

J. Raimund Pfarrkirchner



KEEP CALM  
AND  
CARRION

Three Stories from the Himalaya

Copyright © 2013 by J. Raimund Pfarrkirchner

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

[www.jrpfarr.com](http://www.jrpfarr.com)

Cover Photos: © J. Raimund Pfarrkirchner  
Cover Design: © Stefan Schobesberger

# KEEP CALM AND CARRION

The hangover that morning was particularly rough even though I was only twenty. I awoke at a few hundred metres shy of four thousand after a restless night's sleep of only a handful of hours. Both had their share of responsibility for my sleep-addled bloodshot eyes that announced to all who saw me what I had been up to the previous evening.

Jon, my travelling companion met a week earlier, probably looked just as bad. In my self-pitying and self-centred state I mistook for enthusiasm what was in fact nothing more than his Aussie accent hiding his hangover from me, as did the lingering darkness that was beginning to lose its hold in the east. He was seconds away from knocking on my door at the Kirey Hotel in Lhasa when I opened it and walked out onto the courtyard balcony that gave guests access to their rooms.

'Bloody hell,' he said, somewhat startled, 'Still up for this?'

I grumbled something that conveyed consent, not yet having found my voice. I cleared my throat a couple of times. 'Let's see if the taxi shows up.' It was early April but the air smelled of imminent snow.

Being part of a tour group was the only legal way for foreigners to enter Tibet at that time, a fact that upon learning caused me great consternation. I had made inquiries in Kathmandu about visiting Lhasa but found no feasible options for seeing Tibet without a barrage of approbatory adjectives in various languages and ubiquitous clicking on cameras.

I had cautiously handed over my passport to an outfitter—the one I had used for a climbing expedition previously—with the promise that within a week it would be returned from the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu with a Tibetan tourist visa. Rather pedestrianly my late teenage years had been filled with Hesse and Camus, the former of whom had instilled in me a fascination with The East—in the most over-generalised, Eurocentric, naïve way imaginable—that subsequently produced a fervent desire to see Tibet. I hadn't anticipated any life-altering events or framework-shatter insights but that didn't mean that some part of me wasn't hoping for something.

On the eve of my departure I had elected to take a room in the de facto tourist district of Thamel, in Kathmandu, despite it being round about a thirty minute stroll from where I was living with a local family, working as a teacher and au pair of sorts. At about five euros a night it wasn't much of a splurge but the odd quiet night alone was a great emotional indulgence. Owing to what felt like the advent of an ailment I was especially keen on the solitude a quiet room afforded me. The staff at the hotel knew me well by then and didn't seem to mind waking early to open the locked door.

The bus to the border was parked just round the corner and I languidly found my way through the thick morning air that was marinated in the scents of burning rubbish, exhaust fumes and incense. I found a seat in the back so I wouldn't have to engage in conversation with anyone and stared out the window, all the time eavesdropping but pretending to read my book about Tibetan sky burials. A few weeks of trekking and climbing had heightened my awareness of the pollution in Kathmandu and I was keen to be out of the valley again.

Some time into the three-hour- and one-hundred-kilometre-long drive the unmistakable smell of an electrical fire wafted through the bus followed directly by Papal-white smoke from underneath the steering column. The driver stopped the bus.

Not the driver but another crew member—for a reason I was never able fully to discern the busses and coaches always had superfluous crew members—had a relative nearby who ran a restaurant. It was fortuitously near the location where the bus had broken down, but the smoke had banished my suspicions of nepotism. In pairs and groups, the seventeen of us walked the few hundred metres to the restaurant that was, like most roadside restaurants in Nepal, perched on a steep hillside.

'What d'you think of that? Our bus went up in flames before we've even had our morning coffee.' I turned round to see that the Australian voice I was hearing was streaming out of the youthful and genuine grin of a barely ponytailed man, noticeably my senior by about a dozen years. 'How ya goin? I'm Jon,' he offered me his hand.

After tea and eggs the bus arrived, apparently mended. With windows closer to large holes more than windows, the smell had dissipated rapidly. We all re-embarked and drove another hour en route to the border crossing at Kodari; this time I was sitting next to Jon, chatting with him and a few others in our immediate proximity, all exchanging horror stories about Third World travel.

A massive bump on the dirt road prompted an excited chorus of English, German, Danish and Russian vowels that betrayed our mother tongues and acute concerns at the states of bus and road.

The driver stopped the bus. We got out.

'The steering doesn't work,' I heard someone say at exactly the moment I peered down the long drop to the river below. A Swiss teacher trumped us all with her abbreviated tale of a journey along Bolivia's so-called Death Road.

Egg, caffeine or incipient ailment was making me feel unwell so I found a place in the shade that did little to ease the mid-thirties heat and the mid-nineties humidity. I closed my eyes, leaning my head against a rock and taking deep breaths to suppress a sudden urge to vomit. The Swiss teacher espied my condition, asked if she could do anything, then returned with a bottle of water from the restaurant that was still comparatively cold. We waited for another bus to take us to Kodari.

A convoy of Toyota Landcruisers awaited us on the other side of the Sino-Nepal Friendship Bridge. It was just after noon as we walked the de-motorised zone up to the bridge. A Chinese guard ran towards our group with great urgency to inform us of the prohibition on photography. He even forced a few of my fellow travellers to delete their just taken photos. Upon registering his pregnant

jolt towards us I had started walking back to the Nepalese side of the bridge, afraid he would force me to remove the fresh roll of 35mm film I had just put in my antiquated but tried and true Canon.

Jon walked up to me. Although I had just met him a few hours before, I sensed that his grin was something of a permanent fixture and the lack of smile prompted me to ask what was the matter.

‘How ya goin?’ He had given me a couple of digestive biscuits earlier when I was feeling unwell.

‘Definitely coming down with something, but managing.’

‘They’re, uh, not letting anyone in who’s running a fever.’

‘Shit.’ He asked if he could, then pressed the back of his hand to my forehead and sighed. We stood there for a minute in silence.

‘They’ve got one of those temperature guns they’re pointing at everyone’s head.’

‘Give us a hand, will you?’ I asked as I gestured for us to walk back to Kodari. ‘Find a place selling beer.’

We split up and checked the shacks individually. After a few moments he walked over to me carrying a bottle of Everest. There was condensation on it. He held to my forehead and I took it from him with a smile.

‘Was it refrigerated or in an ice-box?’

‘I’m with you,’ he said and we both walked back to where he had found it. We asked the proprietor for some ice in a bag. The majority of our tour group had already crossed the border without incident so we hurried to catch up with them. I started jogging but Jon reminded me not to exert myself. I hid the ice, wiped my forehead clear of sweat and water and smiled when I saw the digital thermometer displaying 36.7.

‘Well-done,’ Jon muttered after being handed back his passport and passing through gates that looked like they belonged in an Indiana Jones parody.

‘What took you lot so long?’ a Welsh co-traveller asked us.

‘I’ll tell you later,’ I grinned as we made our way to the waiting 4x4s.

Our guide reminded us that it was no longer one o’clock but five. This was due to the entirety of China being on Beijing time, presumably in effort to foster centralisation. As a result of this mildly bizarre time change we would be driving to the next village, some seventy minutes away, and stay there that night. We were unaware of this fact and it was only after we had finished our lunch-cum-dinner and were shown our dormitory-style sleeping quarters that we realised we would be spending the night at that particular village.

I wasn’t feeling too well so forwent sucking down cheap brandy with the others and instead turned in with a book after meandering a bit and deciding that the light wasn’t good enough for photography. The fact that I was still using an analogue camera meant I was rather particular about photos and I usually refrained from casual snapshots. The older Canadian couple with whom I was sharing a room gave me some surplus tablets that worked marvellously in helping me feel better over the course of the journey.

The following days saw the development of a brand of monotony that could have been peppered with fascination had it not been for the drab, colourless expanse of the Tibetan plateau, the dearth of information provided by our government-appointed guide. The repetition of poorly recorded, epic-length, traditional Chinese songs filled the interior of the 4x4s as much as the ubiquitous dust.

Despite the Han comprising only some six per cent of the people of Tibet we were in almost exclusive contact with them which detracted from the experience as I had been hoping to see a more

traditional Tibet. When I asked our guide if we could stop at some of the smaller villages he informed me it was illegal. I didn't bother investigating the truthfulness of that statement and decided it was best merely to wait out the journey and take my leave as soon as we entered Lhasa.

With the exception of a middle-aged Danish couple and their fifteen-year-old son our group was made up of clichéd backpackers, grizzled from months and in a few cases years of being on the road, sleeping on beaches, at ashrams, and in tents; none of us had wanted to be part of a tour and this made us bond together swimmingly.

After a handful of days and tablets I had begun feeling much better in regards my health and could slowly muster the energy to socialise with my fellow travellers. Jon and I started talking more and more and it was over some beers after a tour of a fortress at Gyantse that we started reflecting on what had been going on. He talked about ABC, Another Bloody Church, tours in Europe, and described this trip as an ABM tour, with the 'm' denoting 'monastery.' I consented with a nod and grin, deciding not to confess my disappointment with myself at being essentially bored with the tour despite being enamoured of Tibetan history.

With complementary but equally piecemeal knowledge we started talking about the 1904 British expedition to Tibet. The expedition, led by Francis Younghusband, had the goal of establishing diplomatic relations with Tibet to safeguard British interests in Asia. As much as an invasion expedition, led to a massacre at Chumik Shenko where the British, armed with superior bolt-action rifles, took on matchlock musket-armed Tibetans to the end of between six and seven hundred Tibetan deaths. Shortly after the bloodbath the expedition moved on to Gyantse which is what prompted the conversation for us that evening.

'There was an expedition—'

'The Younghusband Expedition?' I asked.

'Oh yeah, you've heard about it. Apparently heaps of Tibetans died at a massacre near here and were buried by the Brits. A few days later, I read, the Tibetans returned and dug up the corpses to give them a proper burial.'

'A sky burial instead of a Christian one,' I said.

'Imagine nearly a thousand bodies being chopped up and fed to the vultures. Sounds worse than the massacre,' we both drank our respective beers, 'Worse, I mean, for us. As Westerners.'

'Must have been a quite the sight.' Drinking alcohol at that altitude meant that the effects were felt more quickly and loss of inhibition could easily occur after only a few sips. I continued, 'You know, I wouldn't mind seeing one. Not to be morbid, but it has to be an amazing experience.'

'You're not bloody wrong. I spoke to a mate of mine a few weeks ago and he reckons one might be able to see a sky burial in Lhasa.'

'Maybe we could sort this together.' He concurred and we continued talking about the practice until agreeing to leave it until Lhasa and the dissolution of the tour group. A few others arrived, we all ordered more beer and started teaching each other regional card games we had picked up in childhood or through travels.

In Lhasa itself we had two days of tours and two nights in the Potemkin luxury of Chinese-built hotels left to endure before regaining our beloved independence. By the time we toured the Potala Palace we had already grown accustomed to the otherwise enthralling architecture and historical significance of most of the sites.

However Sera Monastery, meaning Monastery of Wild Roses, was on the outskirts of Lhasa and proved to be one of the highlights of the week. Jon and I lingered in various rooms with idle monks, divorcing ourselves from the rest of the group as inconspicuously as possible to see if we could confirm rumours of nearby sky burials.

‘Fifteen or twenty minutes away,’ a monk answered, before scuttling off to rejoin the numerous monks paired off, one standing, one sitting, all engaged in loud verbal exchanges and aggressive, almost violent gestures.

Another reason Jon and I had come to be friends was the fact that we were the only two who would be returning to Kathmandu overland and thought it not a bad idea to do so together. The drivers return to the border at least once a week and supplement their income by taking passengers. We chatted with our guide who gave us the number of a woman who facilitated these trips.

The previous day Jon had done some research and found the Kirey Hotel. Most of the group stayed for another night out of what I can only assume was lethargy. Owing to frugality he and I relocated that afternoon to the more inexpensive Kirey.

Lhasa is sprawling city, as found in the Americas, but also has an organic centre like cities in Europe. What I thought interesting however was how quickly the city turned to countryside, wilderness even. It reminded me of a less dramatic version of Hong Kong’s Kowloon Walled City in the way that one side of a street might have had a block of flats and the other side could just as easily have been a fallow field instead of a suburb or the beginning of farmland as one might expect.

The Kirey Hotel itself was closer to the outskirts, about twenty minutes away from a flat riverbank and vast expanse of reddish dirt on the other side, but nevertheless in the more densely populated part of town. It was an unimposing building, unremarkable in every way from the outside. The entrance reminded me of a gatehouse but was flush with the rest of the building. Once inside the courtyard one found a freestanding two-storey building; its ground floor was a restaurant in which performances of traditional dance and music were performed nightly and the first floor was an internet café and bar. Near the gatehouse was the reception and another, smaller bar. The courtyard was filled with 4x4s, their drivers making makeshift and undoubtedly cost efficient repairs, women washing the clothes of the guests and travellers exchanging tips. The vibrancy inside the walls instantly recalled childhood imaginings of medieval castles.

There were communal toilets at the end of each balcony but no baths. Twice a day one of the maids would bring two litres of boiling water into one’s room in a large thermos flask and take away any clothes that needed to be washed. Despite it not being the most fascinating of sites, I was instantly drawn to the Kirey since it vigorously fed my imagination.

We met up with most of what had been our group for dinner that evening. We ate yak, offered in such a plethora of manners that it delayed decision, and some of us ate *thukpa*, a traditional, hearty noodle-based stew.

With so many nationalities present the conversation quickly lapsed into amiable banter and playful teasing involving stereotypes as it so often does in these situations. I had been considering joining some of the others to Beijing, forty-eight hours away by a newly built railway, via the Terra Cotta Army at Xi’an, but decided against it. It was therefore trace envy that made the goodbyes that evening more bitter.

The group dwindled to about four as we searched for a bar open past ten o'clock. Eventually we discovered a local haunt that wasn't entirely empty. In Tibet one orders a bottle of beer and is also brought a shot glass. '*Shapdeg*' roughly translates to 'bottoms up.' If my experiences can be extrapolated to the general population, people heed the meaning. Drinking is cumbersome but potent and the evening ended with Jon strumming Bob Marley on a three-stringed guitar and semi-a cappella accompaniment.

'I'll wait ten minutes at most before going back to sleep,' I said to Jon the next morning as we went to find the taxi we had ordered for five.

'I gave him a small deposit yesterday, so he'll probably be there.'

As soon as we exited the Kirey we spied a black Geely with the formally-suited driver casually smoking a cigarette. We entered and he drove us out of town, not seeming to mind that we had no idea where exactly to go. The road began petering out and he refused to drive further.

'This has to be it,' Jon said pointing to a weather-worn yellow sign written in Mandarin, Tibetan and English. The taxi sped off. We saw the sign prohibiting access for foreigners and threatening prosecution. It started drizzling as we agreed we, in fact, hadn't seen it.

Through the fast-disappearing darkness we saw a boulder that reminded me of the Foundation Stone in the Dome of the Rock. We darted across a riverbed littered with wigs and discarded clothing and then crouched along some large rocks for cover. I had already begun exaggerating the danger of the situation and the necessity to remain covert; in my mind I could have been a scout on the Younghusband Expedition.

We found some dry rocks on a ridge about a hundred metres from the boulder from where we guessed we couldn't be seen and decided to wait there. The drizzle was beginning to make everything wet so we were thankful for the cover the rocks provided.

'It's a bit spooky here,' Jon said.

'Yeah, it is, but let's just keep calm because those vultures are bound to be more frightened of us.'

'Apropos, set your camera on those guys; they're not here for a haircut,' he pointed to a flock up on a ridge. I set up my camera, glad I had the UV filter at such high altitude. Although not especially talented at it, I had always enjoyed wildlife photography so waiting without expectation came slightly more naturally to me than Jon. We both started making notes in our journals. I promised myself ample time for photographing them as soon as I had seen how massive the birds were.

We heard the sounds of someone—a monk we could only assume—shuffling about, occasionally whistling or talking to himself though we never had more than a fleeting glimpse through the drizzle that was slowly turning white and soft.

Mid-morning we were cold, wet and disappointed and decided to go back. We set off down the back side of the ridge to begin the walk to Sera Monastery where we thought we would have better chances of finding a ride back to Lhasa and explaining why we were there should need be.

A farmer driving a small tractor with a freshly slaughtered yak strewn across the back asked us in Tibetan what we were doing and if we needed a ride. We communicated through gesture and ended up trying not to sit directly on the dead yak as we bumpily and slowly drove towards a butcher in Lhasa.

'I'll have a shower after all that,' Jon announced as soon as we literally hopped off the tractor.

'Shower? Where?'

‘Oh, right. Well, I’ll wash myself with a tea towel and hot water then.’

‘Fair enough. I think I’ll do the same. And have a lie down for a bit. I’m thinking of going to the market later to see what’s to be found. Want to join?’

‘Yeah, just knock on my door or find me in the café.’

The next morning we decided to try another stake-out, but departed at a more reasonable hour. Torrential rain forced us into a small shop to wait out the downpour. The proprietor offered us some chairs. We bought some biscuits and shared them with him and his small son. A bit of sun shone through the rain and we started on our way.

The majority of restaurants have no signage but thick blue blankets for doors, decorated with auspicious symbols. When the rain started up again we pulled the nearest of these blankets aside and entered.

‘This *is* a restaurant, right?’

‘It could be someone’s living room. I’m not sure.’

‘Yeah, me neither.’ We paused and exchanged befuddled glances. ‘Do you think we should—’

An older woman donning the traditionally striped and colourful apron of the Tibetans told us to sit and brought us a thermos flask of salted yak-butter tea. A boy of about five walked out with a guitar made of bits of wood and cardboard and started serenading us. The woman we perceived to be the boy’s grandmother filled small glasses and gestured for us to drink the tea. Before we put them down on the table she refilled them and the process kept repeating itself.

‘It’s just butter and salt,’ Jon said, ‘How can you drink it? It’s too rich for my taste.’

‘It’s not that I am particularly fond of the so-called tea, but, well, what can—’

Just as had resigned to our role in this process, the old woman abruptly put the thermos flask down on the table in front of us and disappeared into an adjacent room.

‘Have you noticed,’ I began, ‘that the same song has been on the cassette player this whole time?’

Jon laughed. ‘It’s a home job too. Somebody must have made this “mix tape” by recording the same song over and over. There! Listen! You can hear whoever made it rewinding and pressing play again.’

We were about to decide to abort our search that morning when a teenage girl jumped in and threw a tiny scrap of cardboard on the table in front of us and then ran out. Jon picked it up and furrowed his brow and adjusted the distance of the cardboard from his eyes in a way that has always made me wish I wore glasses.

‘I love you,’ Jon said neutrally.

‘Sorry?’

‘No, that’s what it says. Watch this.’ Jon stood up and I followed him into the adjoining room where we were just quick enough to see the very attractive girl run down a flight of stairs to the seemingly endless amusement of a bevy of old women who sat cackling and gesturing for us to follow her.

‘I love you!’ Jon shouted at the embarrassed girl, whose coquettish giggling could just be heard over the renewed husky guffaws of the old women at the table. We joined in the laughter and all exchanged waves as we said ‘I love you’ over and over instead of saying ‘goodbye.’

We turned up the collars of our jackets against the rain and hurried towards a taxi that would take us to the old centre. We circled the holy Jokhang Temple at Barkhor Square in the centre of Lhasa.

We meandered, idly chatting, amidst a stream of pilgrims fully prostrating themselves clockwise round what most Tibetans considered the one of the holiest sites in Tibet.

‘You know, I felt sad up there,’ Jon said as the tea we had ordered at a café on the opposite side Barkhor Square arrived.

‘How so?’

‘It was just so weird, so eerie. There were all those clothes and bones and those vultures. I was getting a really dark vibe. It felt strange. Did you get that?’

‘Not really. I could see how one might though.’ I respected Jon’s spirituality, seasoned by his preceding six months in India and Nepal, and he respected my ardent atheism. ‘I suppose I felt disappointment if anything.’

‘Were you looking for something? I mean, it’s bloody Tibet, right?’

‘Well, I guess it was just this idea that we’re in such an exotic place. I was expecting something more foreign, more alien to me, but it’s just like any other place really.’

‘Yeah, I got that too. If we’re honest with each other and ourselves, we both just want to see a vulture flying off with a leg or arm hanging out of its beak, right?’

‘Something like that anyway.’

‘But I think I was expecting more. Something exotic, as you said. Something spiritual.’

‘Visions and prophecies?’

‘Anything, really,’ he said, allowing his natural calm to return to his voice.

We sat in silence for a minute before I brought up our return journey just a day and a half away. Jon said he was going to phone the woman who orchestrated the 4x4s’ long drive back to the border. We had been in Lhasa a handful of days longer than we had planned because we had to wait for a convoy to head south again. Jon left me to my thoughts for a few minutes and then returned and said she hadn’t answered her phone so would stop by her place en route back to the Kirey. I said I would stay and do some reading, enjoying the first proper sunshine for several days. We agreed to meet in the internet café later and then go for dinner and drinks closer to the centre of action in Barkhor, where we were then sitting.

‘And one last go at the sky burial in the morning?’

‘Definitely,’ I said as Jon stood and left.

Later that evening we had what was, by local standards, a late start to an evening out. After some effective aperitifs we did what we could to find some place still serving food and started dreading the likely prospect of having to wait until breakfast.

‘Ahh, looking for girls? I know some nice girls,’ a twenty-something Tibetan suggested to us as we checked nearly every door that looked like food might be behind it.

‘Food, actually. We’re looking for food,’ Jon said.

‘It’s closed,’ the man, who we could now see had drunk far more than us already, said as he lit a cigarette. ‘You won’t find food now, but there are beautiful women.’

‘There’s really no place to eat?’

‘Maybe if you come in one place. A place for locals.’ We followed his brisk but slightly wavering walk towards a corrugated iron gate pulled down halfway. We all crawled underneath and he led us upstairs and ordered us dinner and beer without asking. He assured us the food was good, said this was the place at which the local bar and restaurant staff ate at after their places of employment shut for the night, then said goodbye and back walked downstairs.

A rat ran slaloms through half-empty bottles of local gin and brandy behind the bar and Jon quipped about what meat would constitute our stews. We quaffed our beers from the bottle instead of the incommensurate shot glasses until we decided to play a game involving taking a shot of beer every time we saw a rat. The rats proved many so we amended the rules to every time one of us felt a rat beneath our table we had to take a shot. From time to time a flash of light caused by the fast-moving, colourful aprons of the two women working there caught our eyes, which invariably provoked laughter and a handful of well-rehearsed, very sexual lines said at rather than to us in joyous jest.

Our final stake-out began the next day in the mid-morning sun. We had grown more and more brazen in our efforts to see a sky burial and the process had become routine. Feeling refreshed in the high-altitude warmth that the sun provided and knowing it was our last chance we overtly walked up and down the ridge, always keeping an eye on the boulder that we had assumed was the altar. We found a cloth sack that looked like a money bag from an old cartoon. I opened it to find it filled with pieces of bone then wordlessly replaced it on the rocky ledge. We also found the carrion of a domestic dog lying next to a rusted cleaver. Near the top of the ridge I squeezed my way through a couple of rocks only to startle a massive vulture that appeared to be the height of my chest. It jumped off the cliff and soared away.

I returned to Jon further down on the ridge after pursuing vultures for a few photos. The more likely it became that we wouldn't see a sky burial the harder my subconscious tried to convince me that photographing vultures was a worthy goal in itself. Jon informed me he had seen the sole monk leaving and we decided to take a look at the boulder up close. It smelt of juniper as we approached. The stone itself was garnished with bone fragments and the odd piece of human flesh soaking in water that had collected in the stone's recesses over the course of the preceding days. The more macabre the clues were, the more fascinated I became. I had always feigned a respect for the sanctity of other cultures and religions but at some point my curiosity normally outweighed my sensitivity.

Jon suggested we head back into town and in spite of my desire to explore further, but my more rational side got the better of me and I agreed to return. It was clear he was less comfortable than me in this setting.

'There's someone you should meet,' I said as we walked the route back into town with a nonchalance that more than hinted at our familiarity with our surroundings. 'Yesterday I found a shop selling icons and *thangkas*. It's run by an ex-monk and if you're still going to do that *thangka* painting course back in Kathmandu you may want to meet him.'

After a quick lunch of chips fried in an old oil drum on the side of the road, followed by some Chinese dumplings at another street vendor we made our way to the shop.

The shop's interior walls were saffron and burgundy, befitting the religious significance of the items sold. Those walls were festooned with icons and the cotton sheets painted with deities and mandalas that were the *thangkas* we had both grown to admire.

'*Tashi delek*,' we said to each other with a slight bow, palms pressed together at the height of the neck. The owner remembered me from the previous day and ordered a round of salted yak-butter teas as he cleared away some merchandise and made space for us on the bench.

The diminutive man sat down, lit a filterless cigarette, and in a soft-spoken voice told us about his life. The government sets limits on the number of monks per monastery, he told us. With what

seemed like genuine sorrow he claimed that Sera Monastery, his former monastery, had once had thousands of monks and was now reduced to a few hundred. The debates we had witnessed at Sera Monastery the previous week with the tour group were unique to the monastery, or at least to Lhasa, he said. The practice had seeped into Tibet from Hindu orthodoxy. The monks paired off in the vast courtyard; the seated monk was the defender and the standing monk was charged with presenting an argument. There are time limits set for the defender and a rich lexicon of hand gestures with pragmatic and symbolic meanings that aid the monk in staying within the allotted time. The monk in the teaching role strikes his outstretched left palm with his right when he poses a question and confirms a correct answer by striking his left palm with the back of his right hand.

I felt relieved now that I knew what the somewhat disturbing gestures had been. Jon smiled and said he had enjoyed watching the debates but hadn't known what was happening. The monk turned proprietor went to the toilet. I suggested to Jon we ask him about sky burials, but bearing in mind how guarded the authorities were about the practice I was cautious mentioning a taboo.

'Just ask him,' Jon said, somewhat taken aback by my sudden timidity.

'What about sky burials?' I questioned him when he returned.

'Ahh, sky burial. Yes. Very interesting for you, I think. Different, yes?' We nodded.

The sky burial is the traditional way of disposing of bodies in Tibetan Buddhism. With the concept of reincarnation a core tenet of their beliefs it follows that bodies are seen merely as temporary vessels for the soul, ergo after death bodies are nowhere near sacrosanct. The recently deceased body is taken to a lama, a priest, who normally burns juniper incense and chant mantras in a procedure analogous to a wake before disassembling the bodies, crushing the bones and mixing them with *tsampa*, a barley flour, and feeding them to the vultures. There is evidence that this method of human body disposal dates back thousands of years. Cremation and burial were unviable in a treeless, often frozen environment. When Buddhism was introduced the process was justified as being emblematic of the impermanence of life, a paramount belief, and the insignificance of the disused body when compared with the soul. The interconnectivity of all life, another crucial dogma, is symbolised by the bodies being fed to vultures.

The man we had inadvertently appointed our cultural liaison officer, sipped his tea. In a manner unbecoming the topic he made subtle, slow gestures with an unlit cigarette as he explained that flocks of up to fifty vultures could strip a body of its flesh within a matter of minutes. The experience was loud and chaotic, savage, he said, to those who didn't meditate on the oneness of the world and the impermanence of life while watching.

I took two of Wanguan demi-corona cigars from my breast pocket and handed one to the speaker. He looked at me wide-eyed and asked if it was intended for him. My first thought was that this trivial luxury, at the price of slightly more than a pack of cigarettes, was seen by him as a rare and cherished treat. It wasn't until much later, when thinking back, that I realised he could have thought they were as awful as I did and would have preferred to stick to his cigarettes. Either way, we both lit them and took a few drags in silence.

'In Thailand, the monks are for one year in the monastery,' he began after a moment. 'In Tibet, we are monks for our whole lives. From a boy.' He stretched out his hand to show the height of a hypothetical boy. 'A very big commitment.'

'Why are you no longer a monk?'

He looked sullen for a few minutes as he told us he went to Dharamsala, India, where the Dalai Lama has resided since fleeing with what became the Tibetan Government in Exile in 1959. He walked for six months as a pilgrim in the late 80s. He said he didn't prostrate himself the entire way as several of his fellow monks had done, but assured us the entire journey was done by foot. Upon his return he was thrown in prison and beaten for conspiracy to overthrow the government. After a few days he was released but was banned from being a monk.

'I stayed with my cousin and her husband. I was very sad and didn't know what to do. My cousin has idea of a shop, so I start this shop.' A smile returned to his face and I complimented the wares on offer. In anticipation for his *thangka* course back in Kathmandu, Jon had been paying close attention to the *thangka* and was curious about preparation of the canvases and paints.

About half of my cigar had been either smoked and burned when we thanked him for his time and departed. The sun was shining, we were in a good mood and decided to go haggle with people at the market stalls for fun and possibly for picking up a few souvenirs. As we looked over the jewellery, old knives, and prayer beads I told Jon he looked relaxed.

'Yeah, I feel like know what's going on here.'

I smiled with a nod and pointed to some objects that looked like dominos but instead were polished, white stones with various sexual positions on them. The man selling them, as rotund as his plump wife, also of about fifty, noticed our stares and gave us a thumbs up gesture grinningly. We reciprocated. He jokingly tried to lift his wife; when he couldn't he started dragging her over to us, pointing at the stones with one hand. A merchant one stall over shouted something at them and through fits of laughter the wife shouted something in return. Everyone started laughing.

'Well, I still have no bloody idea what's going on,' I said to Jon.

'Me neither,' he laughed.

At first light the next morning we were walking out of the Kirey for the last time en route to a private house with some twenty lodgers. The landlady hurried out to us as she saw us putting our bags in the 4x4, as clean and tidy as the twenty-something Chinese driver who was to take us to the border. Two Tibetan women and a monolingual Japanese man were coming with us, we were informed by the landlady who also ran the 4x4 to Nepal racket in town. That meant for the sixteen-hour drive straight back four people would be cramped into the back seat intended for three. The boot was filled with various goods to be sold and traded so we had to keep our rucksacks on our laps for the duration.

'He speaks only Chinese,' the Tibetan woman told us. 'No English. But he knows the word "stop." Say "stop" and he will stop.' She started speaking Mandarin to him and spat out what sounded a few thousands words without a breath. At the end of her barrage of instructions we heard her say and then repeat several times the word 'stop.'

# LIVING BY NAAN ALONE

I was working at a car dealership in the United States. I worked on the service side and had little to do with the sales department. However, in their down time the sales team would occasionally meander back to our department for small talk. I took a liking to one of the salesmen, old enough to be my father, because he was one of the more open-minded who worked there. One day we were talking about bias in American news coverage, which led rather quickly to a conversation that without the confines of a working environment might have been called cultural relativism.

‘You know,’ he had begun, swirling his lukewarm coffee in a plastic cup, ‘we’re all the same. It doesn’t matter where you’re from, we’re all the same. Politics, religion—none of that matters. Really. What it boils down to is this: no matter who we are, we just want more.’ He paused either unintentionally or for effect. ‘That’s it. We just want more.’

My first thought was that is sounded a bit too American, too capitalistic. It stuck with me though and probably influenced some of my burgeoning thoughts on cultural relativism. Upon pondering it further I realised it was, as the old joke goes, a philosophical meringue: sweet and appealing but with very little substance. The pliability of his assertion means that it is nearly impossible to counter, but there might still be a nugget of truth; most people do think indeed their lives would be improved with more time, more money, more friends, more whatever. So the statement stuck.

Within a few months I was in Nepal wandering round the city under an opaque February sky, in a transitional stage in my relationship with Kathmandu between novelty and routine. It was the time after the freshness of new ideas and the culture shock had made their impressions, but before I had become familiar enough with them to be reflective about what they said about Nepal and me. At that time my body was incessantly either recovering from or anticipating some ailment. Intellectually and emotionally the situation was not dissimilar. So, in that state I filled the days by setting myself little tasks that invariably ended in a reward of some sort.

That day I was searching for food. I wasn't hungry, but I had allowed myself the mission of finding a treat from home, one of the banalities that go unnoticed in one's so-called normal life but mean so much when abroad. I identify myself, and am more or less identified by those who know me well, as a social and political liberal as well as a dedicated post-nationalist, but my superficial exception to the latter is bread. I maintain that outside central Europe there is almost no satisfying bread to be found. That's not to say that I dislike other breads. I adore Central Americans *tortillas*, Italian *focaccia* and I took a tremendous liking to the *naans* found all throughout Nepal, however, from time to time I simply craved the bread I knew as a child.

I was lucky enough to have discovered one German bakery and had been introduced to another. The first I had found through my itinerant strolls one morning and returned frequently to enjoy its quiet, naturally fragrant courtyard. As an preteen I stopped eating sweets in an effort to seem more adult and since genuinely haven't liked them, so it was with some frustration that I found only sugared and cinnamon pastries at the Pumpernickel Bakery and not even the eponymous treat. I had long before memorised my mother's simple recipe for dark bread, for exactly the occasion of being outside of central Europe, and thought I would ask where they bought their flour or see if they could sell me some directly.

I finished my lassi and yak cheese sandwich and as I was in the process of removing myself from a miniature grotto filled with colourful flowers I remembered that I didn't have an oven at home, so having flour and all the other ingredients for bread would have been tantalisingly useless.

The more I realised I had nothing to do or at least didn't want to do anything of use, the more importance I placed on finding bread. In reality this quest for food was little more than a pleasant past time, as it is for many fellow third culture kids.

Sociologist David C Pollock famously wrote of third culture kids, people who grow up in more than one country, and the adults they become that 'the TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership of any.' It wasn't until I was an adult that I was introduced to the notion of TCKs and immediately identified with the culture. That Pollock definition very much defined my childhood on several continents and explained away many of my tendencies as an adult.

So it was greatly pedestrian for me to be wandering about Kathmandu with the the simple goal of bread, for sake of hobby and continuity and not a reluctance to eat the local cuisine. It became rather hot whenever the sun managed to shine through a break in the clouds, but then a breeze blew and I was thankful for the outer layer I was wearing. It was a North Face epigone purchased at one of the interchangeable shops that crowded the district of Thamel.

Having decided that I needed to find some bread I walked towards Helena's, dodging the numerous touts as best I could. It was in the stage of my stay when I hadn't developed the hardness

that allowed me to ignore people as I walked through the streets and as a result what could have been a ten-minute walk turned into something closer to half an hour. I declined offers of various outfitters, truthfully telling them that my mandatory foray into the wilderness of Nepal had already been planned; I told them I wasn't interested in buying gems, not mentioning I wanted to buy my sister something out of turquoise before leaving the country; pashmina was for women, for not men, I offered another street hawker who tried to arrest me and sell me his 'best quality' shawls; and the only thing I can play is a CD I apologetically joked with a man trying to unload a handful of traditional Newari musical instruments on any passers-by.

Helena's was on the ground floor. I asked if they had dark bread. They said yes. Could I see it? Of course. Do you have something darker? Sorry? Never mind. I'll take two rolls then, please. Do you want to have a coffee also, sir? I hesitated for longer than was appropriate as I weighed my options and considered what I would do if I didn't have coffee. I asked them to bring it to the rooftop, eight storeys up, if it wouldn't be too much of a problem. They said it wasn't and as I climbed the stairs I felt sympathy for the employees there and then felt a sense of trepidation at my forthcoming trek and climb when I noticed I was breathing heavily by the time I reached the rooftop. I found a place to sit in the sunshine, but after the climb enjoyed the slight breeze and as ever adored the view.

As was rather customary for me at the time I passed the afternoon with my journal and my books on the rooftop and owing to a vista of which I never tired my productivity was often forfeited in favour of endless daydreams and inconsequential musings as I watched the birds fly over the Swayambhunath Temple or tried to steal glimpses of the Himalaya buried behind the clouds. Although it was quite bland alone, I had eaten one of my rolls and been circumstantially pleased with it. I wanted something to accompany it, ideally, a *Landjäger*, a type of dry, smoked sausage found throughout the Alps, and one of my favourite gastronomic indulgences. The other roll I was husbanding as a snack before bedtime, but ended up eating it as a prong in my plan of procrastinating putting together a lesson for my pupil that evening. When it began cooling off substantially I descended the stairs and started walking through the crowds in search of a taxi.

I lived near Maitidevi Temple in Kathmandu. Many of the roads don't have names and the majority of the buildings don't have addresses so most people refer to where they live by the name of the district, often taken from a former village that had become part of Kathmandu, or from the name of the nearest landmark as was the case with Maitidevi.

From Maitidevi Temple it was a leisurely, labyrinthine stroll of no more than five to ten minutes to where I was living. There was a small market on my route home. It took a while for me to realise it was there, so it could have been seasonal or my schedule might simply have changed over the duration of my stay without me noticing. When I say or write market I tend to think of something akin to London's Borough Market or Vienna's beloved Naschmarkt, places frequented by the idle and affluent and only on special occasions by the majority of the people. This market was different. Its stalls were collapsable tables, its slicing machinery was a chipped cleaver, its vegetables were grown in city gardens or plots of land used by locals for cultivation until a developer decided to throw up another block of flats, its luxurious meats were goats and chickens slaughtered on site, sometimes on demand, and its fish flopped themselves to death on the tables while the sellers swatted away flies and shooed away stray dogs looking for a meal but often had to content themselves by lapping up the little pools and streams of blood on the pavement. It wasn't a European market.

Several years later I found myself in another developing country, this time attached to an aid work project. I was talking to an Eastern European colleague who had been living in Berlin for a few years where she was doing a post-graduate project on twentieth-century German art. I have always claimed to loathe discussions on art, taking a position that falls just short of a Philistine and imposed the jejune binary of either liking or disliking a piece of art. Covertly however I have always adored these conversations that Woody Allen might have called mental masturbation, indulging in drawn-out conversations on how Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapping of the Reichstag recalled government blindness like the Persian top brass ignoring the demands of the rank and file in marginal satrapies, or some other such contrived nonsense.

Unlike life in Kathmandu, on that particular project it never stopped feeling like a holiday or more aptly like a screenplay in which I had been cast, as a result of which I felt I didn't necessarily have to be my true self and so I indulged in the opportunity for high-brow discourses on art. We had seen a cockfight in a slum, or something analogous and equally uncommon in Western countries. Some of our colleagues hadn't been to places that the collective awareness of Europe and North America would stereotype as poor and their inexperience in that regard was made public as they commented on whatever it was we had seen that day.

'Do you know *The Hunters in the Snow* by Bruegel?' my colleague had asked.

'It's in Vienna,' I had responded, as if living in the city where the painting is housed lent any authority in the matter.

'In one of my courses we were discussing that painting. It was one of those casual conversations, you know, where everyone chimes in with whatever they notice about the painting. Someone said something about how the hunt had been a failure, except for the fox, and how the dogs and hunters looked disheartened. That sort of thing. Our American professor pointed out the slaughter of the pig, in the top left. Remember?'

'Yes, just outside the inn or pub or whatever it is.'

'Yeah, exactly. He was saying how cruel it was that one could see the blood on the snow, how brutal life in medieval—or Renaissance, whatever—Europe had been. Something about violence being out in the open. I remember thinking: he's never been to Romania. I mean, my grandparents still slaughter their animals in the garden.'

'Well, maybe it's because traditional life in rural Europe is better preserved than in Small Town, America. The modern Austrian countryside is like a Victorian period drama with mobile phones and people downloading music. I suppose it really just depends on the individual to some extent though. I'm sure there are plenty of Viennese—in fact I know a few—who would be lost if their feet so much as touched grass that hasn't been manicured.'

Neither of us had intended to imply that being from the developed world meant the world of meat production was alien. However the more developed the country, the less one tends to come into contact with the dirty gore that goes in to making what we call civilised life possible, meat products in this case. The cruelty, as some regard it, can be linked to how directly or indirectly one's procurement of meat is met. The city dwelling dog owner is often shocked with how roughly the farmer or bucolic hunter treats his or her dogs and the sight of an animal carcass being hung to drain the blood is often the cause of some disgust that adds verisimilitude to the adage of loving sausage but hating seeing it made, in the most literal of senses.

I have since become vegetarian, not for reasons of health or issues with the treatment of animals but more as a bet with myself that grew longer and longer until it was simply a part of my habits and not a goal. I am not necessarily intending to remain so, but for now I have no desire to cease my self-imposed dietary restrictions. What amazed me was how quickly—only a matter of months—that the smell of meat went from being a source of Pavlovian delight to being a source of jarring aversion. It's a pity that while living in Nepal I wasn't vegetarian as I would have been able to enjoy the many meatless dishes without lamenting the fact that they were meatless, as I did. Carnivorous as I was then it was a source of bemusement for me that restaurant menus were not divided into poultry, pork, and so forth, but rather the binary of veg and non-veg. On the other hand it may have been for the best that I ate as much meat as I did because the austere market I passed on both a regular and frequent basis might have proved more gruesome than would have been tolerable.

I rarely cooked at home. The mother of the boy to whom I taught English and by natural extension all other school subjects cooked our evening and morning meals. In Nepal most people eat a large meal mid-morning, forgo lunch opting instead for tea with biscuits and eggs in the afternoon, and then have another large meal immediately prior to going to bed. The meals were invariably rice based with potatoes, peas, lentils and pickled chillies making up the side dishes. After the meal it was customary to drink a few glasses of whisky, mixed with more water than I would have liked but the custom was not dissimilar to what I knew of having a digestif bitter or a schnapps after meals.

When we did eat meat it was normally chicken. Strange as it is for me to say now, when I walked home and saw the animals at the market it normally whet my desire for meat. With the exception of the fish, pulled earlier in the day from the treacherously polluted Bagmati River or any of its tributaries in Kathmandu, it must have been the freshness of the meat that I found so appetising, and the slaughter of the living animals must have not crossed my mind as I walked home. Prior to Nepal I abhorred lentils but after leaving the country I surprised myself when after a few weeks of my Western foods I began craving the rice and lentils, the *dal bhat*, that is the cornerstone of the Nepalese kitchen.

That evening we ate a vegetarian meal that, like most of the home-cooked meals I ate there, was delicious, but left my meat-loving taste buds wanting. Without realising it I compensated for the lack of meat by eating rather a lot of the chillies. Sometimes the copious spice upset my stomach but there was the after dinner whisky to rectify the matter. The electricity was shut off as we were chatting after eating and with the aid of a torch powered by winding that was always on the table we went to bed.

I awoke the next morning with the sensation of a great weight on my chest. It was inceptive pneumonia, but for a few days I took it to be something less serious like lungs unaccustomed to the pollution of the city. I had no way of knowing it would progress apace and decided to reenact the previous days' events of exploring the city and rewarding myself with tokens of home.

It was rumoured that there was an importer of European meats. In hindsight there were doubtlessly dozens. Nepal—or Kathmandu at the very least—is not quite the backwater that my journal entries and memories so often indicate. That exotic remoteness is more likely a function of visceral yearnings for a past time when capitalism was still called empire and a lack of mass media meant that the similarities of culture were far less prevalent owing to the dearth of expectation that was a by-product of a world without the easy access one now has to peoples and ideas from every corner

of the planet. Nevertheless I delved into the harmless romance of travel that my mind created and manifested by such quests for food.

This importer was located in Durbar Marg, King's Road, and was opposite some of the most ostentatious and oldest hotels of Kathmandu such as the Yak and Yeti or the Hotel L'Annapurna, a renovated palace of the Newari people, the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. As these were the last days of the monarchy in Nepal, before it would become a federal republic, Durbar Marg was an apt name because of the king's palace found at the terminus of the road that was lined with boutiques selling all manner of opulence. Although Durbar Marg wasn't circular, from the breadth of the road and the condition it which one found it, to say nothing of the wares on offer there, it could have easily been a ring road in any European city.

I meandered its length until I found the place for which I was searching. The sky was still a dirty grey, a combination of pollution and naturally occurring clouds, but the temperature reached the mid-twenties that day. The place was chic and air-conditioned in summer and even that day in February judging from the difference in the temperatures. After a walk that was exhausting because of the chaotic traffic more than the vigour of walking itself I was not displeased with the air-conditioned room for the first few minutes.

The high stools next to the glass window, the glass display case filled with Western snacks, and the road on which it was located would not have been out of place in Europe or North America. The first thing to catch my attention was the scent of espresso. A few places round Kathmandu served espresso but many of the coffees one could expect were merely instant coffee served in porcelain cups. Without hesitation I ordered a double espresso. As I stood at the counter, waiting for my espresso I ogled the products on display and settled my eyes on some dark bread and dried sausage. Both were priced out of my usual budget, but over-ridingly I asked the server to give me some of each to take home.

I sat down by the window and took out my journal, quickly jotting my elation at what I had managed to find. I sipped the espresso and made no effort to hide the smile that the taste brought to my lips. The bread still wasn't the bread I had wanted but it was close enough that I felt I no longer needed to continue searching. The sausages were not quite the *Landjäger* that I had been craving, but they too were close enough. They were akin to Italian *cabonossi*, but drier like Polish *Kabanos*. I thought for a minute about the odd overlaps between Polish and Italian cuisine, remembering having read somewhere that Sigismund I of Poland took an Italian bride who brought with her the Italian way of cooking that influenced many Polish dishes. Funny, I thought, how similar foods are. From a reductionist point of view it is rather obvious that as humans the bases of our foods are by and large the same: starch, vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates and everything else found in food. But the more amazing thought is the creativity possessed by humans as displayed by how different these basic elements are when presented on a plate at mealtime.

I finished the espresso and pinched off a bite of sausage and bread. The brief coughing fit I had had a few minutes earlier did nothing to lessen the utter delight I was experiencing. I took several large sips from my water bottle and became acutely aware of the air-conditioning, so I extracted my jacket and then a novel from the rucksack I always carried with me.

I walked up to the counter again and asked for another espresso. When the server who also worked as the barista didn't know what a macchiato was I explained that this time I wanted a spoon of frothy milk on top of the espresso. She obliged smilingly. An analogue of Nutella, perhaps the one

consistent exception to my to my disinclination towards sweets, caught my eye and I asked for the smallest jar available.

A few minutes after the coffee but unrelated to it, a deep, shudder-inducing cough started. I checked to see how many more pages in my novel were left before the next chapter break. It was more than a few so I slid a ten rupee note in the book, waved a friendly and thankful goodbye to the staff and hailed a taxi just outside the shop.

The remainder of the afternoon I lay in bed with my eyes closed but not sleeping. Between coughing and the exhaustion it produced I devoured the sausages and most of the bread. Eventually my daydreams must have evolved into proper dreams because when I heard the front door open and the subsequent chatter I opened my eyes with a start. My pupil came into my room and I helped him with some of his homework until I started suspecting this cough was more than unfamiliarity with the air of the city and it was draining my energy quickly. I declined the offer of the dinner I was beginning to smell from the kitchen and said that I just needed to sleep. Back in bed I took out a book and what remained of the bread and the chocolate-hazelnut spread. I read to the chapter break that seemed so unattainable when at the Western shop, then I dipped the bread bite by bite into the spread. It had no medicinal effects but was comforting. At one point I looked into the jar to find that the spread was gone. I wanted more.

# THE TRAVELLER'S NEW CLOTHES

When I was eight or nine I had bespoke silk pyjamas. That is to say that I had inherited them. My father had visited the British crown colony of Hong Kong some years before I was born and for non-Western prices bought some tailor-made clothes, including silk pyjamas. Some time after that, also before I was born, they were washed in hot water and ergo shrank substantially. They were boxed away in the cellar and were rediscovered when I was a small boy. They fit me and I had begun wearing them nightly and for the few weeks afters they were found I incessantly asked for stories about Hong Kong.

A handful of years later the sovereignty of the dependent territory was transferred to the People's Republic of China. At that time I was at an age when I understood the transfer of power was significant without being about to comprehend fully the significance itself.

In my mind Hong Kong was an exotic, far-away place for sumptuous clothing at cheap prices. It represented a place that was filled with so many cultures, languages and histories that they congealed in my juvenile mind into a place called The East where strange things abounded and where adventures happened, but certainly not real life, not life as I knew it. When Hong Kong became Chinese again in 1997 I remember taking out the weighty atlas—the atlas that still had Yugoslavia and was only a few months wrong in still having Zaire—thumping it down almost painfully on my lap and running my little fingers along the contours of the South China Sea until I arrived at Hong Kong. I stared at the map and alternated between reading the facts in the margins and watching on television the images of the handover ceremony—immaculate uniforms, solemnly raised and lowered flags, and various pomp crowded the screen. This was long before I had the vocabulary to express what I felt at the occasion and the mental alacrity to comprehend what I was

feeling. Looking back I can recall mixture of satisfaction that a city so far away from Europe was no longer going to be subject to European law but rather local. On the other hand there was a sense of sadness at the loss of power, the loss of empire that through reading and the odd computer game was becoming a source of infinite fascination and catalyst for endless daydreams about imperial swashbuckling.

A decade later my thoughts about the world had matured and I was living in Kathmandu in a semi-conscious effort to fill in the lacunas of my knowledge, disappointingly acquiescing that this idea of The East had never been a valid one.

It was the end of my stay and the monsoon season was already beginning to make itself known through nearly asphyxiating humidity and increasingly frequent rainstorms that flooded the streets. My girlfriend was coming to visit me and I was starting to see her fortnight visit as something of a test for my knowledge of Kathmandu, its culture and its customs. It was a chance for me to prove to both her and myself how much or how little of a local I had become, how much I had allowed myself to and been allowed to integrate into the city. She had stayed in the familiarity of our flat and I had been living abroad. It was to be my first opportunity to gauge how Nepal had affected me.

Foremost in my elation was being able to see her, but her arrival denoted several other points of no small excitement; I was looking forward to doing touristic activities and being able to play the relative pundit with her, I was keen on finally buying some of the curios that I had been waiting until the very end of my stay to purchase and although I was not awaiting my departure with glee I knew I would enjoy that last week of saying goodbyes and assessing what I had learned and how I had changed. Superficial though it was, I was enlivened knowing that during her visit I would have at least one suit made for me.

In anticipation of that spending spree that I knew would happen just before I left I had visited several tailors and questioned them about prices and materials. A few locals I knew well by that point had also recommended tailors or streets in which the best tailors were located.

One local had mentioned that as far as quality was concerned in regards both material and style, it was best to go to a tailor in Thamel or perhaps Lazimpat, just to the north. I checked several tailors in both places but thought perhaps better deals were to be found in the neighbourhoods frequented only by the locals. I found what would have been called a mercer's in the past and given how charmingly antiquated the place looked to my eye the epithet was still apt. When I attempted to learn whether he was just a seller of fabrics or also a tailor it was clear communication was an issue. His workshop was partly underground and I had to crouch to enter. It was difficult not to be reminded of Tolkien's hobbits in the small shop. He played mercer by parading his cloths before me, then played tailor by demonstrating the traditional suits and hats that he could make. Mutual comprehension remained elusive however and I wasn't excessively comfortable with the prospect of not being able to liaise with someone who would be making my clothes, despite the price being more attractive than the already highly reasonable prices in Thamel.

Thamel had no shortage of tailors or jewellers or outfitters or sellers of any other service or product. There was an amply stocked tailor just opposite the Pilgrims Book House where I spent many an afternoon in their tea garden, thumbing through their enviably massive selection of rare and antique books as well as a nearly inexhaustible collection of books on climbing, the Himalaya, Buddhism and quite literally all things Nepalese.

The tailor's just across the street intrigued me because on the glass window that was covered by a corrugated iron wall at night was a flamboyantly painted sign boasting they spoke Swedish, French, English, German and a few other languages. The promise of command over such an incredible array of languages was reason enough for me to pop in one day with a few questions. I mentioned that I was not interested in ordering anything that day but that did little to prevent them from treating me to customary sweet, milky tea and conversation that by no stretch could be considered relevant to my requests.

Unlike my shopping experiences in the West it felt as though proprietors ran shops as a pretence for making people's acquaintance more than earning a profit. Pleasure before business could have easily been their mantra.

They asked me where I was from, how old I was, if I was married and how I found Nepal. When my hackneyed response of 'Turn North at India' was met with quiet laughs and a possibly bona fide but possibly patronising 'Very good, sir' I decided they were affable enough for my taste. Whenever dealing with sellers in Kathmandu I always had the impression that the initial meeting was something more akin to a job interview or speed dating than a simple fiscal transaction. There was a barrage of questioning from both sides that comfortably allotted enough time to brew a few glasses of tea, to let them cool, to drink them quite leisurely and then to wait for an appropriate amount of time to pass that would allow one to leave without appearing impolite.

I can't say if it was simply the indulgence of bespoke clothing or the unconscious memory of those lavish pyjamas I had as a child, but I was delighted to learn that I could have a suit made for the price of a single jacket at a retailer like H&M or Zara.

Perhaps I had wasted their time and missed some subtle social cue, but I think they didn't mind my rather prolonged visit that day and when I told them again that I wasn't interested in purchasing anything just then but that I had every intention of returning they seemed to believe me.

With the exception of relatives taking items of clothing in or letting them out as I grew and the further exceptions of having a shop make alterations when I purchased suits or jackets off the rack, I had not come close to having tailor-made clothing. There was something quietly momentous about a bespoke suit that, comfort and looks aside, seemed to validate me in an odd way. It made one feel liberated of material concerns. Growing up I was certainly comfortable inasmuch as I never wanted for food and as far as frivolities are concerned birthdays and Christmases tended to provide me with the toys and luxuries I craved. About university age, the age I was while in Nepal, I began realising however that most people in my milieu were better off than I was.

I had a menial job when I was fourteen and since then with the odd hiatus of a couple of months at most I have not been without employment. It was somewhat shocking for me to realise then that people who were broadly speaking in my socio-economic group were given flats or money for the rent and food while they studied at university. Having clothing made therefore was a luxury I could ill afford in the West and the purchasing power I had in Nepal made me feel regal. With the sensation of wealth there too came the sensation of power that was enhanced by being white in an Asian country and manifested itself by automatic invitations to parties and often undue but welcomed respect.

Several years later I was discussing the matter with a Pakistani friend who said, 'Yeah we do that in Pakistan too. Having a white at your party is status symbol.' I had to laugh with recognition. I was always in great demand and many people seemed to think I was an expert in whatever field we

happened to be discussing. My youthful arrogance normally forbade me from correcting people and it wasn't uncommon that my ego allowed itself to be bolstered in indubitable quantities. The intrinsic respect and even reverence bestowed upon me forced some part of me to revel in being European in Asia and it was not a long leap for me to feel part of the British Raj or any analogous political entity that showed a group of Europeans nobly, in my mind, lording over masses of locals. A bespoke suit was evocative of these feelings that on one hand I enjoyed and on the other felt rather awkward at times.

My girlfriend arrived. I met her at the airport and took her back to where I was living, pointing out the sites and explaining what was happening as best I could. In the subsequent days I realised that my knowledge of Nepal was not as intimate as I would have liked. Although when seeing the city through her eyes, eyes that were as untrained as mine had been a half-year prior, I wasn't disappointed with myself and the knowledge that I had acquired throughout my time in Kathmandu and the trips I had taken through other areas of Nepal.

The first few days we had together were spent catching up; sightseeing in the days, punctuated by strolls filled with palaver suited to discussion in person more than missives and were peppered with observations about how we each had or hadn't changed. In the evenings we visited the restaurants I had grown fond of, which invariably meant her introduction into my meagre social circle.

Thamel is the known as the tourist ghetto for all the foreigners there, but in Kathmandu the term tourist is a slight misnomer. Although there are droves of visitors who come to climb a peak or trek a circuit and then depart back to wherever it is they are from, there are an equal amount of foreigners who stay in the city for much longer than the average holiday. These people can generally be found in Thamel and within Thamel can generally be found at the same couple of restaurants or bars. It was almost impossible, once one had made a few acquaintances, to spend a night out alone.

Like many of restaurants in Thamel, the Maya Cocktail, one of my favourites for their Nepalese-Mexican cuisine and not least their excessively long and cheap happy hour, occupied several storeys of one building. It was not uncommon for me to walk up to the first floor, order a gin and tonic or a coffee depending on how chilling the air-conditioning was, and sit down with some books or my journal. After a various amount of time someone I knew would see me and sit down for a drink.

'What are you doing here?'

'Oh, not much. I'm just trying to get caught up on some reading.'

'Did you want to be alone?'

'Not necessarily. What are you doing?'

'Just meeting that friend of mine I met a few months ago at that ashram in India I was telling you about the other day.'

'Oh, was that the person who did the thing in the place with the stuff?' That was how I might have formulated a question to clarify who was also coming.

'Yeah, exactly. Mind if we join you?'

And in that fashion the quiet time alone would morph into a dinner party of half a dozen or thereabouts because everyone knew someone from somewhere. It made for fascinating conversation owing to the fact that most people—or at least the people I knew—travelled in more than one circle. There were the spiritual travellers, the adventure seekers, the artists, the people for whom travel was

an excuse to binge on booze and drugs, the historically inclined, the aid workers and volunteers and so forth.

Belonging to more than one of these causal factions was common and the thought occurred to me that this was our, Western, way of mirroring the caste system. We seem to substitute the prerogative of birth with interest, profession and educational title. Maintaining an intellectual purchase on the Nepalese caste system for more than a couple of days proved illusionary. As soon as I thought I could begin grasping the local caste system some sudden and new information would invariably confound my conclusions.

Over the course of the evening these groups would organically splinter back into their original constellations as some people went in search of a party, some to bed early because of a meditation course in the morning and others in search of some contemplative solitude.

The experience was akin to that of village life. Everyone meets in the village pub regardless of one's individual affiliation and despite that affiliation everyone knows each other. The only difference here was that at a dinner with five people there very easily could have been six nationalities represented. Since many of these travellers stayed in one place for less than a couple of months there was a conspicuous dearth of mobile phones which augmented this sensation of village life or even the feeling of being back in time.

It was at one of these dinners that I introduced my girlfriend to Jon, a friend and co-conspirator in misadventure. He in turn introduced us to an organic farmer from Tasmania who was taking a break from the yoga centre circuit in India to do some trekking in Nepal. She noticed a Canadian teacher of acquaintance who had been living in Mongolia for a few years who was also on holiday in Nepal for trekking. The Canadian had bumped into a Dutch aid worker she had met several years earlier in India on a volunteer project and so on.

Our group ended up at a steakhouse devouring inexpensive yak steaks offered in so many fashions that the majority of the restaurants patrons returned time and time again wanting to try as many variations as was possible.

Earlier at a different location we had covered what we were doing in Nepal, for how long we had stayed and would stay, where we were from and how we knew one another. Horror stories about food and sublime culinary experiences had been discussed as we ordered and we were now moving onto the topics of our travels. A round of after dinner drinks arrived and someone raised a glass to the table. Jon smiled mischievously at me and I at him.

'No, no, no. You've got to do it like this,' Jon addressed everyone and looked at me. He took his beer in his right hand and placed his left hand on his right elbow. I did the same. We clinked our glasses and simultaneously shouted '*Shapdeg!*'

'What's all that?'

'That's how they do it in Tibet,' Jon explained.

'Something we picked up a few weeks back,' I added.

Jon explained further by saying, 'That's the abbreviated version. In the longer version you dip your right ring finger in the beer, flick skywards and say "To God" or "To the Gods", dip it again and flick straight saying "To the Earth" and then dip your finger a last time, flick down and say "To the mermaids".'

'Mermaids?' Everyone was surprised.

'Yeah, I still think there was some sort of a mistranslation, but that is what the monk told us,' I offered.

'There are a lot of seashells in Tibet,' Jon said. 'Presumably from when the Indian plate crashed into the Asian and pushed the Himalayas up from the sea.'

'Mermaids though. That's just weird,' the Canadian teacher said. After a pause caused by her having a sip of her drink: 'But there's so many weird things here. It's totally different.'

'Have you noticed,' someone else began, 'how everyone here asks you what "your good name is"? Always "your good name" and never just your name.' A torrent of recognition manifested by laughs and affirmative exclamations inundated the sultry air.

'And the "What to do?" in Nepal. It's everywhere.'

'I love it!' I yelled. "What to do?" The whole laissez-faire attitude of the people encapsulated in a phrase.'

'With the gesture though,' Jon threw in and proceeded to do a convincing accent accompanied by the well known Indian head wobble. We all laughed again.

The Dutch aid worker at the table chimed in with an observation on the lack of utensils in local households, especially in the countryside. He commented on how they looked like children using forks and knives when they try to adopt Western custom, then hastily pointed out that whenever he tried eating with his hands the locals burst into fits of hysterics because of how woefully unversed he was.

My girlfriend had been there only a couple of days but was nevertheless able to join in the mirth and added an anecdote of her own. 'I thought it was strange when we were taking some photos the other day. There were some Indian men wearing suits and ties and doing the same. Instead of asking me to take a photo they wanted a photo taken with me in it.'

'And you let her?' The Canadian woman addressed me in a tone that bordered on panic.

I raised my eyebrows questioningly.

'You know what they're going to do? They're going to go home and show all of their friends the picture and say they met a white woman on vacation and fucked her brains out. They're sick like that.' She nodded for emphasis.

'Well, it's not true, is it?' I retorted more annoyed than jealous.

'You've gotta be secure in your relationship,' she said to both of us and leaned back in her chair.

My girlfriend caught my glance and rolled her eyes. I reciprocated the gesture, then we re-immersed ourselves in the conversation until the group started to disintegrate. We decided it was best to leave as well, so we said goodbye and slowly walked back to the hotel room we had taken earlier in the evening when we realised we would most likely be out past the curfew that was largely ignored in Thamel because of the tourists.

'What time is your sightseeing flight tomorrow?' I asked her. The flights were well worth the cost but seeing as how I had already taken a flight to Lukla and seen the mountains in person, I said I wouldn't join her in an effort to save money.

'It's not until the day after tomorrow, remember?' Maybe tomorrow we could go to the tailor to finish having you measured for your suit.'

'Yes, we could. I thought your flight was—never mind. So, did you have fun tonight?'

'Yeah, it was fun. That one woman was a bit odd though,' she said neutrally.

'I thought so too. It was somewhat uncomfortable the way she was talking about the Nepalese and Indians. She seems to be the only Canadian I've ever met who wasn't obsessed with everyone thinking her a nice person.'

She smiled. 'Was it just me or did what she was saying have a very us-versus-them feel to it?'

'Definitely. I was noticing that as well. It was extremely confrontational.'

'And in an unproductive way,' she contributed. The streets were dark and looked deserted despite there being a few people selling hash, a handful of homeless people sleeping and the odd tourist stumbling back to where ever they were staying. We held hands and walked mostly in silence. She made a sympathetic comment about the poverty in the streets. My new-found jadedness meant I merely grunted.

I was thinking of the us-versus-them attitude; it was something that I had noticed a few months earlier. Many of the Westerners with whom I had come into contact had seemed to mistake their culture shock for an irreconcilable cultural chasm. Some just accepted it, but others fiendishly interpreted it arrogantly, acting as though they were superior in some way. It was indeed easy to do so with the way many visitors were treated.

The police, for example, had a special tourist department the members of which guarded the restaurants and kept them free from beggars or people trying to sell flowers and other trinkets. These were the same police who overtly turned a blind eye to the tourists who smoked the officially illegal but very common marijuana. Outside a few locations police were stationed and they only permitted well-dressed locals or Westerners of any description to enter. That made it easy for one's ego to be inflated. On the other hand, there were sites of religious significance that were forbidden to non-Hindus, which, in effect meant that Westerners were barred entry; they contributed to the feeling of incongruous cultures attempting to coexist.

Both of these occurrences—the strict dichotomy between local and foreigner—fostered an attitude of entitlement and almost ownership in more than a few of the visitors, especially those less inclined to self-reflection. Coupled with the inevitable difference of wealth, I saw an imperial ethos that was uninviting but difficult to avoid.

The next morning we ate a large breakfast at a leisurely pace and accompanied it with several of the local, English-language newspapers. At just a few cents per glass we ordered round after round of fresh juices, squeezed from bananas, mangoes and oranges. After some weak tea with breakfast we had coffee as well. Eventually we meandered to the tailor who was expecting us. The previous afternoon we had been in but the head tailor was not present. His teenage apprentice did what he could, namely showed us the materials and took a few measurements.

When we arrived the moustached tailor sent a boy who I took to be his son for some chai tea. His apprentice, who looked like he could have been his older son, went over the notes he had made the previous day. Not in an unkind way a request was barked at the apprentice who then set about extracting rolls of fabrics from the shelves that covered every wall of the diminutive shop.

'You said, sir, you wanted a linen suit?'

'Yes, indeed. I don't know why but I've always wanted one. For summer mostly. It's too hot to wear something thicker.'

'Of course,' he smiled at me, probably thinking that European summers by comparison are not that hot. 'I think a tan or a beige fabric is best.'

'Something light anyway, but I'm not too choosy.'

'What do you think of this colour?' He took some fabric from the apprentice and showed it to me.

'Oh, that's very nice.'

'And this one?'

'Well, that's quite lovely as well.'

'Perhaps you would like something lighter? Or thicker? Is this one—'

'No, no, the first one is perfect. It's what I've always wanted.' I smiled at him, not really wanting further options to complicate my decision.

'Very good, sir. Could I please bother to measure?' He took my remaining measurements, confirmed how many buttons I wanted and asked something about the lapel that I didn't really understand so I suggested he do what he thought most appropriate.

The heat from the dulcet, creamy teas still in our hands was making me sweat slightly. Sitting on the woven stools the approximate height of my knees was not the most comfortable either. The little boy held the door open for a draught to enter and from time to time shouted something at local children passing by in the street. The tailor now asked my girlfriend all the questions he had asked me on my first visit as we finished the tea. He said the suit would be ready in three days as we stood to go. My knees protested the small stools audibly by emitting a cracking sound. When we were already in the street he jumped outside with pen and paper and asked at which hotel we could be found. I told him we were living outside Thamel with a local family. That made him smile. He asked what the phone number was. When I couldn't remember I gave him my email address and said the name of a few places nearby where I could often be found, passing the afternoons. He needn't worry, I said, I would check in after a day or two.

Two days later we were sitting on the first floor rooftop of a café under a shade umbrella with a pile of books and postcards and some empty cups of coffee. I was smoking a cigar, my girlfriend writing a postcard. We both intermittently voiced our preferences in regards activities for the last couple of days in Kathmandu.

'Should we have a go of *Bagh-Chal*?' I asked after admitting to myself that my reading material wasn't keeping me engaged.

'*Bagh-Chal*? Oh, the tigers and goats game?' She nodded to my rucksack which contained the somewhat ornate wooden board and the metal tiger and goat figurines. The game was another of the souvenirs I had been wanting to buy. I took the board from my rucksack and ran my hands along the copper inlay and felt the density of the wood. I thought it would probably be best not to pack the game but take it in my hand baggage because of its weight.

'Do you remember how to play?'

'Goats capture tigers and tigers eat goats?'

'Exactly. Who do you want to play as? If you're tigers you begin with all four of your pieces on the board; you move them round and jump over goats to eat them. If you're goats you place them on the board one by one until all twenty are there and trap tigers by preventing them from being able to move or jump over goats.'

'I'll be goats,' she said, then bleated, playfully mocking a goat. I squeezed her hand and then put the four tigers in the corner. We each made a few moves until she understood, then we reset the board. I won the first game. It was the first time I had ever won. The few months of playing casually with locals meant that the experience gap between me and her translated roughly into the same difference between me and the people who had been playing the game their entire lives.

'Let's play again. I'll be tigers this time.'

'So you liked it?'

'It's really fun. It's interesting how unbalanced the game feels.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, there are four tigers versus twenty goats but it seems like there's an equal chance of winning. You can have the more powerful pieces or the more numerous.'

'It's the quantity versus quality argument.' I sipped my now cold coffee and took a drag on my cigar that was itself nearly cold. I struck a match to relight it.

'Is it? Maybe. I was thinking more along the lines of how active people have to be if they are aggressive, and in this case if you're the goats it's all about defence and limiting how much damage the tigers can do. In chess there's no difference between black and white but here your mindset and strategies have to change depending on who you are.'

'Yeah, I thought you'd like it. It's fun. I'm glad we bought it. It's indigenous to Nepal. This game isn't even found in India,' I said with pride as though the originality of the board game corroborated my decision to come to Nepal. After brief reflection I added that there was in fact a similar game in India but the shape of the board was different.

I placed a goat. She moved her tiger. We repeated the process a few times, then I pointed out a way for her to eat one of my goats. After a minute she noticed one of my mistakes and corrected it by moving my goat to trap her tiger. I ended up winning again although we were both playing on both sides. She said she was looking forward to teaching the game to some friends as we put it back in my rucksack.

'There's a lot that I look forward to teaching people,' I said.

'Like what?'

'No idea.' I smiled. 'I don't know; just how amazing Nepal is. I haven't exactly sussed it out yet, it's more of a feeling.' I took a drag on my cigar to think. 'I missed you a lot,' I put my hand on her wrist, 'but aside from that I absolutely loved it here. I could easily imagine living here in the long term. If the circumstances allow it, I mean.'

'Yeah? Well, you certainly sounded happy and excited in your emails and whenever we talked on the phone. It was a little surprising actually.'

'Why is that?'

'You sometimes have your little routines and you don't really like sudden changes of plan, unless you yourself make them.' I might have been somewhat offended but she was right and we had just talked about that issue a day or two prior. 'I thought you would have more difficulty in adapting or that you'd be ready to come home by now.'

'It's easy living here though. I have such a leisurely lifestyle and can afford it. It's so inviting.'

'Well, that makes sense,' she conceded my point, 'But you're a bit spoiled here. You need to get used to being a "normal" person again.' She smiled.

'Not even you will spoil me when we get back?'

'Well, maybe. Sometimes, I mean. But in a different way.'

'Really?' I said with ludic cheekiness.

She sighed an exaggerated sigh and smiled. 'People here indulge you too much. Remember at home there's nothing special about being white, so you'll be treated just like everybody else.'

'That is a depressing thought.'

She rolled her eyes at me and said, 'You're too spoiled here.'

'Precisely,' I answered quickly. She said she was going to finish writing some postcards and then read the travel guide to see if there's anything she missed that she would have enjoyed doing. I asked if I could use the guidebook until she was finished with the postcards or if she needed the book for spelling. There was an interesting bit about the history of Kathmandu that I wanted to reread, I told her. We ordered another coffee and a mango lassi. The waiter brought them after a few minutes then returned to where he was sitting in the shade, still on the balcony but close enough to the indoors to observe what was going on inside.

A boy arrived at the café. He looked a comparable age to my private pupil who was ten. The boy was barefoot either out of poverty or the comfort of a child, but I didn't take much notice of him. It was a loud and somewhat high voice that caught my attention and made me notice the him. The waiter was already walking over to the boy when I first noticed his dark hair bobbing as he bounced up the stairs to the café. I had assumed he was selling something to earn some money for his family. The waiter seemed to make the same assumption as it became clear he was trying to send the boy back downstairs. The conversation, of which I was only partially aware over the brim of the book, lasted longer than I would have expected but culminated in the waiter pointing to our table. The boy jolted over with great speed that was not appropriate for a café but given his age its absence would have been more inappropriate. The waiter was a pace or two behind him. As I heard the waiter begin to address me, the boy handed me a sheet of paper with the message 'Please be so kind to try suit so we can alter, sir.' I passed the note to my girlfriend who said she would wait for me. I said she should come with me as on items of fashion I needed a guide and opinion to which I could attach myself.

The waiter was standing behind the boy with a hand on his shoulder. He had heard me say that I would prefer not being alone and he offered to mind our possessions until we returned. My girlfriend threw me a look and I assured her our things would be safe. We stood to go; I put my cigar in the ashtray, then remembering that it had been brought at my especial request to Nepal I decided to take it with me.

'Yes, please.' The boy motioned for us to follow him. The tailor's wasn't more than one hundred metres away down a side street but he seemed to take pride in guiding us to the shop. I enjoyed the feeling too. In my mind, I was the maverick doctor working in extreme poverty; I was the district judge summoned to solve a local dispute by a barefooted native boy; I could have been the imperial administrator, led through dodgy areas of crammed quarters, to resolve a potential trade scandal. I could have easily pretended for the short walk to the tailor's that I was a civil servant from a novel by Kipling or an officer in an Orwellian short story. The reality of being an average visitor using his money, average or even below average by Westerner standards, to take advantage of cheap labour in the Third World was far too dull a narrative for my mind.

'Hello, sir,' the tailor greeted us from inside his shop, with his cloth tape measure draped round his neck with almost ceremonial grace. I handed my cigar to my girlfriend, but was assured that it was not necessary. I took a drag on my cigar and we stepped inside for my suit.

# INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR



## **Why Nepal?**

Why not Nepal? I hadn't been there and I knew very little about the country. That's sufficient reason to want to live and work in a place, so far as I'm concerned.

## **When you went to live in Nepal, did you have writing a book in mind?**

Well, it was always a distinct possibility—somewhere in the back of my mind—but I can't say it was my intention. It grew out of missives to friends and family. I was writing longer and longer emails and letters the more I experienced, the more I experienced intellectually predominantly, and at one point I realised I needed, or at least wanted, a method by which I could catalogue, analyse, and come to terms with my experiences, with what I was seeing and feeling. As I have always written it wasn't that much of a stretch to turn my journal entries, little sketches, and the like into a proper book.

'I needed a method by which I could catalogue my experiences'

## **How can we imagine you writing *A Natural Fortress*?**

Coffee played a major role. Tobacco, too. That's not to be flippant, but I can't say I was particularly draconian in my routine. I started writing in Nepal, continued during a few months in the US, and finished after moving back to Vienna. It takes me some time to allow for nascent notions to develop, but once they do I favour sitting in cafés for long stints, writing sometimes with pen and paper and other times on the laptop. And there's always the countryside, the beauty and boredom of which are the perfect cocktail for writing. Not that I could write like them, but when I got stuck or wrote myself into a cul-de-sac I'd normally pull out a Naipaul or Rushdie to get some ideas, to see others' means for dealing with whatever was niggling me.

### **Why did you decide to write a free ebook?**

Honestly, this ebook started life as a marketing ploy and I was reluctant to write it. But once I revisited my journals, photos and memories, I realised that there were plenty of ideas that at the time of writing *A Natural Fortress* I cast aside as irrelevant or dull. My interests and focuses had shifted since writing the book and I now thought some of these ideas merited exploration in their own right. Ultimately I enjoyed writing these stories as they ended up being something of an epilogue, a way for me to compound my experiences in Nepal after several years had passed. Writing these three stories allowed me to approach my experiences from a new perspective.

### **Has this new perspective, as you say, changed your ideas on Nepal and it's people?**

I should hope so. I don't trust people who undiscerningly believe what they think. Ideas are simply ways of seeing the world but there's no right or wrong. It's akin to clothing. Certain sizes fit certain people, some clothes are appropriate at a given place or time. There's no morality with clothing; it's

'I don't trust people who believe what they think'

just opinion. Maintaining unwavering trust in one's convictions invites the risk of becoming dogmatic and close-minded. There are quite a few ideas I put forth in *A Natural Fortress* that I don't necessarily agree with anymore. They were the clothes suited to my environment and circumstances—one wears an anorak in the Arctic and flip-flops in the South Seas, if you will. Like Zeno's Arrow Paradox, the book is merely a snapshot.

### **Despite these changes over time, are there common threads running through your writings?**

I'm not entirely sure I can provide a satisfactory response. With these short stories and *A Natural Fortress* I was certainly intrigued by the question of identity, what the stereotypes are and how people conform to or reject them as they go throughout their lives. The importance we as a society place on being 'from' somewhere, as though one's passport has anything more than a facile effect on who they are, has been a topic of fascination to me for some time.

### **In one of the stories you mention growing up a third culture kid. How has that influenced how you see the world?**

Pollock was spot on in saying TCKs build relationships with all cultures but have ownership of none. I consider neither Austria nor the United States—the two most prevalent countries in my formative years—to be home, though I have a far greater affinity with the former. And I certainly don't feel either to be foreign. In truth, I have difficulty in subscribing to the notion of 'foreignness' as a concept. It's an alien paradigm for me. There's a camaraderie amongst TCKs that we, as a subculture, embrace. Bearing in mind my own biases, I like thinking growing up this way fosters a propensity towards openness and acceptance.

'The importance we place on being "from" somewhere is fascinating'

### **It certainly seems like a major topic for you. Do you intend to explore it further?**

It's part of how I see the world. Being something of a late-comer to the concept—I learnt about it as an anthropological category at twenty-one—I am perhaps more more sensitive to the topic than people who grew up knowing about it. That being said, it's an intellectual topic for me as much as a personal one, an emotional one. So, yes, I intend to write further on it. I'm currently engaged in writing a collection of short stories that deal with living and working abroad, global nomadism and

the intercultural exchanges that many see and experience on an increasingly frequent basis. And of course identity, or rather the issues of identity that arise from this age of the internet- and cheap airfare-induced connectivity. Reflecting on our surroundings and self for me is one of the few worthwhile pursuits in life.

### **Author Bio**

J Raimund Pfarrkirchner has lived in North and South America, Asia and Europe. He works as a translator, teacher, and writer. He currently lives in Vienna and enjoys travelling under any pretence, be it aid work, speeches on third culture kids, or simply indulging his curiosity. To find out more visit [www.jrpfarr.com](http://www.jrpfarr.com).