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CULTURAL WORK

Heaven on Earth

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Abstract

'Heaven on earth' is a creative non-fiction piece which juxtaposes life under lockdown in Sydney 2020 with my experience of curfew in Kashmir in the 1990s. The COVID-19 crisis is explored from the resonances and dissonances across place and time. In this hybrid personal essay, I reflect on how a sense of space is constructed from wealth and community, and how a white, middle-class status benefits from lockdown, juxtaposed against the ongoing political and social isolation of Kashmir.

Keywords

COVID-19; Creative Non-fiction; Curfew; Kashmir; Sydney

Outside is as quiet as a truce. Usually, from six in the morning, cars whoosh past my house, on their way to work and school. Instead cars are parked in their driveways. We too are parked; safer to stay inside. Planes are also parked somewhere, I hear birds on the wind, calls from different birds. For the first time in seven years since I've lived in this suburb, I wonder what caws and screeches. Gulls, butcherbirds and magpies most likely, the odd cockatoo and rainbow lorikeet. We are almost still, uneasy in Sydney, and this strangeness reminds me of Kashmir.

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Heavenly Nigeen Lake, 1991; © C.J. Vallis

Sunset prayer—*God is great*—and gunfire echoed around the valley. Like the Kingfisher birds, the noise no longer bothered me or moved me from Nigeen Lake, Srningar. I paused until it settled, before asking Abdul, ‘When will it end? When can we go out?’

Abdul’s smile was hard to read as he explained—an army checkpoint was blown to bits by a bomb, hidden in a basket of temple flowers. Yesterday soldiers captured seven militants and chopped off their arms. But we were safe on Marco Polo Super Deluxe AAA houseboat, so he said. The fighting was in the distance. Even under curfew, Nigeen Lake was paradise in comparison to Delhi and its traffic snarls, hubbub and fly-blown street stalls. In this space, I was protected from Delhi’s touts and frustrated men, their grinning faces and roving hands.

‘Kashmiri suffer from India and Pakistan.’ Abdul collected our tea glasses on a tray, stood and sighed.

In 1991 I was for adventure. I didn’t mind. As long as I had supplies of Gold Flake cigarettes to smoke and Abdul to play Snap with me, even if he cheated because his luck was bad and couldn’t win fair and square. We sat inside at a lacquered walnut table, encircled by shelves of British Raj furnishings, flowery bone china and embroidered curtains. In that intersection of time and space, I could fool myself that Abdul enjoyed my company and that I was not another demanding white tourist. That could come and go as I pleased.

Soon the sky was dark and pricked with stars.

*

At this point, Corona is a Mexican beer, best served with lime. 2020 is off to a biblical start. In January summer heat, I board a bus where an elderly lady wears a full gas mask to protect her lungs from the bushfire smoke that palls over Sydney, punctured only by a small apocalyptic red sun. To stop myself staring at her monstrous mask, I look out an ash-blackened windowpane as fire engines speed past us on Broadway.

In February, torrential rain is a relief; drenching Armageddon blazes around New South Wales and rinsing the sky. We rally at Town Hall in thousands about climate change, as the ocean rises to wash away more of the coast and some beach backyards.

Next is pestilence; let’s call it an epidemic. The virus seems like another SARS or swine flu, mostly bad for travel, and for international students locked down in China who have to delay their semester in Sydney. In Australia, pessimists are panic-buying toilet paper, pasta and rice. (I laugh at doomsdayers while buying extra paracetamol and ibuprofen just in case.) Hundreds are dying in Italy and Iran, and New York, the

greatest city on earth (or so the Americans say) is sick. COVID-19 is upgraded to pandemic status on 11 March 2020.

The date comes from a work email that warns staff of unprecedented challenges. Without the email, I'd struggle to remember the details; generally, I've outsourced dates and times to virtual calendars and their invisible data empire of server farms with forever memories reminding me what to do when. My poor memory is imprinted in tracks of inside and outside spaces. There's only room in my brain for magnetic experiences that stick to these grooves. Growing up, I walked grassy footpaths along wide bitumen roads with no trees, no shade, pretending I was unafraid of the unleashed dogs behind small chain wire fences. A car, I wished, if only I had a car to protect myself from sprawling boredom.

*



Embroidered curtains Kashmiri houseboat, 1991; © C.J. Vallis

Abdul was proud of his Indian car, his 'Embassador', which resembled a newly manufactured Morris Minor. He promised to drive me to the Mughal gardens and markets and winked as he said we'd haggle over Pashmina shawls and visit friends to drink chai and eat pakora. He always skipped the part about having to bypass mosques and avoid the Indian military bunkers that cut Srinagar into ribbons.

If I asked Abdul *when will curfew end* his answer was soon. Soon we'd book that mountain trek to Gulmarg. 'Heaven on earth', was his description, and charm aside, I could tell he believed it.

Days blurred and bled together. I got sick of trying to write the great Australian novel. For something to do, I plucked out my leg hair with tweezers as I sat on the houseboat prow, gazing at Nigeen Lake, a powder blue mirror of snowy peaks. A powder keg, really.

I took to swimming in the lake, past lilies and algae fed from houseboat sewage, until my face broke out in a rash that could only be cleared by antibiotics.

So I was glad to have company when a young backpacker couple rented the neighbouring houseboat for a few days. I invited them over to Marco Polo to slurp Kashmiri tea, warm with cinnamon and cardamom, and compare travel stories.

The Israeli guy, Eli, wanted the low down on Abdul. He was incensed that Abdul had tried to sell him a carpet, and then ranted about how Abdul wouldn't let him hire a Shikara to paddle around, supposedly for his own safety. Then he boasted of his military service and how Israelis could defend themselves. No way

would he pretend to Kashmiris that his thick Hebrew accent was German. Abdul's warnings about militants were designed to scare him away from competition and comparing prices. Etcetera.

His Dutch girlfriend only seemed to half-listen. She spotted my Tarot deck and asked if I could read for her. Eli mocked her request and my 'fortune telling'. Unfazed, she told Eli she was thirsty and sent him back to their houseboat to purify water. As soon as he left, I laid out a short, two-card tarot spread for her. The Six of Swords was her key card: a warrior who is focused and stubborn. Didn't go down too well. Luckily they moved to Dal Lake in a huff not long after.

For myself, I shuffled seven times, cut with my left hand, and drew the Three of Cups; enjoyment of others, or reversed, exploitation.

*

In Sydney we are a long way from curfew in Srinagar and the military occupation of Kashmir with hundreds of thousands of Indian troops ([Zia 2020](#): 360). NSW schools close, my local café switches to takeaway, and some shops close though their windows are not boarded over. So long as we follow rules, we're allowed to shop, visit the Doctors and exercise, no permit required. Access to unlimited electricity and Internet keeps me occupied and docile. I become a bit obsessed with the latest statistics and locations of outbreaks. It seems that in a pandemic, crowds have to be controlled for the greater good (some of us just can't act responsibly and have to be fined or arrested).

Usually lockdown is imposed on prisoners; now we are our own guards. In the suburbs, we've always social distanced anyway. I couldn't have less physical interaction with my neighbours. Our windows and bedrooms are a few metres apart, but I am only familiar with their noise pollution; the hum of their vacuum cleaner, the television extra loud for the footy, lawn mowing and whipper-snipping on weekends.

I walk a lot to the Cooks River foreshore. On one day I stop and chat five times to people I know from soccer, school, an old workplace; people I rarely see otherwise. Friends and I socialise by strolling together past the river's smelly mangroves, ignoring the plastic refuse and abandoned shopping trolleys beached on its mudflats at low tide.

It's hard to envision my protected Sydney in 2020 as a 'place of disciplinary monotony,' unless protection and tedium agrees with me ([Foucault 1996](#): 141). Order and surveillance are still methods for controlling the pandemic. Authorities brutally enforced the lock down of citizens in segmented space during the bubonic plague. In seventeenth century Europe, I can imagine faceless men with shields and safety glass, dressed in long-sleeved aprons and disposable surgical gloves; quarantine soldiers monitoring and measuring disease. The only discontinuity in my make-believe scene is the PPE. Foucault had a point—distributing and enclosing individuals in designated spaces, by whatever means, is a more effective way of controlling crisis than staging public executions to scare people.

*



Traces of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), Srinagar 1991; © C.J. Vallis

After yet another blackout, Abdul invited me to dinner with the family, to listen to BBC World News on a short-wave radio. I spent a long time dressing for the occasion, draped a downy scarf over my head, and still I felt I was no fit to this place in my tight jeans.

On the family's Doonga boat, parked behind my fancy Marco Polo houseboat, Abdul introduced me to four brothers who I never knew existed. I tried not to gawp at the youngest brother sitting by a window with a home-made fishing rod and line in the water. The older brothers nodded, 'Salam Alaikum,' oiled black hair gleaming in the reflected light of spirit lamps, entered and left in turns to pray in the back room.

Then came Baba, Abdul's father, who wore a faded loose tunic, white skull cap, and stroked his grey beard instead of greeting me.

'What's the matter?' I whispered to Abdul.

'Baba say Allah is angry.'

Following Baba, mother Muoj crab-walked in carrying a pot of steaming dahl. Baba was served, next the brothers, finally me. She urged us to eat. When we were done (my taste buds still burning from chilli), Muoj unhooked her dangly earrings, pointed at my ears, until I understood we were supposed to swap.

After Muoj cleared the dishes and went to eat, Baba switched on the news.

'And now to Kashmir, India, where authorities have raided suspected militant hideouts to search for two Swedish nationals, abducted by militants while en route to a ski resort, northwest of the state capital of Srinagar.'

Abdul started shouting Kashmiri at the radio. A frown from Baba muzzled him. Abdul, the fixer and wheeler-dealer, forced his gaze down to the wooden floor planks, bare apart from a faded carpet and cushions.

Back on Marco Polo, Abdul eased out a floorboard under the walnut table. Hey presto he extracted a bottle of black label Johnny Walker. The first sip burned as it soothed. So did the second, third and fourth. After the fifth, I was blathering. 'Jesus, hope those Swedes are released soon.'

Abdul poured another tumbler-full, 'In sha'Allah.'

The power came back on. Magically his brother appeared, with a hash joint and a borrowed Bollywood film, despite the curfew. He connected the old VCR, retreated to the Doonga.

Hindi music shrilled through the tinny speakers, heavy drumming of tabla and high-pitch duet. On the television screen was shimmering lake, pink dusk and Himalayas as a backdrop, Indian coffee-cream actors sang love in a boat.

‘Very romantic.’ The tone of my voice was anything but.

‘It is about heart.’ Abdul smiled.

By this stage I was flushed and loose and could only giggle.

More Scotch. Cigarettes.

We were both grinning like nobody ever got killed in Kashmir.

*

Why say lockdown, not curfew? Like fast fashion, words trend, wear out quickly and are thrown away for new styles and cuts or sewn into other stories. In Singapore lockdown is called a [Stay-Home Notice](#) (SHN). Lockdown has been layered into stages. Army could come around to check you are at home. Lockdown or curfew, going out without permission means risking a fine and possibly arrest. The pandemic is changing many definitions.

Trust the Hindustan media to explain the nuances—the *Times of India*, *India Business Insider*, and *India Today*, explain curfew as an emergency state regulation to force you to stay inside at certain times. Lockdown is self-imposed, if you flout lockdown rules you are accused of being selfish. Self-isolation, self-quarantine; it’s all about self-self-self.

Is my-self any different? ‘For lease’ signs are sprouting in Sydney shop windows, though toilet paper is back on supermarket shelves and I have a well-paid job. Plus, work from home suits introverts like me. In my home space I can independently and asynchronously think and reflect, rather than react, which has improved the quality of my work and my life (despite an overload of ZOOM meetings). By luck of birth, I am centered in a big family, home and yard, and I don’t need to catch public transport where I might catch Miss Rona.

Instead of a lockdown or curfew, with prison yard principles and army enforcers, I daydream of cultural proxemics—couldn’t we learn to expand our bubbles of personal space? I almost convince myself that a new understanding of the anthropology of space will help ([Low 2009](#)). That everything works out for the best.

*



Police in Kashmir, 2018. By Tasnim News Agency, CC BY 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=75342944>.

In the morning, I woke with a stupendous hangover. After downing aspirin, I shoved clothes into my backpack. On top came the ‘guaranteed’ hundred percent silk Kurti, and the paper-mache bowls I bought

from Saddam Hussein's second cousin, who spluttered out his chai when I complained I was low on cash. 'Smoke my hookah, Carmeni,' he coughed. 'Forget your very bad situation.'

To begin with, Abdul just shook his head when I asked him to take me to the bus station. Lit a cigarette and blew smoke rings. 'Stay, stay. Tourist can come.'

Slowly he registered my expression as I told him, 'You can't make me stay.' My right to enter and leave was inalienable, I was certain.

Driving, Abdul and his little brother were silent. Shops were shuttered down in Lal Chowk, the streets empty. Near the market, Abdul pulled over—'Business.' His brother jumped out and retrieved a wicker basket from the boot. He strode away to the market without a backward glance, the basket's woven handle tucked securely under his arm. Soon after, a door to a boarded-up sari shop opened and he disappeared inside.

Abdul slowed for a checkpoint. From nowhere, an army jeep veered onto the road behind us and accelerated.

I screamed.

The jeep slammed into the Ambassador. Our bodies jerked forward. Whipped back. The bumper bar fell with a heavy metallic clang.

Eyeballing me, Abdul covered his mouth with his hand—I should shut my cake-hole.

A soldier swaggered over, barking Hindi, until he spied me. 'Memsahib!' Grinning betel-stained teeth, the soldier wagged his finger at Abdul, 'Bad driver.'

Abdul's jaw was tensed to a polite smile. He gripped the steering wheel as he stared straight ahead.

Another soldier with a bushy moustache struck Abdul's door with a big stick. Both soldiers appreciated this slapstick. Thwack, thwack; Abdul flinched at the loudest blows and the soldiers laughed and laughed until they tired of denting and scratching the Ambassador's shiny body.

*

Somehow we are getting used to social distancing and a U.S. President that advises drinking bleach to kill contagion. Masks. Middle class friends have stopped baking sourdough bread and are commuting back to work, at least a few days a week. I long to see friends and families overseas and interstate; social events and milestones like graduations are cancelled.

Lockdown and curfew disrupt a sense of time while waiting for a return to normal. Planning ahead is impossible under these conditions which 'acquire a surreal power over the society's temporal order' ([Junaid 2020: 308](#)). Yet the pandemic has not quite managed to dislocate the narratives we tell ourselves of the world and natural order of things. About which lives matter.

*

At Srinagar bus station, I was still shaking and blathering to Abdul—I'd spread the news about Kashmir's injustice.

'Shhh!' For a moment, Abdul grabbed my hand—'Come back with husband for honeymoon'—bequeathed a block of hashish that I swallowed on the spot. As I turned to leave, he rivetted his eyes on mine. 'All are moral, God forgives everything.'

For the ride out of Srinagar, I had two seats to myself behind the bus driver, thanks to Abdul's friendly chat with him before I embarked. During the ten-hour trip I slept in snatches as the bus lurched around bumpy mountain roads into Jammu. At Jammu railway station, platform two, I had another five hours to meditate on Abdul's parting words as I sat on my backpack waiting for the Delhi Express. I convinced

myself that his family would be fine, Abdul with his smooth-talking would shield them. Anyway, what had I done? Why should God forgive me?

At that time, I turned to Tarot reading and asked all the wrong questions.

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Police, Protesters Clash after Eid Prayers in Kashmir September, 02, 2017. By Tasnim News Agency, CC BY 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=75340912>

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My Bollywood honeymoon in the Himalayas never eventuated (Pal 2020). Instead, I've collected tweets about Kashmir that I can't reproduce here. One twitter account in particular, called 'Lost Kashmiri History,' was suspended along with its Facebook account in late 2018 (Zia 2018). It documented grieving mothers with faded snapshots of boys and men who have disappeared or been killed, among other photos of bullet-ridden militants laid out by soldiers. Abdul (not his real name) and his family are nowhere to be seen in these tweets. Would I recognise them after so much time and space? Srinagar, Kashmir, heaven on earth, is still in curfew and lockdown.

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