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Adrie Kusserow
St. Michael's College

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American Bardo

Adrie Kusserow

Ethnographic poetry allows me to describe the often viscous, clumsy, awkward encounters between self and other that leave both parties covered in the complex residues of *each Other*.

This poem came out of a summer of visits I made to the homes of Bhutanese elderly in Burlington, Vermont. I was trying to get a sense of their well-being, levels of isolation, challenges, and hopes.

Poetry allows for a kind of ethnographic fabric, woven from the ethnographer and the subjects' voices, memories, expectations and doubts, which resists more linear, one-dimensional descriptions. The Bhutanese elderly so obviously carried their pasts, religious beliefs, and conceptions of self right on into the ethnographic present, just as I came to meet them riddled with my own questions, anticipation, and confusion.

Raining in the north end slums,
soggy gloom sulking knee deep
around the apartments
of the just washed up.

We knocked and knocked,
everyone still sleeping.

In the small dark room,
under the masthead of the black tv,
they slept off the nightshift,
curled humbly around the couch.

Even as they rose from the warm rivers of their sleep,
there was a desire to please us.

We watched
trying not to watch,
as they untangled,
warm, grunting,
all bangled, bindi-ed,
smell of milky sandalwood as their bodies pulled apart.

Just as we had been dosed
since infancy
in the righteous habits of the overpraised,
their limbs had been soaking
in a warm kind of amniotic humility,

each porous cell knowing its place
in a karmic migration toward bent head,
lowered eyes, stooped shoulders.

We repeated our overly cheery
“Namastes,” hyped facial affect
sent out like stretchers
to cover up the gaps between us.

An old woman takes us to a side room
where a corpse lies,
wrapped head to toe in a white sheet,
feet stuck up like crows.

She pokes him with her finger,
out slips a puffy face, alive
but weighted with bored sleep,

“He does this to pass the time”

Outside the traffic lurches and honks along the streets,
liquor stores, dirty snowfall of lottery tickets,
a father laughing as his pitbull lunges,
the python of his bicep writhing in black tattoos.
In the muddy light soaking the curtains,
we let go of the taut strings
working our facial puppetry, though we don't know why,

“He gets dizzy if he goes outside”

Malai bahira niskane bitikai ringata lagcha

he cannot find the earth,
fears he'll get lost.

He likes to feed the ants a kernel of his daily rice,
watch them circle and drag it home.

He complains of his soul,
its recklessness, tendency to wander off when alone
and his mind fills to the brim with worry,

In the midst of the great blossoming of his story,
he lies down again,
wrapping himself in the white pupa
of his so called rescued, resettled life.

Meanwhile, we meander through analysis–

was it depression calling him back?
or his soul ascending out of the great American bardo
like a balloon, trapped by the ceiling,
blown around by the grungy Walmart fan
they proudly brought in to cool us?

And the tap tap tapping in the risen heat,
this knocking of the soul's light head against the ceiling,
how sad? or maybe how beautiful?
this gentle morse code of attempted escape,

We say our goodbyes, promise to come back,
take him outside, but leash him to this earth.

Stepping onto the chipped concrete,
before we have fully hardened,
before the shards of light bounce off us
like the shiny American cars we think
we should be,

instead we stay low, stay tender,
as the liminal do,
the street's rap pummeling us,
the bark of thick, blunted selves,
the mist of this house of risen souls
still rising from us.

Adrie Kusserow is the author of two collections of poetry: *Hunting Down the Monk* and *REFUGE*, both published by BOA Editions, Ltd. as part of their New American Poets Series. Her ethnographic fieldwork and humanitarian projects are based in Bhutan (Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy), Ladakh, India, and South Sudan (www.africaeli.org). She is Professor of Cultural Anthropology at St. Michael's College in Vermont where she teaches courses on refugees, medical anthropology, and anthropology of media. This poem will also be published in *Anthropology and Humanism* (40):1, 2015.