

The Shattered Mirror: On the Migrant in Literature and Politics

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For five months this year, I traveled and wrote in Cambodia and Laos. Most of those weeks were spent in Phnom Penh or in Luang Prabang, with the occasional sojourn to less inhabited places. At the most difficult points in my life, I have always turned to travel. It changes the fundamentals of experience for me: it elongates time, severs distance, drains the pocketbook and reminds me, persistently, of how we are raised up by language.

The exiled writer Ma Jian wrote, "I came to Tibet hoping to find answers to all my unasked questions, but I have discovered that even when the questions are clear, there are no clear answers. I am sick of traveling. I need to hold onto something familiar, even if it is just a teacup. I cannot survive in the wilds--nature is infinite but my life has bounds. I need to live in big cities that have hospitals, bookshops and women. I left Beijing because I wanted to be alone and to forge my own path, but I know now that no path is solitary, we all tread across other people's beginnings and ends."

Exactly five weeks ago I arrived here in Iowa City. For some reason in this beautiful place, all my words have evaporated. I feel like an empty glass sitting on the windowsill, while all the light and darkness of the passing days run through me. Right now in America a great many stories, a great many beginnings and endings have collided: the story of the American Dream and the global village, of exceptionalism and the decline of empire, of the girl-next-door and the enemy within. Over the last few weeks, these stories have made for riveting and sometimes disturbing politics.

Several years ago the writer and political philosopher Michael Ignatieff wrote an essay about marching on Washington on January 20, 1973, the date of Richard Nixon's second inauguration when America was in the throes of the Vietnam War: "I'm a Canadian," wrote Ignatieff, "but it was inevitable that the great cause of my growing up was an American war, not a Canadian wrong. I loved my own country, but I believed in America in a way that Canada never allowed. I was against the war because I thought it betrayed something essential about the country. I marched because I believed in Jefferson and Lincoln."

I remember, the morning after the 2004 U.S. election, taking the bus across Vancouver, British Columbia. The bus was packed. As we sat in traffic on the busy Broadway corridor, the bus driver picked up the speaker. "I thought you'd want to know," he said, addressing us all, "that John Kerry has just conceded defeat." Around me there were people with tears rolling down their faces. How did it happen, I wondered, that people who probably never wept at any Canadian election result were crying, in public, over a result next-door? I don't know how to explain it, except to observe that our dreams are tangled up in yours. The Canada/U.S. border is the longest border in the world, and it

also happens to be unmilitarized. It is a far, far cry from the U.S./Mexico border, where migrants wait until nightfall to make that terrifying dash over the fence, across the beach, from Tijuana into San Diego.

No, our border admits that we see each other as alike, as economic equals and business partners. For the time being, there are no walls.

But the idea of the migrant hovers, I believe, over our political discourse. She or he lives in the notion of the outsider, the stranger, the specter that haunts 'real America', in the fear of disappearing jobs and a rising China, of shuttered towns and the loss of home. The migrant, some believe, has no ties to this land and she or he, rootless and unknown, cannot be trusted.

I was born in Canada, and I hold a Canadian passport and no other. I would be distressed and offended were anyone to question my Canadian identity. Once, at a souvenir shop in Leeuwarden, in the north of the Netherlands, a shop owner said to me, "The immigrants in Canada, they don't dream in Canadian."

There is a saying in Dutch, *Nooit vergeet je de taal waarin je moeder van je hield*. Translated it means, Never do you forget the language in which your mother loved you. For me, that language is English. Like many new immigrants, my parents raised my siblings and I to speak and to think in the language of the new home. My mother watched in quiet curiosity as I hoarded books from the library. Like my sister's daughter, who is now 16, I read at the breakfast table, in the car, on the bus, even while walking. She must have been certain that I dreamed in English because it was the only language that I had, and the one in which she had loved me.

Among the many things this Dutch shop owner said, something in particular jumps out at me now: the ideal immigrant should be a person unencumbered with a past. Only then can an immigrant embrace the future and fit seamlessly into the adopted nation. But in our heart of hearts, he knows and I know and you know: such a person is more fiction than fiction.

The migrant in literature is obsessed with home. Perhaps he or she has been cast out; perhaps he or she has entered into a chosen exile. Perhaps they are outsiders within their own homeland. The migrant in literature builds her tent in a landscape where home is as elusive as a stable sense of the self.

Like many writers, I believe that literature not only defies borders, but it brings the periphery to the centre. It draws our gaze to the crevices and the minute, the cracks in the epic, the multiples selves within the individual. It adds labyrinth upon labyrinth to our shared experience of the times in which we are now living.

The Lebanese writer Elias Khoury put it this way, "The other is a part of me. If I do not incorporate the other into myself, then I am not me."

I don't know if I can prove that I dream in Canadian. Whether I am here or in Montreal or in Asia, my writing allows me to reflect a self that is often in-between places, that is restless and that is not satisfied. Pico Iyer, the travel writer and literary critic, once said that it was in Canadian literature that he found a "vision of what Canada might offer to a world in which more and more people are on the move and motion itself has become a kind of nation."

Some things are forever burned into my memory. Once, in Cambodia, a little girl asked me to buy her a pair of shoes. In Phnom Penh, a child accompanied me to the bakery and pointed her tiny, muddy finger at the display case to indicate what she wanted. She looked up at me, her eyes full of knowing. "Two," she said. "Give me two." She smiled, thinking she had won the day. She took her prize and ran away into the dark traffic-laden streets. I know that it is easy enough for a foreigner like myself to buy a few pieces of bread, a pair of shoes, to thrust money into every open hand. But back home, in Montreal, familiarity will breed a certain ease. Between talking and writing and living, so many things fall between the cracks. These young girls that I meet in Cambodia, everyone that I meet and share a moment or a day with, they slip, over time, into that other impenetrable world.

What is particular to the migrant is that these impenetrable worlds exist simultaneously within his or her own soul. The task of living is, in large part, an attempt to reconcile these multiple solitudes, to live with them or alongside them in a way that will not result in the fragmentation of the self. From this shattered mirror we make a narrative. These stories pervade our identities, our nations and yes, our elections. It's no wonder, I think, that I can't write in Iowa City; another story, far more compelling, is being unspooled in the newspapers, on television screens and in the streets. Nothing and no one come without a past. Not a president and not a migrant. Not even a bystander watching history being made.