

Infinity Between Us

MAITHREYI NANDAGOPALAN

I stand before a red door, its dark cranberry color vivid against the grey house, the grey sky, the grey snow on the lawn. It would make the perfect backdrop for a Christmas wreath, and the season calls for one. But there is no wreath, and this is no occasion for festivity.

I want the door to open, and yet I don't.

My father's hand presses the doorbell—his gloves grey, too—and a melodic fourth rings out in the still air. The door opens just as the second note fades to silence. My parents enter, but I do not follow them. Instead, I stay leaning against the doorjamb, facing the stairway that rises across from me. He's sitting on the third step, his shoulder against the banister where a thin crack mars the wood—my handiwork, from sliding down the stairs eons ago. I stare at him, trying to find something in his face to recognize. There isn't much, but I know who he is. He couldn't be anyone else.

Geoff. My friend, once my best friend, whom I haven't seen since my family moved to California eight years earlier. Geoff, with whom I was engaged at the age of three—at least until he refused to let a girl on top of his bunk bed—and I broke it off. Geoff, with whom I went sledding once behind my apartment, where we overturned our saucer in a tangle of snow and flailing arms a mere instant before crashing into a creek. Geoff, with whom I somehow thought I'd be able to pick things up from where we left off, as if we'd grown up a thousand miles apart but on perfectly parallel paths. I forgot that parallel lines don't converge.

We are here, after so long, to mourn his older brother, who turned seventeen a week ago and died four days after that. I should know what to do—I prepared for this moment on the plane, scripting lines for both the left-alive brother and myself, his long-lost friend. I am nearly thirteen years old—a mature thirteen, adults often say—and I have thought about death. It may come at any time, I know, and I'm all right with that. Until it does, I will live. Afterwards, nothing will matter. I accept that people might die. I accept that I might die.

With the edge of the doorframe digging into my shoulder, I discover that I have never really thought about the possibility that my best-friend-turned-stranger's brother might die.

"Hey," he says, into the silence. Just that. And I, who as a child was restricted to three sentences per bite at the table so meals wouldn't last for hours—I who at twelve already sprinkle my speech with four-syllable words—can think of nothing to say. My scripted lines have fled, and I can only stare at him. Above him, the staircase turns a corner into darkness. His eyes, too, are very dark, and suddenly I can't remember what color I had remembered them to be. He doesn't look like someone who would find comfort for his grief with me. He looks like a calm thirteen-year-old stranger whose parents might have baby pictures that match my memories. The silence, which seems infinitely long, stretches on between the two of us there in the vestibule, six feet and eight years and a thousand miles apart.

I finally manage a "Hey" in response to his, but close my lips over the instinctive "How are you?" that tries to follow. We are pretending that things are normal, that he hasn't just lost his closest brother, that we're not talking across a decade's silence. I can pretend, because what else is there to do? But *How are you?* would go too far.

"You're tall," he says. "Much taller than I remember."

"I grew," I tell him. "And you're sitting down. I'm standing." The trivial, the irrelevant, the innocuous, the game with no stakes.

He looks at me. I stare back, utterly miserable and utterly helpless, and utterly selfish in my misery and my helplessness. This isn't how things are supposed to be. I can't see *his* grief, and I have no right to it.

But something passes between us as we stare at each other—something that whispers of the memory of friendship and the nature of loss, of the illusions two strangers might offer each other. It isn't much. It isn't enough. But it's a start.

"I'll show you where you're sleeping," he says, and I follow him up the stairs.

I am a thousand miles, give or take, from the grey winter of that grey house. A thousand days, give or take, have passed since then. The July sun mercilessly assaults a dance studio in California. Every surface, from the mirrors on the walls to the varnish on the floor, seems to radiate heat. My teacher sits untouched by the sweltering air; by contrast, I am disheveled and trembling, having danced already for three hours, with bruises on my knees from slipping gracelessly on my own sweat. This latest dance piece, less technical-

ly demanding than the others in my repertoire, was supposed to be a reprieve, but what it lacks in physical rigor it makes up for in emotional intensity.

Somehow, I'm not getting it right. All the parts are there: I've memorized the music and the steps and the gestures. It's not a linguistic barrier, for the lyrics are in Tamil—the language of my lullabies, which slips with equal ease into endearments and epithets, any speech of strong emotion. It's not that I'm unfamiliar with the music, because I've studied this style of singing for years precisely so that I could understand what I am dancing to. But something is still missing, and I don't know what it is. The parts don't make a coherent whole.

“Stop,” my dance teacher says. “This isn't about you. Stop making it about you.”

She's right. It's not about me, it's about the song's heroine, the *naayika*, from whose point of view these lyrics were written. The piece I'm learning, composed by the Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi, is called *Asai Mugam*, “Beloved Face.” The *naayika* in this case is a girl who has fallen in love with the Hindu god Krishna—the notoriously perfect lover, he of the night-dark skin and lilting flute. Through a haunting and plaintive melody, crescendoing from lighthearted exasperation into crushing grief and longing, the *naayika* laments that she has forgotten his face. She remembers the warmth of his embrace and the shape of his smile against her lips, but when she recalls his form, his face is blank, and when she envisions his face, the essential smile is missing. Of what use are eyes, she asks, when she can't remember what she sees? Of what use is life without even one picture of her beloved?

And I, dancing as her, must somehow capture her love and her despair, must make a real person out of this character in a song. In my teacher's choreography, I pantomime setting up an easel and palette; the *naayika* has decided to paint a portrait of Krishna from the disparate glimpses she can catch, and hopes that from their aggregate she will be able to remember the visage she yearns for.

Critic and writer John Berger would say that she searches for Krishna's “likeness,” the “space with its contours” that Berger describes in his essay “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible” (109). A likeness is that part of a person that makes them *themselves*—or more accurately, makes them uniquely recognizable to others as themselves. An artist, rendering a likeness, captures not just the contours of this space but also “an encounter between painter and model,” not just an image but also an interaction (108). On the canvas, the *naayika* tries to convey all the force of her love and longing, every instance of her seeing and his being seen.

I, too, am trying to capture a likeness—the likeness of the *naayika*. I am trying to dance as her, follow with my body the movements she would have made, delineate with my dancing the contours of her space, as Berger might say. It isn't enough to go through the motions of the dance; I have to find and convey the identity of the girl I am portraying. Somewhere in the intersection between dance and imagination, I have to encounter her.

In the dance, the *naayika* finishes the portrait she is trying to paint. Playing her, my fingers delicately holding an imaginary paintbrush, I trace in air the arch of Krishna's eyebrows, the line of his nose, the curve of his mouth. Together, the *naayika* and I take a step back to appraise the image.

It looks nothing like Krishna. The *naayika* has rendered each individual feature, but has failed to capture a likeness. The parts are all there, but they don't make a whole; the composite, the composition, is incomplete. And she still can't remember his face. In disgust, she throws her brush at the easel, splattering invisible paint. These movements are all predetermined, carefully choreographed, but for a moment I share in the *naayika's* disappointment. The gesture of my hand, releasing the imaginary paintbrush, is abrupt with real dismay.

The music stops, and suddenly the buzz of an ineffectual fan and the sound of my own breathing are unbearably loud.

"You see?" my teacher says. "Your hand is upset, your hand loves Krishna. I don't believe the rest of you. You are too busy thinking of how she should feel, so you don't feel. You analyze. You intellectualize."

I am ready to cry and collapse in laughter at the irony. We are faced with parallel predicaments, my *naayika* and I. She cannot remember Krishna and thus cannot paint him; I cannot find a way to encounter her and thus cannot portray her. And while I can understand this irony, I can't break free of the mind that understands it, the mind that analyzes and intellectualizes. I know we are in the same predicament, and yet I am no closer to expressing it.

"Enough." My teacher's voice tethers me to composure. "Go home and practice."

When I get home I play the song for my mother. She tells me that, as the story goes, Bharathi wrote this song as an oblique reference to the death of his mother, of whom he possessed neither photograph nor painting.

Two years later, I come to a halt before a different painting: René Magritte's *The Lovers*. It depicts a man and a woman kissing each other, their bodies truncated by the frame just below the shoulders. Their faces are eerily obscured by white cloths that cover their heads, pulling taut across their

lips and noses but sweeping back and relaxing into folds that drape around their necks. They kiss through these veils. A red-brown wall defines the right side of the painting. Behind the lovers, the bluish grey background might be another wall; it might be the sky at dawn, with early light bleeding up from the lower edge. The contour of the lovers' heads traces an infinity symbol, its twin loops crossing at the point where their lips meet. The line of this juncture is painted into shadow.

Though they do not see each other's faces, each can surely recognize the touch of the other's lips. They kiss despite their veils; the veils separate them despite their kiss. And although canvas and frame withhold them from us, just as they are withheld from each other, the lovers' closest contact—the kiss, the greatest visible evidence of their love—takes place at a point where they press and strain against the cloth and seem to press, also, against the canvas.

We may imagine, too, that they press and strain against more subtle barriers, which the painted veils simply make visible. There is a poem by e. e. cummings that begins, "since feeling is first / who pays attention / to the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you" (1-4). The rules that govern how words may be related to each other, how they are ordered, are so ingrained that it is easy to follow them without being aware of how they control us. And there is also a syntax that governs how people can relate to each other. Most of us abide by it without noticing. Such syntax, a grammar of relationships, keeps the lovers from wholly kissing. It keeps the veils stretched tight across their faces. It separates "I" from "you" so thoroughly that most of us don't know that anything other than that separation is possible. Consciousness distinguishes *self* from *other*; the thinking "I" of a person is always trapped inside, looking out at people, searching for encounters to be had.

When an encounter occurs, when one thinking consciousness meets another, the exchange is always incomplete. We hold part of ourselves back, as does the other person, so it is impossible to see someone from the inside, the way they see themselves. Instead, we form images of them, flights of imagination, conceits—the products of acts of conceiving. And it is conceit—in the sense of unwarranted vanity—to think that these flights of imagination are the whole picture, or that they are the truth. Yet perhaps something may be gained from leaving a little to the imagination; perhaps the lovers love as well as they do because there are parts of each that the other cannot see, because they are free to fill in the hidden spaces with what they wish to be there.

When we look at another, we seldom create an image that matches the true complexity of that other's own consciousness. But if we stop and think

about it, we can see from this image, this conceit, this likeness, the suggestion of a whole identity. We usually ignore it, instead piecing together a less-than-whole from the parts we see of someone else. It is comforting to avoid confronting a consciousness as layered and intricate as our own; we would risk our own selves in such a confrontation. But there is a kind of magic in seeing people as more than the images we form of them, or at least embracing the awareness that they are, in fact, more.

Paintings, too, perform this kind of magic. They suggest, within geometrically enclosed spaces, a view of the infinite. It is a dizzying thought that through a bounded two-dimensional surface layered with pigments, we can look beyond our limits into an endless space. Sometimes it can be a terrifying thought, and when it strikes me, I have to turn away from the painting that inspired it. I am limited, bounded by the outermost layer of my skin and by the things I don't know; and all that I am, because it is finite, comes to nothing in the face of the infinite. I must guard against being swallowed up, subsumed. But infinity is beautiful, and art encloses that beauty so that we may gaze upon it without terror.

One such painting hangs in my parents' bedroom. Imagine a Madonna and Child, both looking out at the viewer, the toddler sitting upright in his mother's arms. Now make the Madonna's eyes dark, her hair black; clothe her not in blue robes, but in a sari of vivid green and vermilion, its borders patterned with gold beads. The child is so dark-skinned that he is painted in shades of blue. A peacock feather waves in his hair and a mischievous glint gleams in his eyes. This child is none other than Krishna, who will grow up to become the perfect lover, the same Krishna whose face a girl will weep to have forgotten. This painting portrays a favorite subject of Indian artists: Krishna as a child with his foster mother Yashoda, wife of the headman of a village of cowherds. And though it depicts a very simple domestic moment, for those who know the story it, too, suggests the infinite.

It's a story I've often been told. One day, it begins, Yashoda set her son down briefly to perform some household task and turned around to find that he had vanished. Frantic, she searched for him everywhere, at last finding him sitting in a patch of dirt, happily eating the mud. Relieved but angry, she scolded him, crying, "Open your mouth!" He refused, proclaiming his innocence and protesting that he had not eaten any mud. Failing to convince her, he began to cry. Only when she threatened to spank him did he tearfully open his mouth, into which she peered, expecting to have to remove the dirt.

And she could not believe her eyes. His mud-smeared lips contained the entire universe. The cosmos danced and galaxies spun between tiny white teeth. All the endlessness of time and all the boundlessness of space were captured there, and peering into that perfect circle, she saw vastness that brought her to her knees in terror and awe. Her Krishna was no ordinary boy. Prankster and paramour, cowherd and king, divinity in human form, he united the endearingly mundane with the transcendently eternal. And in return for his mother's devotion, he granted her a glimpse of eternity. Some versions of the legend maintain that, had he not enclosed it within the curve of his lips and shielded her with his own face, the sight would have driven her mad.

There is a place on the shores of Lake Jackson, Wyoming, in the Grand Tetons National Park, where the lake water shrugs in gentle waves against a pebbled beach. Across the water, the Tetons themselves rise, streaked with snow even in summer, and from this vantage point it is easy to see how they got their name. To the left, a small pine-covered peninsula thrusts out into the lake, pointing at the mountains. To the right, the pebbled beach continues until it curves out of sight, reemerging at the slope of a green hill.

My family, moved by arbitrary impulse or irresistible compulsion, chose this spot as our breakfasting site on the last morning of our visit to the park. Wanting to explore, I walked toward where the beach curved out of sight. When I was out of earshot of my family, my pace slowed. The morning was achingly beautiful, and I walked with gentle steps. My strides grew slower and slower until the crunch of pebbles beneath my feet was barely audible. Then, at last, my footsteps halted. Along with my family's voices and my own footsteps, something within me had grown quiet.

I removed my shoes and socks, as if entering a temple. The pebbles were hard and very cold, but smooth against my feet.

I sat cross-legged at a point where the more ambitious waves would just reach my feet. The water seemed to edge back to make room for me, but then, slowly and almost curiously, the waves crept closer until I felt a soft, icy touch along my instep. Leaning forward, I submerged my hands in the water. They looked strange there, refracted and distorted. The water blurred their edges so that I could not quite tell where the boundaries of my skin lay, nor what shape my once-familiar hands had now adopted. Beneath them, I could see that the pebbles, dull grey and brown on the beach, were revealed for what they truly were: vivid green, bright ochre, fiery red.

I sat there for a long time, cold and still, breathing water and pine, hearing birds and splashes and my own breath. At some point—exactly when I

cannot say—something shifted. Thought stilled. On some dimension beyond the three spatial ones, I was growing translucent, effaced, starting with my edgeless hands. Lake water and human blood flowed to the same rhythm. The infinite approached and I sensed within it my own dissolution, but the prospect was comforting and gentle, with none of the terror I would have expected. Some profound communication—no, communion—was taking place, in which there was no room for a distinct human being or a discrete sentience. Somewhere beyond macroscopic stillness and beneath microscopic frenzy, in the infinitely vast and the infinitely minute, there was convergence.

I don't know what brought me back. At some time I realized I did not want to go back, and realized in the same moment that *I* and *want* meant I had already returned. I withdrew my hands, ordinary and brown, armed my feet once more against the pebbles, and walked back.

It is difficult to pinpoint what catalyzed the experience, what consecrated the scene. The setting of this miracle was large and grandiose, dominated by the presence of the mountains and the expanse of the lake. The site of the miracle, however, was small, for it occurred in the simple contact between water and hands. I immerse my hands in water every day, and have never, before or since, lost myself. I experienced the transcendent through the trivial. Two summers later we traveled to Tibet, and though we made a trek that for many was a pilgrimage, though we bathed in a lake made sacred by the traditions of three religions and circumambulated a mountain holy to millions, what I received in Tibet was an education. Not a miracle. It is not up to us to decide where our miracles occur, whether out of the mouths of babes, or at the places where water invades skin. If I were able to replicate that relinquishment, I might have found the words to talk to Geoff. I might have performed a dance that was not about me.

Memory, too, colors my rendering of this experience. I can sense the tale change with the telling; I can sense significance emerging not just from the details I recall, but from my longing for those I have forgotten. Memory is inherently an act of the self, an act that delineates what *I* lived from what anyone else lived, and from what actually happened. It lets us believe that we recall things as we experienced them, but like life and language it has a syntax that keeps a part of us hidden from ourselves. Sometimes we don't even realize what we don't remember. Tamil captures this better than English. Bharathi's song begins with the words, *asai mugam marandhu poche*—literally, “that cherished face has *gone forgotten*.” We don't willingly relinquish our

memories; no, they *go forgotten*, creeping from our brains so stealthily we don't even notice their absence until something requires us to remember. I didn't know I had forgotten the face of a friendship until the dark eyes of a boy on a shadowy staircase challenged me to resurrect it. And then, because I could not give in to a more willful forgetting, a *relinquishment of self*, I could not find the words to talk to him. Had I been able to erase the boundaries between myself and him, we might have been able to encounter each other in the infinite space between the boundaries. Instead, I settled for an ascent into shadow, into darkness, into possibility.

My telling of that encounter is also unreliable. Geoff is an image to me—a truer one now, and in retrospect, than he was at the time, but still an image. Memory gives me a likeness of him, but I can't be sure that the contours he fills for me are the ones he believes himself to inhabit. So he remains a conceit, a flight of imagination. Yet it's possible to get closer, to bring the conceit into greater concordance with the truth. Once we have tasted the infinite, we know at least that there exists something beyond the boundaries, some space in which two people might meet and know each other.

It's only in writing that we mark spaces between words. In speech, the rush of sound is continuous; our brains, not our tongues or our ears, parse and parcel the sounds into separations, into syntax, into significance. Syntax is ingrained. But its limits are not essential. The e. e. cummings poem ends, "life's not a paragraph / And death i think is no parenthesis" (15-16). Geoff and I began something that day in the vestibule that eventually led us beyond our separation. It took me a long time to learn that in giving up a little bit of ourselves, in ceding the *I* to something greater, we can begin to expand—if not escape—its boundaries. I remembered that parallel lines converge at infinity.

Three years after the death of Geoff's brother—three years during which we barely contacted each other—we struck up an email correspondence. Over email, unable to see each other's faces, we exchanged confessions and confidences that would never have come out in person. We grew close, closer than we had ever been. Close enough that he traveled a thousand miles to see me perform my dance debut. Afterwards, in the car on the way home, I leaned against the window, looking out at the darkness edging up the eastern horizon, while he hummed and tapped a rhythm on the armrest. An otherwise talented musician, he sings tonelessly, and I asked him what he was humming. He looked at me ruefully and said, "I thought you'd recognize it. It's been stuck in my head all evening since you danced to it." I stared at him, surprised

that one of my dance pieces had so captivated him. He smiled. “That one about the girl, and Krishna’s face.”

I still write to him. We have come to the point where, in the spaces between sentences, I can hear the comfortable silences that punctuate the conversations of close friends. Such silences, such spaces, need not be boundaries; they admit the small moments that transcend syntax and speech, the moments whose duration is brief but whose potential for exchange, for encounter, is vast. In such silences, as in the darkness above a staircase landing, as in the shadow between two veiled faces, as in the lips’ remembrance of a smile that the eyes fail to reconstruct, as in the blurriness of hands underwater or the mud that breaks the circle of a child’s lips—in such silences, it may be that I can disappear.

WORKS CITED

- Berger, John. “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible.” *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 106-10. Print.
- Bharathi, Subramanya. *Asai Mugam*. c. 1910. Perf. Asha Ramesh, Vidhya Subramaniam, N. Narayanan, Shanthi Narayanan. McAfee Center, Saratoga, California. 25 Aug. 2007. Performance.
- Cummings, E. E. “since feeling is first.” *Selected Poems*. Ed. Richard S. Kennedy. New York: Liverwright, 1994. 99. Print.
- Magritte, René. *The Lovers*. 1928. Oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York.