

Bits and Pieces

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I was stuck in an absolute hellhole that was officially called Phnom Penh, but that I had fondly nicknamed “stinkytown.” I came to love this city in the way one comes to love a degenerate racist uncle, but at that moment, all I wanted was to get back to Hanoi, my home, my civilization. I was sick of enduring \$3 communal hostels and towering mountains of trash. In a desperate search for camaraderie, I ended up with a pair of Irish backpackers in perhaps one of the dreariest bars in Southeast Asia—though it was indistinguishable from standard backpacker bars of the type that are steadily spreading all over Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos like some dirty disease. It was there that we happened to meet a terrible Englishman, a character almost too strange to be real.

He looked as if he was falling apart. After awkwardly talking for a while, he introduced us to his Khmer “girlfriend,” a girl about half his age, strung out on drugs, holding a baby that she liked to hand to random bar guests for long periods of time. With surprising, straightforward honesty he told us how he had given up on life in England, come to Phnom Penh, met this girl, gotten her pregnant, and, while they were in the hospital, had his house robbed, which meant the loss of passports, money, belongings. They had slept on the streets of the city with a newborn and were now living in a hostel with no means to pay. He had come here looking for change, obviously running away from something; his self-induced exile was so willful that he was refusing to return even in the direst situation. By not notifying his embassy of his stolen passport, he had in essence ceased to be an English citizen, ceased to be any citizen at all. And while I was talking to him, all I could think of asking was, “Is this better?” “Are you complete now?”

In her essay, “The Blue of Distance,” Rebecca Solnit recounts the story of an expedition of Spanish conquistadors, led by commander Cabeza de Vaca, making their way into the heart of a land completely unknown to them. Whatever their intentions were, they became secondary as the men wandered across a “continent about which they knew nothing” (123). They were lost,

lost in such a terrible way that they faced death, cruelty, and uncertainty. I imagine this uncertainty to be the most malignant foe of all—a torturer of the self. Hope dies painfully as it sinks quickly from the hearts of these men, and instead pure, blank panic takes over. “No one will ever be lost like those early conquistadors again,” Solnit declares (123).

Solnit concerns herself with moments of extreme loss (physical or spiritual) and makes us aware of the discoveries that can arise from such moments. Cabeza de Vaca, doomed with uncertainty, develops “an ability to reinvent himself again and again,” and, after living as a primitive medicine man, “ceased to be lost not by returning but by turning into something else” (124, 126). Solnit also takes us to an 18th century United States, where two kidnapped girls find themselves suddenly at home among Indian tribes, forcibly separated from their families. They, like Cabeza de Vaca, have taken the uncertainty of being lost and dispelled it by making a new environment distinctly their own. After a period of confusion and distress, it seems that “they must have learned their surroundings like a language and one day woken up fluent in them” (126). They ceased to be lost, changing and adapting to their environment by following basic survival principles.

In an overpowering scene toward the end of the essay, Solnit observes butterflies freshly emerging from their chrysalises. Nothing is beautiful in their struggle. In fact, Solnit is stunned by the sheer violence that the butterflies undergo to achieve their metamorphoses. Not all succeed; many find themselves caught indefinitely in limbo, between one state of being and another. Some “seemed permanently stuck halfway out,” others “flailed frantically” in a grotesque manner, “trying to drag [themselves] out” (132). Solnit says that “the process of transformation consists entirely of decay,” a merciless statement that leaves me perplexed (131). There is a frightening certainty in her proclamation that “this era of ending that must precede beginning” is an inevitable part of the “violence of the metamorphosis,” a process that all butterflies must endure to become complete (131). Change implies the severance of all that was before to make room for the new. Supposedly.

Now imagine, for a second, the Grand Canyon. Imagine a dogfish, a Shakespearean sonnet, or anything else worth looking at. We are Solnit’s conquistadors, freshly off our ships, full of greed and ambition, and we see these objects, trees, natives, Cambodia—and yet, cocooned by conventions and expectations, we do not truly *see* them. In his essay “The Loss of the Creature,” Walker Percy gives us a theoretical scene of tourists standing in front of the Grand Canyon, unable to “see it for what it is” (751). It only exists in their painstakingly studied postcard images, for “the Grand Canyon, the

thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind" by the record of what others before them have seen (751). The true beauty of the canyon is lost unless the tourist knows "that it has to be recovered" somehow (751).

According to both Percy and Solnit, this recovery can only be achieved through a forceful awakening, "by [an] ordeal" or shock that will allow the observer truly to "see" the object in all its purity (Percy 759). We unexpectedly fall prey to terror: the conquistadors face loss and terror in the Americas; the kidnapped girls witness the slaughter of their families. A shift in perception occurs, and suddenly we perceive our surroundings in a new way, in a way perhaps radically different from before. Percy tells us that in this moment, "the simulacrum of everydayness and of consumption has been destroyed by disaster" (759).

There is a certain terror in change, no matter how unspectacular the change may be, that both Percy and Solnit warn us about; it is the loss of one state of being, replaced by a new, more complete one. Though Solnit argues that "the transitions whereby you cease to be who you are . . . seldom [tend to be] dramatic," that they do not all have to be triggered by intense traumatic events like Cabeza de Vaca's, she still promises the dramatic loss of what was before (130). Percy also argues that out of disaster, purity arises: purity in perception and of the object itself, which has been liberated from its "symbolic complex" (751). An encounter between viewer and object becomes complete "just as the exile or the prisoner or the sick man sees the sparrow at his window in all its inexhaustibility" (759). The viewer in distress emerges from the chrysalis, perfectly transformed. The exile, the prisoner, and the sick man break away from the past and suddenly seem like fresh new souls with fresh new eyes.

Yet I still remember a decaying, thin, jittery man talking to absolute strangers in Phnom Penh while his drugged girlfriend passed her baby to random people. This man had completely severed himself from all he knew before. The uncertainty, the terror, and the discontent that he may have felt in England left him like Percy's tourists, numb and confused. He proceeded to seek salvation in a world of decadence, in an exotic place where he could make up the rules as he went along. But I continue to wonder whether his change made his soul complete, made it pure.

In one of his notebooks, George Orwell describes the moment that, while observing a wasp that was eating jam off his plate, he cut it in half with his spoon. The wasp "paid no attention, merely went on with his meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of his severed oesophagus. Only when he

tried to fly away did he grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to him” (15). The realization that half its body was gone must have been terrifying; the wasp, changed beyond recognition, desperately struggled on the plate, dragging bits and pieces of its insect body along, fragments of its former self. Orwell sees the wasp as a metaphor for modern man. “The thing that has been cut away is his soul, and there was a period . . . during which he did not notice it,” he writes (15). Orwell’s wasp is not reborn in the moment of disaster; quite the contrary, it becomes literally half a wasp, half a mass of ripped internal organs.

The idea of a brave new butterfly is quite nice; once an ugly caterpillar, it emerges into something complete, despite the pain of transformation. But there’s also more gooey insect flesh than perfect butterfly in those chrysalises, lingering long after. Solnit’s immaculate butterflies and Percy’s transformed Grand Canyon tourists sound great, but the butterfly is no more than a caterpillar in a different skin, and the tourist is still—even in all transcendent receptivity—secretly wondering why the shadows don’t fall the way they did in the postcard. Orwell speaks harshly when he says that “it appears that [the] amputation of the soul *isn’t* just a simple surgical job, like having your appendix out” (16). Instead, “the wound has a tendency to go septic” (16). “Amputation” may seem like a strong word, but in essence this is what change is supposed to be, according to Percy and Solnit; a clean-cut, complete removal of what was before to make space for something purer, as Percy might argue. Yet, as Orwell and Solnit show us, the transformation is not simple, clean, and spotless. As with Orwell’s wasp, there will be a trail of messy organs left somewhere along the road.

Some wounds of change do heal nicely, but some have a tendency to rot instead of disappear. Solnit’s essay speaks of change as the painful but necessary cure for loss in an incomprehensible world. Her conquistadors “ceased to be lost not by returning but by turning into something else” (126). Yet I find it impossible to believe that they came out of this transformation of the soul unscathed. Why is it that countless love poems deal precisely with this inability to complete the transformation from being lovers to ceasing to be so? As poet Ezra Pound recognizes in “La Fraisne,” no change is ever final, and no one escapes unharmed. The poem contains the reflections of an older man who, when he was “among the young men,” met a woman who broke his heart so profoundly that he became mad, escaped into the Ash Woods, and fell in love with an ash tree (40). The old man seems to have accepted this new mode of being in the world—“this abandonment of memory, of old ties” in Solnit’s words (126)—when he claims, “She hath drawn me from mine old

ways, / Till men say that I am mad” (Pound 20-21). And yet, despite his crippling madness, he cannot finalize his change. His soul remains incomplete, his heart broken, as he unsuccessfully tries to forget the pain of his former love:

. . . I do not remember . . .
I think she hurt me once but . . .
That was very long ago.

I do not like to remember things any more. (45-48)

The old man’s self-amputation of the soul does not seem to have resulted in a healing transformation. He cannot reconcile the fragments of his former self with the present, and finds himself at odds, mad. And perhaps it is this sense of loss that we must learn to live with and accept. Solnit speaks of a butterfly’s transition, where it “remains a caterpillar as it goes through these molts, but no longer one in the same skin” (132). My poor English acquaintance in the bar in Phnom Penh is Solnit’s butterfly, Pound’s speaker, a caterpillar in the same skin; he is incomplete, neither one thing nor another, just like Orwell’s wasp. He is stuck, desperately trying to get out of his chrysalis, desperately rejecting his sense of loss. He wishes to become a liberated butterfly, ready to fly, abandoning the encased caterpillar he had once been in England. But he leaves quite a mess as he goes along.

In Solnit’s butterfly scene, somehow all I can see are half-deformed masses struggling and panicking, half-out of their chrysalises, refusing to accept their state of limbo. And I realize that this desperation is not foreign to us. We would like to believe that change is absolute, clean, neat and definite, but it’s not. It is messy and ugly and savage and gory, with bits and pieces everywhere. We find ourselves panicking when we realize that our souls become “permanently stuck halfway out,” “flail[ing] frantically” behind us (Solnit 132). I look at the Englishman, so desperate to become complete and whole, and stuck in his denial and incompleteness. The speaker in “La Fraisne” betrays himself; a fragment of him is stuck in the past. He is somewhere between loving a woman and loving a tree, as nonsensical as that may sound. They are all in limbo, being neither one absolute nor another, suspended. Fragments of souls, I’d call them.

Albert Camus once stated that, in the face of an absurd world, “the important thing . . . is not to be cured, but to live with one’s ailments” (38). When faced with the prospect of a fragmented life, I believe despair to be an inadequate response. In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Camus declares that “the

lucidity that was to constitute [our] torture at the same time crowns [our] victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn” (121). It is the acceptance of our fragmented state that will ultimately define us as human beings, as a mix of traits and characters that constitute our very beings. Just as Sisyphus learned to find satisfaction in the absurdity of his fate, there is a certain glory that accompanies the chaos of incompleteness.

Change does not discriminate. It is everywhere; it is at work in all of us. We experience changes in perception, no doubt about it; perhaps we even gain clearer perspective, as Percy might argue, but there are no pure butterflies in the end. There are hundreds and thousands of fragmented souls, and collectively they make up this thing called life. Perhaps the writer Herman Hesse was right when, in his novel *Steppenwolf*, he mentions that humans “consist of a hundred or a thousand selves . . . [whose] life oscillates . . . not merely between two poles, such as the body and the spirit, the saint and the sinner, but between thousands and thousands” (77). What we present to the world are fragments of ourselves; we are first a caterpillar, or a normal English citizen, or a man simply in love. And then limbo occurs, with its violence and confusion. The caterpillar becomes an unpleasant, fascinating mass, something unrecognizable as either a complete caterpillar or a complete butterfly. My degenerate Englishman, lost as he is, has become a mix of what he was before and what he wished to find. This sense of confusion and loss will prevail because there will always be incomplete fragments, pieces that we tried to saw away but couldn’t, as Orwell once noticed over breakfast.

We may actively ignore these facts, but they still exist. And as Camus said, our victory lies in acknowledgement. Hesse said that “it appears to be an inborn and imperative need of all men to regard the self as a unit,” but it becomes apparent that the more we change, the more splintered fragments we produce (78). We are less complete than before, perhaps, but to be conscious of this fragmentation makes us even more human. I cannot agree that this fragmentation calls for despair. The fragments that define us expose us in all our unchanging and ever-changing confounding complexity.

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