

Poems

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A Sacred Geography: Sonnets of the Himalaya and Tibet

The steppe, valleys, and peaks whose contours define the Tibetan and Himalayan world grant humanity no easy life. Yet this landscape has been peopled for centuries, and is marked by their makings. Cairns and temples, villages, fields, and even cities have cropped up with time, conferring names on these places, making them home. Memory holds fast to cool, dry earth. Wind carves this landscape with equal force. This is an unforgiving place, for all its beauty.

“A Sacred Geography: Sonnets of the Himalaya and Tibet” is borne out of years I’ve lived in the Nepal Himalaya and in Tibet. These sonnets are written in homage to places on the edge of things. Each locale invoked through these poems has made me more attentive to the stories that live within a landscape. These places are touchstones. They guide me, as I learn to live within the bounds of cultures very different than my own.

To some, treeless landscapes conjure loneliness. To me, exposed places endure, for all that is stripped away—washed clean by wind and light, sand and snow—for all that is empty. Infinite horizons are nature’s augurs: nothing certain yet everything seen.

I have chosen the sonnet-as-form, in part, because these poems are an act of love. They are offerings, written in the spirit of ritual and with the knowledge that, like love, landscapes must be true to change. Many of the places about which I write are remarkable not only because of their majesty, but also because they have survived and continue to survive through massive transitions, most of them caused by humanity’s capacity for creation and destruction. I have also chosen the form of the sonnet because, far from constricting my imagination, the structure and cadence imposed by the sonnet grant me certain freedoms. They are what a Buddhist might call *upaya*, skillful means. Like the places and histories of which I write, a unique kind of liberation flourishes within the boundaries of tradition.

To Tibetans, geography is not merely a thing to be mapped with reference to topography and material utility. Here in the high country, survival depends as much on a people’s ability to reap harvests and tend herds as it does on myth, imagination, and a collective reverence for the natural world. Mountains, lakes, and rivers are the abodes of protector deities, serpent spirits and Buddhist saints. Tibetan pilgrimage guides read like epic poetry, charted in metaphors instead of miles. These guides are often buried in earth or cave. As the

mythology goes, such treasure texts, or *terma*, are revealed only when pilgrims and practitioners are ready to receive them. I find resonance here—poetry to be found, to lend meaning to place.

1. Lubra

Out of an ocean mapped in drifts and plates
 Those continental shelves, these shifts of blue
 Mountains rose tall as gods in their slow wake
 And incremental moves bid sea adieu

Turn time round and bottomless floor soars high
 Coolest pressure, the sky as it weighs down
 High earth crevassed in monumental sighs
 Sheds its salt like tears, deliberate ground

Where in this preeminence do I see
 My tiny place across, within, between
 Today it's no more than this sipping tea
 In dark and wooden rooms, sun at the seams

Outside steep stone reminds
 The aeons here and those now left behind

2. Kali Gandaki

A path of shale snakes up from riverside
 Semiprecious glimmer, where soil meets stream
 This road leads me to distance, a heart divide
 And makes me wonder what I've placed between

From the nearness of high above, recent
 Reminders of mules washed clean away
 Carried out from under this life's current
 By the unwitting force of water play

River like a serpent, rocks for her scales
 Smooth venom, these wet licks across horse legs
 We crossed morning quick before high noon swell
 Sodden saddle bags whose insides bore dregs

Of buckwheat cakes and boiled eggs, both bitter
 As we moved across summer, toward winter

3. Monthang

I walk your wall at daybreak wrapped in wool
 Rainbow striped cloth with its stale butter smell
 Clings to me like dreams; bare feet on slate, cool
 Slabs brought from where a quarry demon dwells

From this vantage tangled wood is wealth, stored
 For long winters, marriage, a *lama's* pyre
 Adobe palace, a protector's sword
 Shrine of wild horns and noble fire

Easterly glow on monastery walls
 A few cows and even fewer child cries
 Mothers with sleep in their faint rooftop calls
 Colored yarn wrapped around sheep skulls, and eyes

To watch the living, the dead, and those between
 Less earthly abodes and this city, labyrinthine

4. Luri

Rumors fly like vultures in this place; kneeled
 Sage and scholar taste truth, lick hungry lips
 Wet with promise of treasure to reveal
 Luri, precious gem, one *chöten* of six

Such are the blessings of eroded land
 As it is, we climb the steps gingerly
 Cautious moves between breaths, hand over hand
 We circle, light incense, pure reverie

Smooth as eggs and marble to human touch
 Buddhas refined and prayers in golden script
 Deities mark directions, knowing much
 A treasure scarred by men's hands, its flesh chipped

Into amulets; and in these shards of blessed earth
 Soldiers took refuge, waiting out death, circling rebirth

5. Drakmar

A demoness spilled her life here, they say
 See that cliff, it bears her innards out
 Her flesh subdued becomes the molding clay
 Her wrath the ravages of wind, torrent, and drought

It is not hard to fathom centuries
 From this place of caves and human toil
 Sheltered not from arduous destiny
 This ground was tilled and trampled into soil

Where do these winged warrior pasts reside
 Those gods and tricksters, wrathful and supine
 Where in the truth lived does forgetting hide
 A trace of color shed by the divine

To paint history with pigments found
 A ghostly presence defines this ground

6. Muktinath

Not yet dawn, but we've charted an ascent
 Bearing gifts: acrid butter, biscuits, tea
 Oblations to nuns, their bare heads now bent
 Against mountain's chill, and to Baba *ji*

That withered guardian of Vishnu's throne
 Keeper of vermilion, the blood of alms
 Nature the arbiter of worship's gloam
 Here in mountain's midst, this valley like palms

Open to face a catholic rendering
 Beyond mere patina of glittery gods
 One hundred eight glacial streams as offering
 And flame from water, a lambent at odds

With all things rigid, afraid of change
 Even the most ordered of universes, here rearranged

7. Dolpo

I've read the books and yet I find rare trace
 From whence the poetry of landscape blooms
 But ride across passes and plains with grace
 And poetry, through movement, is subsumed

What can the word released from tongue or tip
 Say to the moon when sky is ripe with stars
 What ruse communication, flushed with pith
 Contemplate instead this silent earth hour

What to recall most vividly, endow
 Now that language is liquid and shapes shift
 The ease of action, simply knowing how
 And to this blessing add their eyes, pure gift

Sometimes to find my center
 It is these weathered valleys, those tents I enter

8. Kailash

The yaks and their masters met us, grumbled
 Against the chill of morning, tourist work
 From the base of sacred mountain stumbled
 Past rows of *mani*, nibbled ground, cold earth

On the second of these pilgrimage days
 We walked together through western valley
 People, laden lorries, tents, yak dung blaze
 A hermit's cave found, a merit tally

At twenty thousand feet closer to heaven
 We crossed paths as one, breath labored, strung prayers
 The source of snow, of water's course giving
 Shape to souls, and mountains as myths, seers

Transcendence mixed with brittle bones
 To touch my head upon these stones

9. Reting

The ancients lean upon you here, they say
 Not an untroubled place, Reting recalls

Power grasped and wrestled, men betrayed
Careful steps and whispers between the walls

And yet for all the malice cloaked in claims—
Renderings of history sworn to repent
Lest they repeat—be still, sense what remains
Of the sacred; the trees endure, grow sweet

Gnarled beauties whose seeds were cast about
A thousand seasons past, and still they catch
On winds blown like breath of masters devout
For which sentient storms remain poor match

Meditations on quietude and clarity, they endure
From limbs to smoke and embers, fires burn pure

10. Chomolongma

Confronted with this place where myths are made
Beyond florid plains, woven summer light
And clouds that roll like water as a wave
I see a summit ready to take flight

They say she is the captor of men's dreams
Fear and fancy mingle, this death pleasure,
Wrought by earthbound hands, breeds heroes in reams
And equally renounces breath; danger

In so sure a form has never been more
Confident: her blackened face, wisened ridge
Glacier jewels as necklaces she has worn
Crystal rampage and ice, she is a bridge

Between worlds we hold and those we free
I, as Orpheus, turn and she remains, Eurydice

11. Jokhang

Imagine stone polished by human touch
Smooth slide of worship, prostrate to this ground
Most cherished shrine, Tibet's Jokhang at dusk
Is living's essence—history astounds

Red flickering place of shadows and prayers
Blood and silk haunt equally, rooms with near
As many centuries as I have years
Threadbare cushions, ancient tapestries—dear

Reminders of *dharma* kings and sovereign
Days when emperors and khans paid homage
Now chimed and muttered rite is modern
In its timeliness; monks wrest patronage

From circumstance and secret alms
This jeweled and hallowed palace beguiles as it calms

12. Boudha

Beneath damp morning, monsoon clouds part sky
 As if to echo thunderstorms now passed
 Streets quiet still under Buddha eyes
 The *chöten* rests, smooth whitewashed temple cast

As Sakyamuni's wish when this life ends
 Two begging bowls turned upside down, empty
 A plain request, this metaphor ascends
 Becomes a place of worship where many

Light lamps and spin prayer wheels, wanting still
 Release from worldly suffering when world
 Surrounds—*chöten* is want and wisdom willed
 In clockwise turns, the universe unfurled

We are beggars and pilgrims both, this lifetime round
 Feet shuffle along slate, walk saffron sunset down

Placing the Poems

The first six sonnets are named after places in Mustang District, Nepal, a region I first visited in 1993, and to which I have been returning since.

LUBRA is a small village located in the Panda Khola river valley. It is a settlement defined by Bön, the pre-Buddhist religious traditions of Tibet. The hills around Lubra testify to the region's geological history, to a time when the whole of the Himalaya and Tibetan Plateau was ocean.

The KALI GANDAKI names the river that is Mustang's spine. Stretching north to south across the Himalaya, it has been a trade and pilgrimage route for centuries, and continues to shape Mustang's sentient rhythms and those of the land.

MONTHANG translates as "plain of aspiration." It is the name of the walled city that is the capital of the Kingdom of Lo, also known as upper Mustang. Seven centuries after Monthang's founding, this cluster of two hundred-odd households is still home to the king of Lo, still bound up in a medieval sensibility as much as it is also part of the modern world.

LURI is a jewel, both literally and figuratively. This *chöten*, a Buddhist cairn, is located east of Monthang, in a cave perched above the villages of Yara and Gara. The paintings depicted on the walls of the temple and the *chöten* speak to a time when artists from as far afield as Kashmir and Kathmandu endowed the region with art. Erosion threatens to block human access to Luri, much like the other five such sites that are the stuff of Mustang legend. Soldiers of the Tibetan Resistance Movement, which was based in Mustang from 1960–74, were said to have made pieces of the *chöten* into protective charms during their cross-border forays into Tibet.

The settlement of DRAKMAR gets its name from the red cliffs that loom over this village south of Monthang. Like much of Mustang's geography, the remarkable colors and shapes have been lent life through myth. Drakmar represents the blood of the demoness who was subdued by Guru Rimpoche, or

Padmasambhava, the Buddhist saint who is famed for spreading the *dharma*, the teachings of the Buddha, to Tibet.

MUKTINATH, or *Chumig Gyatsa* as it is known in Tibetan, is one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites in the Hindu world. Yet the shrines at Muktinath themselves are remarkable because they meld lowland and highland, Hindu and Buddhist cosmology and tradition, like so much of Nepal itself. The Muktinath Valley harbors much of Mustang's prehistory as well: its caves, once home to Mustang's first human inhabitants, and its fossils.

DOLPO is a region west of Mustang. It is a rugged place, comprised of four main valleys, a crystalline lake called Phoksumdo, and some of the highest settlements on Earth. The people of Dolpo spend many months each year in the high pastures, wresting survival from briefly verdant grasslands, livestock, and seasonal trade.

The next four poems are written about places in central Tibet.

Like Muktinath, Mt. KAILASH is a site that draws pilgrims from across the religious traditions of the Himalaya and Tibetan Plateau, as well as the Indian subcontinent. Here, at the *axis mundi*, the navel of the universe, Tibetan Buddhists and Bön practitioners meet Hindu wanderers in search of Shiva and followers of the Jain faith. Pilgrims circle the mountain, earning merit, seeking salvation. Through the act of walking, people lose themselves to the greater elemental forces that shape life: earth, air, water, fire, and space.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama says RETING is the place where he would choose to reside, should he ever return to Tibet in this lifetime. Nestled on a mountainside in Lhundrup County, in today's Tibet Autonomous Region, China, Reting is both monastery and forest, home to a stand of junipers that are more than a thousand years old.

CHOMOLONGMA is the Tibetan name for Mt. Everest, and is translated as "mother goddess of the universe." The vision of this most famous of mountains depicted in this poem is a view from the Tibetan side of the border looking south, toward Nepal.

While Mt. Kailash is the natural center of Tibetan sacred geography, the JOKHANG temple in Lhasa is its manmade counterpart. This temple was first built in the 7th–8th century, at the time of Tibet's Imperial golden age, at the behest of King Songtsen Gampo. The Jowo, a grand statue of Sakyamuni Buddha, is the heart of the Jokhang, around which pilgrims circumambulate and make offerings. The Jokhang itself is thick with history, a place of survival and of loss.

The final poem is a return to the Kathmandu Valley and to one of the most sacred Buddhist pilgrimage sites in South Asia.

BOUDHA, or Bodhnath as it is also known, is one of the world's largest *chöten*, and is the heart of Tibetan cultural life in urban Nepal. It is said that when the Buddha was on the cusp of an enlightened passing, his disciples asked him what should be done with his body. To this, the Buddha replied by stacking two begging bowls on top of each other, signifying his fundamental teaching: emptiness upon emptiness. Or, rather, form is not the point of this life; transcendence is. But the human need to create sacred space as an inspiration toward, and metaphor of, such transcendence, meant that this teaching was translated into a physical structure. The *chöten* was born.

Note*Acknowledgement*

This collection of sonnets was first created as part of a collaboration with my mother, painter and papermaker Mary Heebner, who featured my poems in a handmade, limited edition artists book. To learn more about this project visit: <http://www.maryheebner.com/thework/artistsbooks/artbks.html>.