

Westerly

Volume 62 Number 2, 2017

Notice of Intention

Westerly has converted the full backfile of Westerly (1956–) to electronic text, available to readers and researchers on the *Westerly* website, www.westerlymag.com.au. This work has been supported by a grant from the Cultural Fund of the Copyright Agency Limited.

All creative works, articles and reviews converted to electronic format will be correctly attributed and will appear as published. Copyright will remain with the authors, and the material cannot be further republished without authorial permission. *Westerly* will honour any requests to withdraw material from electronic publication. If any author does not wish their work to appear in this format, please contact *Westerly* immediately and your material will be withdrawn.

Contact: westerly@uwa.edu.au

Westerly acknowledges all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Australians. We celebrate the continuous living cultures of Indigenous people and their vital contributions within Australian society.

Westerly's office, at the University of Western Australia, is located on Whadjak Noongar land. We recognise the Noongar people as the spiritual and cultural custodians of this land.



This project has also been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.



Publisher

Westerly Centre, The University of Western Australia, Australia

General Editor

Catherine Noske

Associate Editor

Josephine Taylor

Editorial Advisors

Cassandra Atherton (poetry)

Rachel Robertson (prose)

Elfie Shiosaki (Indigenous writing)

Editorial Consultants

Delys Bird (The University of Western Australia)

Barbara Bynder

Caterina Colomba (Università del Salento)

Tanya Dalziell (The University of Western Australia)

Paul Genoni (Curtin University)

Dennis Haskell (The University of Western Australia)

John Kinsella (Curtin University)

Ambelin Kwaymullina (The University of Western Australia)

Susan Lever (Hon. Associate, The University of Sydney)

John Mateer

Tracy Ryan (The University of Western Australia)

Andrew Taylor (Edith Cowan University)

Corey Wakeling (Kobe College, Japan)

David Whish-Wilson (Curtin University)

Terri-ann White (The University of Western Australia Publishing)

Administrator

Asha Ryan

Commissioning Editor

Lucy Dougan

Web Editor

Chris Arnold

Production

Design: Chil3

Typesetting: Lasertype

Print: UniPrint, The University of Western Australia

Front cover: I Dewa Putu Mokoh, *The Antique Shop*, 1991. Chinese ink and acrylic on canvas, 80 × 60 cm. Courtesy of Mary Hill and the late Chris Hill. Image by Brad Coleman/John Curtin Gallery.

All academic work published in *Westerly* is peer-reviewed.

Copyright of each piece belongs to the author; copyright of the collection belongs to the *Westerly* Centre. Republication is permitted on request to author and editor.

Westerly is published biannually with assistance from the State Government of WA by an investment in this project through the Department of Culture and the Arts and from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. The opinions expressed in *Westerly* are those of individual contributors and not of the Editors or Editorial Advisors.

62.2 | New Writing from
Western Australia
Fiction
Poetry
Interview
Essay

Westerly

Sitting on My Grandmother's Skirts

Caitlin Prince

Caitlin Prince works part of the year as an occupational therapist in remote Aboriginal communities. The rest of the year she is based in Asia, writing, blogging and completing a Masters in writing and literature with Deakin University.

I don't want to play games with you so let me begin with some facts. When I was three years old my Australian parents took me to live in Kathmandu, Nepal. When I was ten years old they brought me home again.

Are those the facts?

Fact /fakt/ *noun*: A thing that is indisputably the case.

Indisputably.

•••

Outside my hotel window, two children in knitted hats are playing badminton. The shuttlecock, suspended in slow flight between the twang of every hit, is a ghost from my dreams. This light, this particular shade of the morning during Nepali winter, is the same colour as the insides of my eyelids.

The sound of Nepali language—*Didi—hunchha—tiksha*—intertwines with the sound of someone hacking back phlegm, the bumble of a motorcycle, a rooster crowing and somebody pounding spices in a mortar and pestle on the floor above me.

I can't be sure if I am dreaming or awake. If this is now or then. For so long these sounds have hung inside me, the empty echo of a lonely corridor.

•••

'Where are you from?' Travellers ask this of one another before they ask your name or occupation.

I am sitting on the floor at a low table in a technicolour café in Thamel, the tourist centre of Kathmandu. I look up at the young American woman. She is about thirty I'd guess, like me. Probably volunteering at an orphanage for ten days before a trek and then onto a vipassana retreat. Unlike me.

'I'm from Australia,' I say to her. *It's a lie, it's a lie*, whispers behind me.

I touch my fingertips to the worn cushion beneath me. It is woven in the traditional Dhaka patterns. I know this without knowing what it really means. It has been Dhaka cloth to me the way salt is salt, and pepper is pepper.

I'm from Nepal, I want to say, but I am trying to avoid that inevitable moment where eyes widen with delight at the exotic or narrow in suspicion. Why does this happen? Are people threatened? Suspect I'm lying? Is my story too complicated for comfort?

I watch for these cues without knowing I'm watching for them. These are the microseconds of unspoken communication that have laid down on top of me for the past twenty years, suffocating the truth inside me until I simply stopped trying to speak it.

If I place my hand against my sternum I can feel the skyline of Kathmandu there, oddly shaped and asymmetrical like the teeth of an old woman. I want to say that this seething city has arranged my insides, so I too am craggy-toothed, twisted and wobbling, with warm breath, bad smells, pink gums and blackened ulcers. I too have hawks soaring, spiralling in packs in the ceiling of the Himalayas.

I am from here, I would say, if honesty weren't quite so hard to come by.

•••

Here are some definitions I learnt during my Nepali childhood:

Home /hōm/ *noun*: A red-brick building owned by a Brahmin family who lived on the ground floor. We lived on the second floor and also on the big flat roof that had one room in which my big brother slept. The Brahmin family used to invite us to dinner but would not eat with us. They could not share food with the unclean.

The unclean /ən'klēn/ *noun*: Us.

Road /rōd/ *noun*: Any space through which a motorcycle can pass. May not lead anywhere. Construction may include bitumen, river rocks, gravel and/or an open sewer. Inhabited by chinky cheap cars, three-wheelers, motorcycles, chugging tractors and TATA trucks belching out black smoke and sparkling with tinsel tassels. May also include the palace elephant, residential cows, or once a year, the multi-storey wooden chariot pulled on giant ropes that houses Lord Machhendranath.

Building site /bildiNG sīt/ *noun*: Synonymous with playground. Perfect for chasing Aneil up concrete steps that have no walls, to floors that have no ceilings.

Kancha /kānchā/ *noun*: House-boy. A boy sold into slavery by a family too poor to pay their debts, to feed their son, to offer a life. Aneil.

Shop /b 'zär/ noun: A web of alleys spidering off in all directions. Laws of gravity or physics do not apply. Stores stuffed with goods procured from invisible spaces. Hot sweet tea and shop-keeper's life stories come free of charge.

Here are some things left undefined (by Christian parents raising a Christian child):

Fierce Hindu gods and goddesses following me with wide eyes and sharp teeth, a multitude of hands holding weapons, fire and severed human heads. Copulating on temple pillars, leering out from roofs, guarded by snakes and lions—stained blood-red with tikka dyes, lit up by candles, the light and shadow shifting their features—half revealed, half obscured by the lattice of the temple walls. Not spoken about. Look away. But on every street corner, between the motorcycles and pressing crowds, men and women are bowing, touching their foreheads to the ground, ringing bells and lighting incense. Sacred acts on hallowed ground in the thick of all the living.

What happens when an experience impacts the senses but is left wordless and undefined, never articulated, never shared? If an experience cannot be put down in words and nobody verifies it, did it really happen? If you cannot name it, does it really exist?

•••

When the earthquake hit Nepal in 2014, I watched the footage via Facebook from my home in Australia. I watched the temples I had memorised—the thread of their wooden beams, the purring of the pigeons in their rafters—disintegrate in a cloud of dust. I saw temple guardians lying sideways in the rubble as if keeled over in grief, derelict on their duty.

I stared at the screen in silent shock, heat burning out of somewhere deep in my gut. Tears spilled over and I began to shake.

I had experienced this before. I hadn't had the words, but I had experienced this before.

•••

Ten years old and Kathmandu's toothy skyline is shrinking beneath the aeroplane. Now the green hills have come into view, patches of colour—rice terraces—cut into steep slopes. Clouds are reaching their occluding fingers through the hills until suddenly everything is white. Nepal is lost from sight.

Long after Nepal has been swallowed, the stony Himalayas stare me down, sharp as an inhale, piercing the sky. They trail on and on, seemingly

endless. This is their one last entrancement. They extract part of me, keep it always locked behind those mountains.

•••

These are definitions I tried to relearn:

Home /hōm/ noun: Australia. Repeat after me: *I am Australian*. A four-bedroom home in a suburban grid.

The unclean /ən'klēn/ noun: Brown people, especially Aboriginal. Not spoken about. Look away.

Road /rōd/ noun: Inhabited by cars only, windows closed tight and tinted, reflecting back your own face standing alone. Nobody to see here.

Building site /bildiNG sīt/ noun: 'I went to Kathmandu once. It looked like a bombed city, or a building site,' said the librarian, the only other person in my school who had been to Nepal.

Shop/SHäp/noun: Air-conditioned mega-mall with shiny floors and bright lights and a background static of footsteps, exhaust and trolleys rattling. Everything is on the shelf and what you see is what you get. The price is as you see it.

Here are some things left undefined (by Australian adults educating an Australian child):

Why we must apply the make-up and the perfect clothes and step out into the clean straight streets to walk to the shined car and drive between those walls of metal to the gates of the school and scurry in away from the threat?

•••

Five years old and I am staring at the closed door. I can hear Aneil crying behind it. I am imagining the other side of this wooden door—dark, the sloping roof of the underside of the stair, the thin mattress on the floor. Behind me from within the main house I hear the flicking of a gas heater, its creak and boom as it springs into life. I shouldn't be here. He wouldn't want me to hear it. Haju Amma would squawk and chase me away. I wouldn't pay, not with my white skin and pale blonde hair. I'm a ghost running through these streets, getting away with everything. Aneil would pay, more chores to his working day.

I back away from the door and climb up the stairs to my own house. Dad is on the couch, reading *The Hobbit* to my brothers. I climb in.

There are beggars on every street corner. Every time you turn a new hand reaches out. Women clutch skinny babies, men without legs drag themselves on shaky wooden carts. My parents teach me to walk past

them. They explain to me the difference between giving to an organisation who can help, and giving here on the street at the prickly, uncomfortable interface. If I was older, perhaps I would look away, but I am not, so I stare at the stretched thin breast of the woman feeding her baby, the dirty bandages around the man's stump—the swollen belly surrounded by four skeletal limbs.

•••

When I graduate from high school my Principal announces in his speech commemorating each departing student, 'Caitlin wears her passion for social justice on her sleeve, even if it is a bit too in-your-face for my liking.'

I am blazing in my maroon school blazer. Aneil is crying beneath the stairwell, and my beloved Didi is coming to work with bruises on her face. My friend down the alley is having her marriage arranged at the age of thirteen. But these stories take on the sheen of exaggeration when I try to deliver them in my grey, blue school uniform. They echo with hyperbole in the gymnasium-cum-assembly-hall of our private school in the northern suburbs of Perth. Even to my own ears, they have stopped ringing true.

I am an adolescent trying to find the words to express my experience of the world, but the world I have experienced has vanished from sight. I am like Wile E. Coyote, running on empty air out past the cliff—the world that should structure and underpin my language has gone missing beneath me.

Don't look down—just keep running.

•••

Why does it take me so long to go back to Nepal?

I'm thirty-one years old. I've been married and divorced and I never took my ex-husband there.

I didn't know how to fit those pieces together. Kathmandu is filthy streets and polluted skies, and my first and most intense love affair. What if he hated it? *Kathmandu looks like a bombed city*, the school librarian said. A single sentence remembered because precious little else was said.

There's another reason I never took my husband there. There are too many things I can't put into language, don't know how to bring up to the surface to tell him: *Here, this is what this means. (Everything. This means everything to me.)*

•••

I tell myself I'll just pop over to the hotel near my old house, sit in their comfortable lounge and have coffee. Maybe visit a handicraft shop in the

neighbourhood. My subconscious is playing games with me, hide-and-seek. It's too much to face head-on.

I leave early before the traffic, and oh my, it's a quick drive in the taxi. Whizzing past the monkey-infested temple—their population seems to have grown—past the Tapatali turn-off where Mum and Dad worked and we used to get the lychees, over the Bagmati River, past the little market where the goats used to get butchered, past the corner-store on my street—there—that was my alleyway—that old traditional house is still standing. Now there is a Ganesha where there used to be a rubbish dump with a resident cow munching. We drive up the Summit hill that I would always try to make in one go on my bike. The *dahi* (yoghurt) place seems to have gone. We arrive at the Summit Hotel and there is the very same waiter who has been here for thirty years. I called him *Daju* (father) and sit down in a corner and weep.

Everything has shrunk. The hill not so insurmountable, the hotel not so impressive. Even the closeness, this part of town to the other, everything so much smaller, closer, with adult eyes and adult legs.

I try to calm myself down by reading the paper.

As I read I realise I don't know the name of the Prime Minister. My political understanding of Nepal is in broad brushstrokes. I remember there was a King. Then gunshots and the smell of burning tyres, a plane left early so we never made it to our Indian beach holiday. Instead we stayed indoors, and came out to celebration, dyes pouring in the street—the dawn of democracy in Nepal. I remember printed symbols on the walls, 'Vote for Sun', 'Vote for Tree', 'Vote for Plough', democracy in a country with low literacy. Later I remember military patrolling streets, stalking through jungles, *bandhs* and curfews, streets emptied of cars and Maoists. I wasn't in the country when the royal family was massacred but somehow have images of Nepalis crowding palace gates and weeping. Did I visit then or see it on the news from Australia?

There's a scene in the final *Harry Potter* movie where Harry awakens in a dream-like King's Cross Station and a warped foetus of Voldemort is bloody, crying and dying on the station floor. I feel like that warped foetus—the child who was connected to this city got trapped here alone, stuck behind the mountains. She's still here, and I can pick her up, but my relationship to this place is weirdly stunted, trapped at a child level while I went on to grow up and be an adult. I was educated to understand other places, have been working and contributing to other parts of the world, yet always separated from this essential place, an essential part of myself.

I hate that I no longer speak the language. That I don't understand its political realities or what it is really like to live here as an adult. I'm scared

of the implications the recovering of my connection to Nepal will have on the other beloved parts of my life in Australia. I wonder if this is how adopted people feel when as adults they connect to their birth families. A weird sense of belonging and ownership but also gaping holes in their relationship with their birth family and fear about what it means for their adopted family.

Of course I walk from the hotel down the hill, just to go past the alley. A wave of nausea rolls through me. Okay, maybe just a little way down the alley, maybe just have a little peek at the house but I won't go in... But then I see Reema, my Nepali sister, and I'm opening the gate and I am in the courtyard being hugged by Reema, welcomed by her (my) brother Suraj, my father Daju, and Didi who now has dementia and can't quite place me but stares long in half-recognition. As we sit in the sun drinking tea, a parade of old neighbours come by, all to share their memories of me as a kid.

'Of course you feel it is your home,' Reema and Suraj say, 'you spent such a long time here.' I sit in their circle, surrounded by their bodies, the clamour of the conversation—claimed.

•••

Back at my hotel, I sit on the balcony listening to Kathmandu's lullaby: Hindi music from somewhere nearby, crows and dogs barking, horns honking, kids' voices. Prayer flags are waving in the sky from a rooftop next door.

As I sit, I feel the fullness of myself, a sense of wholeness and coherence I can't quite articulate. I feel more solid here in Kathmandu, more aware of my muscles, the round presence of them, how much room they take up, how they connect with and touch the earth. I am effortlessly and innately both part of and distinct from the elements making up this city. The ease I feel brings tears of both grief and relief, for now I realise the effort it takes me to be anywhere—everywhere—else.

The sounds of the temple bells sound right. The Nepali in the bazaar sounds right. The sunlight in the morning through the fog is just the right kind of grey-blue. The pink of the Himalayas at sunset is exactly as it's meant to be. The city's crooked skyline of haphazard housing is exactly what a horizon is meant to be. It is the mirror of my heart.

I pick up my phone and send a message to my girlfriend describing these unfamiliar and extraordinary sensations.

'That's what home feels like!' she writes back.

'I didn't know,' I write. In different hemispheres we both begin crying.

'I'm so sorry you didn't know. You should have known. Everyone deserves to know that.'

'I thought that was broken in me. I didn't think I had a home. I didn't know I could feel like this.'

That night I don't sleep. I spend the night crying. Great racking, body-shaking sobs. Anger rising in hot waves. My gut rolling with nausea. All these years—two decades—of dislocation and confusion. Dumb silence. Desperate aloneness. How did I get so lost?

I may not be Nepali for the nationality of my parents or the culture of the family home I grew up in, but what nationality did I inherit from the mothering this city gave me?

•••

In the Durbar Square of Bhaktapur intricately carved ancient bricks stand in piles rescued from the rubble. I have been circling the old city, again and again, like some kind of street dog. Even though I can see the empty platforms, even though I watched the footage of them coming down, I cannot stop myself from looking for the missing temples. I can still feel them, their pagodas towering over me.

I pick my way through the dust and construction workers to the last tall pagoda left standing, Nyatola Temple. I climb past its stony guardian elephants, up its slim steps. Its dark timber beams are warped but still here, the bricks cracked but holding up. Steel struts prop up part of the temple. The Gods dance above, around and behind me. I sit quietly, listening to the pagoda creaking.

A Hawaiian woman once told me she makes a monthly pilgrimage to the volcano, the home of Goddess Pele. She needs to sit upon that land, she says, because 'it's like sitting on my grandmothers skirts.' This, then, is coming to visit and finding my grandmother's skeleton exposed, essential bones missing—the breastbone perhaps, or the pelvis that cradles new life. They hold a powerful absence.

Since the earthquake, there are parts of this city that have completely disintegrated. Things lost that leave permanent gaping holes. Other parts have visible or structural scars but manage to stay standing. All over the city old bricks are being gathered and new bricks are brought in. The slow, dusty process of rebuilding has begun. It takes time and hard work and still some scars and losses will always remain.

In the ruins of Kathmandu Durbar Square, a woman bows to Kala Bhairava, Shiva's fiercest and most destructive manifestation. She stands, reaches past the human corpse that Bhairava straddles, past his belt made of human skulls, to place her hand in his—the hand that isn't clutching a bouquet of severed heads. I watch this woman, standing in this broken place, tenderly hold his hand a moment and wordlessly make her peace.