

Six Thousand Lessons

WHEN I WAS A BOY I WANTED TO SEE THE WORLD. BIT BY BIT IT'S happened. In 1948, when I was three, I left my home in Mamaroneck, just north of New York City, and flew with my mother to a different life in the San Fernando Valley, outside Los Angeles. I spent my adolescent summers at the Grand Canyon and swam in the great Pacific. Later, when my mother married again, we moved to the Murray Hill section of Manhattan. Another sort of canyon. I traveled across Europe by bus when I was seventeen. I went to Mexico. I camped in the desert in Namibia and on the polar plateau, twenty kilometers from the South Pole. I flew to Bangkok and Belém, to Nairobi and Perth, and traveled out into the country beyond.

Over the years I ate many unfamiliar meals, overheard arguments conducted on city streets in Pashto, Afrikaans, Flemish, Cree. I prayed in houses of worship not my own, walked through refugee camps in Lebanon, and crossed impossible mountain passes on the Silk Road. Witness, not

achievement, is what I was after. From the beginning, I wanted to understand how very different each stretch of landscape, each boulevard, each cultural aspiration was. The human epistemologies, the six thousand spoken ways of knowing God, are like the six thousand ways a river can run down from high country to low, like the six thousand ways dawn might break over the Atacama, the Tanami, the Gobi, or the Sonoran.

Having seen so much, you could assume, if you are not paying close attention, that you know where you are, succumbing to the heresy of believing one place actually closely resembles another. But this is not true. Each place is itself only, and nowhere repeated. Miss it and it's gone.

Of the six thousand valuable lessons that might be offered a persistent traveler, here is a single one. Over the years in speaking with Indigenous people—Yupik and Inupiat in Alaska and Inuit in Canada—I came to understand that they prefer to lack the way we use collective nouns in the West for a species. Their tendency is not to respond to a question about what it is that “caribou” do, but to say instead what an individual caribou once did in a particular set of circumstances—in that place, at that time of year, in that type of weather, with these other animals around. It is important to understand, they say, that on another, apparently similar occasion, that animal might do something different. All caribou, despite their resemblance to each other, are not only differentiated one from the other but in the end are unpredictable.

In Xian once, where Chinese archaeologists had recently uncovered a marching army of terra-cotta soldiers and

horses, and where visitors can view them in long pits in situ, I studied several hundred with a pair of binoculars. The face of each one, men and horses alike, was unique. I've watched herds of impala bounding away from lions on the savanna of Africa and flocks of white corellas roosting at dusk in copses of gum trees in the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia, and have had no doubt in those moments that with patience and tutoring I could distinguish one animal from another.

It is terrifying for me to consider, now, how television, a kind of cultural nerve gas, has compromised the world's six thousand epistemologies, collapsing them into "what we all know" and "what we all believe." To consider how some yearn for all of us to speak Mandarin or English, "to make life easier." To consider how a stunning photograph of a phantom orchid can be made to stand today for all phantom orchids. To consider how traveling to Vienna can mean for some that you've more or less been to Prague. How, if you're pressed for time, one thing can justifiably take the place of another.

During these years of travel, my understanding of what diversity can mean has evolved. I began with an intuition, that the world was, from place to place and culture to culture, far more different than I had been led to believe. Later, I began to understand that to ignore these differences is not simply insensitive but unjust and perilous. To ignore the differences does not make things better. It creates isolation, pain, fury, despair. Finally, I came to see something profound. Long-term, healthy patterns of social organization, among all social life-forms, it seemed to me, hinged on work that maintained the integrity of the community while at the same

time granting autonomy to its individuals. What made a society beautiful was some combination of autonomy and deference that, together, minimized strife.

In my understanding diversity is not, as I had once thought, a characteristic of life. It is, instead, a condition necessary *for* life. To eliminate diversity would be like eliminating carbon and expecting life to go on. This, I believe, is why even a passing acquaintance with endangered languages or endangered species or endangered cultures brings with it so much anxiety, so much sadness. We know in our tissues that the fewer the differences we encounter, wherever it is we go, the more widespread the kingdom of death has become.