

Questions of Travel

'The traveler has to knock at every alien door to come to his own.' – Rabindranath Tagore

I know parts of Bangalore as well as I know parts of Sydney: I've spent as many birthdays in Bangalore as in Sydney, and, researching and writing a novel set in both hometowns, they inhabit my imagination as much as they do my memory.

Travel is life writ large: finding yourself in a new place, you must find somewhere to sleep, something to eat, someone to drink with: everything you find becomes a refraction of something you left behind. Even as I rediscover the dishes I once loved as a child in my aunt's house of many rooms, and wander the streets in which I once played, too many summers ago, I wonder what it is that I left, and where I left it, and where that leaves me, caught between two places, the past and the present.

Was it Somerset Maugham who observed that the wise traveller never leaves his room? I can't quite remember. I wonder what those tourists on package tours think, ferried from their gated hotels to ruined palaces and back again, as they look up from their guide books to look down on the rickshaw wallahs and souvenir hawkers from their coaches.

But reading about a place is never as vivid as it is after you've been lost in it. What then of writing about it?

Somehow the lines of those fictions of memory and imagination – what we imagine or imagine we remember – blur, like photographic negatives slightly askew to the photographic plate we encounter when we're there, especially when what we remember – or thought we remembered or hoped yet to see – is no longer there.

One of the aching sadnesses of getting older for me is discovering all those holes, those spaces where something or someone used to be in the intimate, imaginary geography of my memory.

Bangalore, once a sleepy cantonment of monkey topped bungalows and golmohur'd avenues, is now a "YIE-TEE" boom town, with countless blank-faced, glassy-eyed office blocks reflecting the same relentless demolishment as Sydney, the past torn down and stripped away, the rubble dumped on a rubbish heap somewhere else far away as the future looms, unfinished.

Such alien doors flashing past on the train, or car, or plane, or autorickshaw; I'm reminded of Aldo Busi remarking that we travel like lobsters, our heads tucked over our shoulders, always looking back, doing all the travelling on the journey home.

That's true, but I've often found that when I travel, my head turns up, looking at the cornices and pelmets, the monkey tops and minarets, rather than looking at the cracks and chewing gum on the footpath as I do when I live in a place and I'm in a hurry to get somewhere else. When I travel, I wander, I wonder, I lose myself; when I'm at home, I *commute*, I worry, the next corner growing inexorably closer and closer because I know where it is, unlike the unreachable horizon of travel – even in Bangalore, my "other" hometown.

Yet writing about both places I call home makes me see them, really *see* them, even if what I see is as much a figment of my imagination as nostalgia, or hope, that what was lost can be revisioned; that what is left can be remembered.

And writing this meandering reflection makes me wonder if for all the places we journey, there and back again, whether home – wherever it is – remains within us, whoever we are, wherever we are, whatever we find – or imagine we will – when we get there.

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