

The Promised Land – Birth to Age 7

Public Readings.

One, two, buckle my shoe
Three, four, shut the door
Five, six, pick up sticks
Seven, eight, lay them straight
Nine, ten, a big fat hen.¹

Word-World. I cannot remember life before reading and writing or life before the spoken word. I don't have memories of the world Freire describes, the visual world he experienced as separate from his "word-world." Thought not without its political and social flaws, the United Arab Emirates, a place I still consider the Promised Land, was very much a magical place for a child like me. My parents encouraged us to study, but also to socialize with their close group of friends and we were thus raised by a community of forward-thinking intellectuals. School (a private English school for Indians) was challenging and regimented and I was considered a bad student. I remember watching Voltron on our 8-channel TV, borrowing Dr. Seuss and Asterix & Obelix books from my dad's friend's independent basement library, and most of all, attending the parties, where the grown-ups drank and danced through the night and we kids invented games, watched movies, told scary stories, and read comic books together. I don't even remember reading in school. It was something I did at home for enjoyment and something I could share with my family.

Spoken and Sung. When living in the UAE, I remember picturing America like it was this far-away place only accessible through music videos and radio. All the music we listened to was from the states or the UK. And we never completely understood the words. Mind you, we were English-speakers, but that English was different. Americans had strange accents and they slurred words in songs, so much so that when we sang those songs, we mimicked the sounds without really knowing the words. It didn't bother us

¹ An English nursery rhyme we recited as kids.

that the language wasn't completely accessible. It was fun to play and especially fun to sing along. When I hear those songs now, mostly songs from the 80s, I am surprised by the simplicity of the lyrics, or maybe, by my own ability to understand them. They don't seem that foreign anymore.

Rebirth – Age 7 to Age 10

Public Readings.

“How do you know that I have some money?” said Ali Baba.

When Cassim told him how his wife had found out, Ali Baba said, “All right, I will tell you.”

But Cassim was greedy. He did not want to have less money than Ali Baba. So he said, “You must take me to the place where the gold is. If you don't, I will go to the police and tell them that you are a robber.”²

Word-World. Moving to the states in grade 3 meant starting over. We went to an international elementary school where most of the students were immigrants. For the first time in my life, I was considered smart. In the third grade, a boy named Sam read constantly – he was way ahead of us, reading 500 page books like it was *normal*. He would get so involved in reading that he wouldn't even hear our teacher telling him that recess was over. She would have to tap him on the shoulder and yell his name. I remember loving her then, but when I look back, she was so unaware and disappointing. She was the one who told me that “neighbour” was wrong, instead of telling me that it was just not the way the word was spelled in the states. She was also the one who asked us to draw an “Indian family” as part of our unit on Thanksgiving, never explaining to her newly-arrived ethnically-Indian student what the difference is between Indians from India and American Indians.

In the fourth grade, Mrs. Gunther started a journaling project and I became a writer, journaling constantly, recording all of my important 4th grade thoughts, and most importantly, writing poetry. My brother and I were active participants in summer reading projects and we even volunteered at the library. On Sundays, my parents would read in bed together and take afternoon naps surrounded by newspapers and books. I remember

² From the copy of ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’ I read as a child, retold by Marie Stuart and published by Ladybird Books.

reading lots of series novels about groups of girls having sleepovers and liking boys. Not many of my friends read, so I never felt I could talk to them about books. Reading and writing both became very personal.

Grade 5 was heaven; even now, I remember that perfect world. Mrs. Brooks is my favorite teacher in the whole world. She helped us all to delve into the world of learning and love each part of it. We enjoyed grammar and math, science and social studies. She made everything relevant. One of our favorite subjects was writing workshop. She encouraged collaborative writing; in fact, our class eventually put out a newsletter, which even included comic strips that some students had written during writing workshop. What I remember most though was something Mrs. Brooks called “Rap N Chat.” We did it every Friday after lunch and it was a whole period dedicated to talking about our lives, our feelings, and things that bothered us. I remember people talking about abuse in their homes, not feeling accepted among their friends, feeling confused about their identities, having difficulty communicating in English. “Rap N Chat” made us a family and even when we were torn apart, forced to go to different middle schools, we called each other – I think now about how the internet might have changed our relationships. Maybe we would have all kept in touch.

Written and Erased. At this time in my life, I remember working hard to keep my two worlds separate, learning the boundaries of each. In my culture, hitting your children is not wrong. Once, I journalled about “being beaten” in my 4th grade class and my teacher had written a note on my journal asking for more details. I knew instinctively that I had to change that meaning and not talk about those things anymore. I didn’t want my teacher to read something that wasn’t true – my mom wasn’t a bad person; she was normal. So, I wiped away those experiences and wrote about other things.

Life in Darkness – Age 10 to Age 13

Public Readings.

She, she screams in silence, a sullen riot penetrating through her mind.
Waiting for a sign to smash the silence with the brick of self-control. Are

you locked up in a world that's been planned out for you? Are you feeling like a social tool without a use?³

Word-World. Depression hit hard and it hit when I was most alone. The world was falling apart around me and no books could save me. I had hit puberty earlier than my friends did. The kids I hung out with didn't respect themselves or each other – our guy friends smoked weed and sexually harassed us and we let them. Though some of my friendships were strong, most of them were unstable. Many of my friends had problems at home and these manifested themselves on our friendships in particularly strange and troubling ways. In this period of my life, I hated school and never participated. And I stopped reading. All I had left was music and my writing.

Pretend. I remember feeling most alone at school. I was placed in the gifted-talented classes where most of the students were White and Jewish. They didn't understand my brown-ness or Catholic upbringing or the fact that my family lived in an apartment, not a house. I associated being brown and having an accent with poking-fun. Watching TV, I could read the things people secretly thought about us. Once, a boyfriend of mine told me my dad reminded him of Apu, the sing-songy, Indian store owner from the Simpsons. I shot back, "My dad is a radiologist, not a 7-Eleven owner!" He explained, "No – just his accent when he answers the phone." It was easier then to pretend those stereotypes didn't exist, to try to be more American, and to phase out the parts of us that weren't American enough.

Finding Myself – Age 13 to Age 17

Public Readings.

Men seemed to irritate Shannon even though she was always looking for one. She couldn't understand why when she'd finally go on a date, there was never a second one. When they'd come by to pick her up, she'd greet them with her voice high up in her forehead. But as the night wore on, she'd discuss sexual politics in a voice that closed slowly like a fist and smashed their opinions against the walls like eggs.

After dessert, she'd undo a button on her blouse and make her eyes soft, bring her voice back up to the top of her forehead, and slowly reach for

³ An excerpt of "She," a Green Day song from middle school.

her date's hand. When she felt the sweat on his palms evaporate, the trap was set:

“And what do you think of what Woody Allen and O. J. Simpson have done to women?”⁴

Word-World. Moving to the armpit of America was the best decision my folks ever made. I spent my high school years going to punk and metal shows, reading political and feminist literature, like Singer's “Animal Liberation,” Adams' “The Sexual Politics of Meat,” Stepaniak's “The Vegan Sourcebook,” and even Erika Lopez's hilarious and raunchy novels and comic books (which my 10th grade English teacher referred to as “sexy”), and most importantly, reclaiming myself as a reader and a writer. I made zines and books for others, went to poetry readings, and engaged in conversations with peers about books that mattered to us. I felt alive and tried to forget the darkneses of my past. At this time, so much of how I felt about literature was incorporated into the idea that I could create it and I did. I felt like I could express myself through writing and through creating books. I also created commonplace books, journals plastered with drawings and poetry of my friends, with show flyers and typed-up excerpts of books I liked, and with my own writing as well.

Rules Not Written. This was also a time when I began to understand sex as something that could signify empowerment. Before this, my world was completely sexless outside of being harassed by boys I'd thought of as friends. And of course, like every good Indian household, our house was quietly devoid of any hints or conversation of sex and like a good Indian daughter (and without knowledge of this role), I was to be the physical representation of our family's good Indian values and strong morals.

Of course, I was completely shocked when my old school feminist dad misunderstood that a book I was reading, “Cunt: A Declaration of Independence,” was NOT pornography, but a book centered on earth-based feminist practices and spirituality. And little did I realize the inherent wrong in reading erotic stories by Anais Nin to my boyfriend over the phone. And when my mom overturned my room to find and read my private writings, realizing that I was not a good, virginal daughter, she asked, “How could

⁴ From “Flaming Iguanas” by Erika Lopez.

you?” to which I responded, “I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to.” No one had told me it was wrong and I’m sure my parents regretted that there was no manual entitled “The Overseas Indian Girl’s Guide to Goodness” that I could have read to know the rules I had accidentally broken.

Discovering the World – Age 18 to Age 21

Public Readings.

“You’re crazy, man,” Sean said, shaking his head. “Forget about it. You know how many rednecks there are between here and Seattle? You’re Asian and who knows what sort of bigots you’re going to come across. They might give you a beating for fun.”

He truly believed it. For him, a gay Asian male, his America was outlined by the boundaries of San Francisco and Berkeley. He grew up in San Francisco and having Asian faces around him had become an integral part of life. Like most Vietnamese who have settled in the Bay Area or in Orange County, California, he couldn’t imagine living in the Midwest or the South, anywhere impoverished of Asian faces. No, to a minority, any white face could be a face of violence – a quiet fear we live with.

Once, when my brother Tien and I were driving through Arizona, a pickup drew alongside us. The scene played out as it had countless times before, the driver and his passenger gave us the one-finger salute: “Go home!”

This time, Tien replied, “To California?”⁵

Word-World. Moving to Philly at 18, I became a student at Temple University. My experiences at Temple were starkly different than those at West Chester University, where even my friends wanted to fit me into the only two racial categories that existed in their minds: white and black. At Temple, it didn’t matter what you looked like; it mattered who you were. Race and ethnicity were a mandatory part of study. My professors also encouraged me to find work within the university and I became a reading and writing tutor. I started out as an adult literacy tutor, working with Tom Chamberlaine, a man in his thirties who could not read. As the two of us spent countless hours reading the Sports sections of newspapers together, I grew to understand reading differently. I also worked with Tom on writing. A powerful poet, Tom would write poems for his girlfriend and read them to me, and I would transcribe them. Tom changed my life and my goals and after working with him, I became a writing tutor for first-year writing students.

⁵ From “Catfish and Mandala” by Andrew X. Pham, i.e. the book that changed my life.

I also became engulfed in the party scene and was constantly meeting people with stories to tell. I was reading books for class, reading emails from my long-distance boyfriend, reading poetry that my best friend had translated from Spanish for me, and I blogged it all, turning all of these stories into public journals for others to read.

My Asian-American Studies minor helped me to discover my world. Finally, I was reading books written by and about people like me. I found the deeper meanings in simplistic immigration-focused novels like Susham Bedi's *The Fire Sacrifice*. I focused one of my senior papers on the Indian girl as representative of nation and was finding ways to connect my scholarly work with my politics and identity. I could see that Ronald Takaki, in his history book, envisioned me and my brothers as a part of America – he knew what we were and that we belonged. And most of all, Andrew X. Pham's bicycle memoir moved me, changed my life – it brought me to tears and made me feel whole again. He showed me that my experiences weren't singular and at times when the weight of my skin was too much to bear, I could turn to his pages and know that there was more to life.

What is this place? After meeting at a party, a group of us go to the Midtown Diner on 20th and Chestnut. We sit and still drunk, try to reintroduce ourselves to each other.

Mel: Can we go over names again?

Alex: I'm Alex, short for Alexandra.

Hamid: I'm David, but my real name is Hamid.

Sin: I'm Cynthia, but my real name is Sin He.

Mel: I'm Melissa, but my real name is Meera.

Felipe: Well, my name is Felipe and I haven't changed it for nobody.

We agree to call each other by our *real* names for as long as we know each other. Later on, this incident replays in my head. What does it mean to have many names, to butcher, murder one's own name simply to make it more accessible to strangers?

Even now, as my two cousins Sushanth and Smitha begin their immigration process to Canada, my mother acting as their mentor and sponsor, I witness this transaction reoccur. Both use their middle names (Gerald and Jean) on their documents

and sign emails with these names. When I point this out to my mom, she responds, “I’m the one who told them to do that.” I fight with her, explaining that it’s okay to just be who we are and she fights back, “No – If he keeps Sushanth, they’ll butcher it anyway. They’ll give him a nickname like ‘Sushi’ or something. It’s better this way. It will be easier for him this way. Why do you want to make it harder on him?”

I want to understand where she’s coming from. I want to believe that life is better when you have a name that’s easier to pronounce, that changing your name means you can somehow assimilate. Maybe Gerald will become Jerry and people won’t notice that Jerry is the only brown man in a white office or that Jerry speaks the thickly accented English of his people. I just don’t want him to forget that his name is beautiful; I don’t want him to have to experience the pain, the deep loss that comes with the journey he plans to make. But I know this is part of our story, part of the story I was made to tell.

Re-reading – Age 21 to Age 23

Public Readings.

Baby Kochamma looked as though she had shrunk. Pouches of flesh hung from her eyes and jowls. Fear fermented in her and the spit in her mouth turned sour. The Inspector pushed a glass of water towards her.

“The matter is very simple. Either the rape-victim must file a complaint. Or the children must identify the Paravan as their abductor in the presence of a police witness. Or.” He waited for Baby Kochamma to look at him. “Or I must charge you with lodging a false F.I.R. Criminal offense.”

Sweat stained Baby Kochamma’s light-blue blouse dark blue. Inspector Thomas Mathew didn’t hustle her. He knew that given the political climate, he himself could be in very serious trouble...

“The children will do as they’re told,” Baby Kochamma said. “If I could have a few moments alone with them.”⁶

Word-World. At 21, school wiped me out. I was a reader, but maybe I had stopped feeling like a writer for a while. A writing tutor working with college and graduate students, I was helping them to negotiate the words on the page. So much of my own experiences with reading were tied up in what students were *trying* to say and so my work with their writing revolved around helping them to make meaning out of their writing and also to find a place for themselves as writers in their disciplines. After a

⁶ An excerpt from Arundhati Roy’s “The God of Small Things.”

while, it felt like I was stuck in academia without a voice, watching people move ahead, but not moving anywhere myself.

At the same time, reading had become even more liberating – finally, I could read anything I wanted and I didn't have to write about it if I didn't want to. Finally, I could stop reading a book thirty pages into it and not pick it up for a year if I didn't want to. I felt free. The best thing about this time is that I could reread the books that had moved me, the books that had changed my life.

Retelling. Living with my husband has made me a different kind of reader. Reading together for us means reading *to* each other (mostly with me doing the reading). Reading aloud has changed my reader-self: I act out dialogue and use tone to signify the feelings that go along with certain passages. The same way that certain books remind people of events in their lives, our reading of books together has also marked events we've lived together. In Hungary, forced to sleep in an old, un-insulated, Communist-era bed, my husband and I read *The Lord of the Rings* books to each other, escaping into that world and feeling its warmth and mystery. We were so mesmerized by “Fatty Lumpkin,” Tolkien's chubby pony, that we scribbled its name into the cold, foggy windows of every car we rode in on that trip. In the winter before we married, we read Rushdie's Haroun and the Sea of Stories together before bed each night and it became one of our favorite storybooks.

I have kind of welcomed the role of storyteller. Two years ago, for my dad's birthday, I had bought him Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner and had spent the few days before our visit reading the book. On our car ride to my parents' house, we had engine trouble, but had to wait for Philly Car Share to send its own mechanic out to us. Tired of waiting, I asked my husband if he wanted to read The Kite Runner with me and we read until the mechanic came. Once we were back on the road, my husband asked me to tell him the rest of the story (which I condensed into an hour). In this way, I have become a different kind of storyteller, retelling the stories that have moved me. And just as I cried while reading particularly painful parts of the book, I could evoke emotions from my husband as I retold the story to him, witnessing the way his and Hosseini's worlds connected even in the retelling.