

Kimberly Blasser, "The Weight of Small Bodies"

THE COLORS OF NATURE

Culture, Identity, and the Natural World

Edited by
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To the voices that remember and those as yet unheard

THIS WEIGHT OF SMALL BODIES

Kimberly M. Blaeser

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.

—William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

Apologies to Blake, but last summer, deep in the heat of the Southern Hemisphere, I saw the world in a banana leaf. More. Standing in a dinner line, holding the frondlike green sheaf, the evening feast suddenly seemed touched with a symbolic light.

That August evening, a patchwork of international writers, architects of voice and page, we gathered as part of the Utan Kayu literary festival with regional Indonesian writers and artists. Stepping outside from a particularly smoky reading and welcomed by the humid Magelang night, we mingled and moved—perhaps more quickly than is strictly polite—toward the drinks and refreshments awaiting us.

I repeated to myself the lengthy food cautions meant to keep me healthy during my travels. They involved a litany of avoidance: avoid anything but bottled water; avoid anything that might have been washed in water, not boiled; avoid unpasteurized products; avoid uncooked meats, et cetera, et cetera. In simplest terms: peel it, boil it, cook it, or forget it. But by this time, I was craving a green salad, and perhaps for this reason the largesse of the banana leaves immediately caught my eye.

Over the previous week, we had visited various sites—embassies, galleries, colleges, high schools—and I had begun to anticipate with trepidation the arrival of our meals. Not for the foods themselves, which I invariably enjoyed, but for their presentation. In a country with no infrastructure for dealing with waste, the Western packaging influence had run amuck. Lunch at one of our stops was presented to us as a small cardboard box on top of a paper plate with a paper napkin accompaniment. The box contained plastic utensils and several tasty cellophane-wrapped items. As I ate, I watched the waste pile up and remembered the view from the back of my Jakarta hotel.

The front of the luxury hotel was landscaped, had elaborate lights, fences, and guards. A look out the back window, however, showed three-sided corrugated-metal structures, shanties, behind which lay piles of garbage—all the way down to the river that was presumably the water source. The water that flowed out of the pipes in my twelfth-floor room was not pleasant to smell or to bathe in. No one had to remind me not to drink it.

Several times on my journey, I recalled a smartly worded critique I once heard from my fellow tribeswoman Winona LaDuke. Speaking of garbage, packaging, and recycling, she asked, "Where is 'away'?" as in, "I'm going to throw it *away*." I had now seen the "away" that Americans for a large part will never view up close.

And so, the banana leaf. Thick and smooth, it graced the palm of my hand, and upon its emerald body I placed rice, meat in peanut sauce, and vegetables. Then some local sweets followed. Everything edible or biodegradable. If portents do reside in the everyday—fortuitous markers, or nature's hieroglyphs like the animal signs in which I was instructed as a child—that twilight encounter with the banana leaf shimmered as a symbol for the challenges we face in sustaining our fragile world.

I see myself in the puzzle of its transport, wondering what of my own past causes me to finger the green leaf edges as if in comprehension. Why does this night remind me of a night twenty years earlier, driving into the dusky woods south of Twin Lakes, coming upon my uncle after he has just killed and skinned out a small buck? I see him as he stands with the still steaming deer heart skewered on a stick. Why does the simple Indonesian food taste of memory? Of childhood evenings sitting with relatives as we undressed the wild hazelnuts we had picked, removing the brownish bract, pooling our small bounty of nuts. What forsaken rhythm of heart do I feel in the beat of that night, in my memories of camp suppers, of berry picking, of bounteous green gardens?

I think what beats at the center of these moments has something to do with earth community, with labor and reciprocity, rather than simple abundance. *Aseema*. Tobacco placed in solemn offering. A supplication to ancient gods or a simple gesture of connection. Harvesting has long involved seasonal rituals and complex celebrations that symbolize our engagement with place, our immersion in a cycle of belonging. Tribal gatherings always involve both relationships and foodstuffs. The Tohono O'odham of the American Southwest travel together to gather the cactus fruits, extended families of Great Lakes Anishinaabeg set up spring sugarbush camps, tribal peoples everywhere come together to harvest—fish, clams, wild rice, all earth's sustenance. And the ceremonial and practical respect they pay to the land source enhances the continuance of their community as well as the stability of the food products themselves.

We always leave a little behind, I was told. Berries. Fish. Rice. Nuts. Indeed the very methods used to gather wild rice in my Ojibwe community—bending the plants and pounding with a flail to knock the ripened kernels into the canoe bottom—guarantees that some will fall into the water and accomplish reseeding. Indeed many families still “plant” rice for later generations of relatives, deliberately sowing part of their harvest. Customs that limit harvesting or accomplish renewal might originate from spiritual teachings—*Leave some for the animals. For the manidoog and little people*. These practices become ritualized in song, story, or pattern. As ritual, they are sustained or prescribed through the communal history of repetition, renewed as each generation takes up tasks tightly entwined with beliefs.

And, if we come to knowledge through our bodies as much as through our minds, then clearly the habit of labor, too, looms large here. We enter into a process through our own reaching limbs, our scratched and pierced hands that pluck the riches from protective thorns. Holistic methods become embodied memory through the physical acts of tradition. We search, paddle, place offerings, set net, catch, clean, cook; we lift, dig, plant, cut, fill, haul, build, peel, preserve, and repeat all in endless cycles of remembrance. Perhaps this explains why two-thirds of the words in the Ojibwe native language are actions—verbs. *Nandawaabam. Jiime. Biindaakoojige. Bajida'waa. Debibidoon. Bakazhaawe. Minozan*. Indeed contentment, too, may reside in the body as well as the soul. How many times have we lingered, flushed, spent, in the afterglow of a day's toil? *Now we rest while the stars sing songs for workers*.

Standing in the Indonesia night, I know the upturned green palms hold the labor of many brown hands. They hold land knowledge. Somewhere else they might be corn husks or lotus fronds. In my own past, they might be the filleted bodies of fish.

II

Nearly every winter weekend of my Minnesota childhood, we went ice fishing. Though such expeditions might not appeal to some, we went for pleasure as well as for food. Preparations for the season might begin weeks or months before as my brother and I made fish-house candles with my mother, pouring the layers of colored wax into cream cartons or tin cans of various sizes, carefully adding a string wick. And waiting. Meanwhile my dad repaired a portable canvas fish house or designed and constructed the homemade sled on which we would haul all that we needed. I see the sequence of activities, the seasonal preparations and the day outings, as ritualized only in hindsight. To us, it was simply our everyday.

In the dark of the winter morning, we collect our cold-weather clothes, perhaps haggling a little over a particular pair of mittens. I remember proudly layering wax paper on the table (or when I grew taller, on the kitchen counter) and with great ceremony I inquire of each person what they would like spread on their bread, what meat they want, and how many sandwiches. I

pack dill pickles, fish-house candy, coffee in the thermos, water in the dented red jug. We gather wood decoys (carved, weighted, and painted by my dad, my brother, or my uncles), a heavy pronged spear, ice-fishing rigs, bait, buckets, an auger, chisel, ice scoop, playing cards, a cribbage board, ice skates, fishing gear, metal stringer, blankets, towels—an endless array of fish-house necessities. Among the most important in the northern climate: matches in protective tin, a lantern, and firewood.

Laden and dressed in warm layers, we set out first by car, then on foot from the landing. The walk is joyous, often rowdy as we crunch through the crust of snow on ice, check in on others already fishing, call out warnings about still-open holes. Our heavy-booted feet lift easily as we journey into the infinity of a northern lake—sun snow-sharpened, light on white on ice.

We arrive slightly breathless from the cold and the excitement, set immediately to preparing outside holes. At first we queue for turns at chiseling, lifting the heavy tool and bringing it down to chip away at the ice in ever deeper and widening circles. The repetitive motion gradually becomes hypnotic until the fatigue of our still small arms breaks the rhythm and, reluctantly, we pass the chisel to other hands. Still we each hope that it will be with our magical downward thrust that the water arrives. Miners after summer's gold, we always shout when the first moisture seeps up from the dark spiral, pools, then in a gush breaks through and splashes onto the sides of the hole, gracing the frozen ice surfaces with water, with a fluid, wet rush of memory.

Anticlimactic in contrast, more tasks follow: clearing the ice, checking depth, placing the bobber, baiting the hook with a shiner, a chub, or a crappie minnow, and securing the rig's metal tip in the small round mound of chipped ice that now surrounds the fishing hole. Then renewed anticipation. An upturned bucket for a seat. And winter waiting.

Meanwhile fire has been set in the barrel stove and belongings unpacked in the small windowless fish house, our six-by-eight destination. So we barter our positions—inside or outside, spearholder or watcher. Outside we might skate while the fish make up their minds, or lose ourselves in ice layers, follow intricate visual patterns across the canvas of frozen water.

Inside we will settle in, darkness secured by a tattered army blanket at the door. Minutes tick into hours as we sit crowded and hunch-shouldered over

the rectangle cut into the floor of the fish house, cut into the ice beneath. Water, the only light in our darkness. We take turns puppeting the fish decoy through the green tinted lake world, make it swim, dip, and dive. We hope the flash of tin fin, the lure of its painted scales will call the fish from the weeds, from the edges of our longing.

As schools of minnows and curious perch swim in and out of our vision, we whisper stories like they were ancient incantations. Of how you once dipped your hand, rinsed and lifted only seconds before the smart snap of a muskrat might have taken your finger for a fish. Of the lurker—*the length of your arm*—that Ike watched and finally outwaited over the long days of January. The soft slow looping of language pairs with the smooth lengthening swim of the decoy. Motion told and repeated while the four-prong spear rests just there on the edge of the ice as it has for decades in one hand or another. Soon patience and the stories work their enchantment. Something always rises to the bait. The white belly of fish may flash as it meets the quick spear thrust. Or the northern, turning in the silt black bottom, that rudders just out of reach, heightens our every hunger.

And the day bears on, dusk creeping, inching towards its destiny. While we fish. And dream. Our stare now sees deeper into winter water. Beyond fish. Beyond the dark edges of the ice.

Finally, as if into another age, we emerge again from the fish house, where we have been lulled by the womblike darkness. We are thrust anew into the sudden cold, the startling blue-white winter. And fish spots, mirages, flash before our eyes as we stretch and shake awake tingling limbs.

Outside, anglers jig their bait. They wait. The lines we have pulled from these mysterious waters seem endless as every day of childhood. The filament that flails like live electric wire in our stiff hands wakens us from winter reverie. Grasping the line, we could simply haul our catch in hand over hand, but now and then in excitement we run gleefully from the holes, carrying the line away with us and our hooked fish up from the small water center.

Fishing routines turn, repeat, like the simple looping of decoys. Each dusky evening we depart, leave with empty sandwich wrappers and frozen bodies of fish. With tired steps we set out, align ourselves by distant tree patterns or follow twinkling cabin lights, and move in arcs toward the far-off shore.

Soon cheeks flush hot and red in the warmth of the car, eyes shutter, nearly closed as we sketch word-fish on the drive home, these swimming more swiftly and larger in the lake of our contentment.

In the late-night fish cleaning that follows, we try our hands at scaling and filleting. Then, mesmerized by the mastery of our parents' knives, we watch each deft move as the bellies spill their secrets: yellow masses of eggs, air sacks, sometimes a still beating heart, and the mysterious digestive sacks. Opening the thin membranes, we see again the cycles of feeding of which we are a part. Sometimes minnows are found whole, as yet undigested within the larger fish. Worlds within worlds, cycles overlapping other cycles—as children, through the simple seasonal activities, we pressed our noses against the windows to these realities.

III

What nourished us then was more than the fish, the rice, meat, nuts, berries, and other gathered foods. And the symbolism in the Magelang night rose from the coalescence of more than sugarbush camps and Javanese custom. What do we fathom in regional ceremony or a seasonal harvest ritual? What symbol of infinity is the weight of these small bodies—the northern pike, the lotus, the banana leaf? Deep in the skewered heart of deer, buried someplace in the gestures of every subsistence activity, beats belief. Belief that we live entwined in intricate sets of relationship. Because we gather these natural gifts for food, tools, shelter, medicine, we believe with our bodies as well as our minds that we must pay attention to their survival. Some among us hold them as relatives to whom we owe a portion of care. What shimmers in my memory of that Indonesian night is a certain kind of belonging, not belonging to a mass of assembly-line consumers, but belonging to a committed, native, local economy.

If I measure the distance between my own early immersion in just such a community and my present longing, it might equal the steps between the poorest Jakarta dwelling and the city's dark polluted river. But I know that distance is neither temporal nor merely physical. Somewhere in our understanding of economy as a distribution of wealth, industrial escapism has fixated on the wealth of product—fast food and Hello Kitty are mimicked

around the world. Questionable Western ideals of progress wield influence in more and more remote places with disastrous economic and ecological results. Nation after nation has constructed governments built on various false notions of independence, on belief in separate realities. Church from state. Third world from first world. Human from all else. *Away* from the everyday. What we need are experiments in return.

In my journey last summer, I also visited a rural high school seminary. Their "auditorium" was a roofed, open-sided space, relying on air currents rather than air conditioning for cooling. In their complex, the school kept pigs to help deal with waste products, kept chickens for eggs, had a garden for produce. Each of the boys worked at chores to keep the community running. They slept three-high in bunk beds, hung their hand-laundered shirts on lines to dry. Perhaps they would live in luxury air-conditioned rooms if such were available. Or perhaps someone there sees links between things such as faith, community, responsibility, and ecology, between lifestyle and the wealth of spirit. This one tiny pod.

Can you see the distance, the chasm we must cross? We can get there without Blake. Without the grain of sand. The banana leaf. Or the dark thunder of regret. We can even begin the journey in the midst of material excess. Vision itself is not linked to circumstance. Something that is before you now will do. Silver body of fish. The ancient patterned sky. A child's palm. Just look closely. Some remembered light might shimmer and ignite.