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LOSBO

BY LAURA VALERI

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I know nothing about Tibet: while most of the globe is threatened by war and hunger, I live safe, by the grace of God, tucked comfortably away in a corner of Coastal Georgia, on a lot on the marshes, where every morning I wake up to the sun shining on the Vernon river, to the myriad shades of green and yellow baked on to the grass by sun and salt. We live only a short distance from the river, protected by a speckled prairie of marshes. Brackish water drags mud across a slow creek where our dock rests, straight and patient, awaiting its daily blessing of tide. The air is permeated by the smell of musk, that which Joel calls the smell of the cycle of life and death. When at evenings he sits on the dock, his eyes finding comfort in the pinks and purples of dusk, he says that life begins and ends right here. Our world is three quarters of an acre of Georgia land.

We know next to nothing about Tibet, Joel and I. We once watched a movie about the Dalai Lama, about the invasion of China. We watched with rigid displeasure at the deception of power officials: militarists disregarding of love and faith, drunken on ideology and secular dogma, caught in a frenzy of power, slaughtering pregnant women, young children and Buddhist monks. I did not cry. Nor did I cry when the Dalai Lama, staggering with grief, cut up with thirst and hunger, was plagued with hallucinations as he dredged on foot through hundreds of miles of desert and mountain trails to reach safety. Earlier in the film, the Dalai Lama was persuaded to abandon Tibet by his advisers, and hurrying out of the high walls of his palace, he surprised a small enclave of his followers -- his terrified and grieving people, his about-to-be-abandoned fellow Tibetans, who see in him not only a political leader but a spiritual gate through which the end of suffering comes. When these people fell at his feet in tears, prostrate before him, praying their hopeless prayers, pleading their hopeless pleas, a sea of human bodies rising and falling with heaves of sorrow, then I cried, I cried with the grief of one who has been defeated by catastrophe, wondering how, how can a body endure so much? How could the Dalai Lama endure leaving them? How could he suffer the paradox of such betrayal as the only pathway of hope? I cried and still cry to the burden of this simple and unassuming leader whose spiritual force is a hot blast of truth against the cold, ungracious dogma contaminating the world. And I cried for the sacrificed hopes of the people of Tibet who watched him be stolen from them by a merciless necessity.

I know next to nothing about Tibet. Joel and I run errands on Sunday, in our safe corner of Georgia where the land in spring sings with gospel and humming-bird song, where the marshes breathe with warm winds and with the flight of egrets, so far from Tibet, so far from the systematic horror of Chinese occupation, so far from he politics we do not understand nor wish to. We drive on roads shaded by live oaks and draping Spanish moss, roads so beautiful as to forgive even the whispers of a violent history, of racial hatred quieted by modern times that thrives inert like a virus in signs that tactlessly announce: "This is a Weed and Seed

Community." In the classrooms where I teach, that history stirs when students halt with angered breaths before the word goddamn in a poem by activist writer Patricia Smith titled "Skinhead," but they remain unflinching when they read the word nigger. Still, it is beautiful and peaceful here, and it is easy to believe in peace when the oaks build chapels to worship blue skies, the mossy tangles of their limbs intertwining above these sleepy roads. It is Sunday and Joel and I drive past the dressed up crowds of suits and shiny shoes and belabored hairstyles milling outside Episcopalian churches, Catholic churches, Baptist and Lutheran churches that crowd neighborhoods speckled with billboards announcing messages of God love, messages of Bible wisdom to which we have grown used to and hardly notice anymore. I am a lapsed Catholic turned Buddhist, and Joel is a lapsed Jew turned Taoist. We joke that between us, if we were to adopt a Muslim child and nudge him towards Hinduism, we would contain in our little family sphere the most popular spiritual philosophies of the world. But today the humid heat makes us silent. We are at that point in the season when the azaleas spray their pink and violet breaths on gardens and roadsides as if to make us forget the humid heat, the unbearable thickness of the air as it gathers and condenses on the nooks and hot folds of our bodies. We tread in and out of Home Depots and Publix supermarkets, already missing the jasmine scent of our backyard. We are mostly quiet as the early afternoon heat bakes us slowly in the car, and we listen to the radio without really listening, turning the dial and settling on NPR. Music comes on and we are alert: it is a mantra we hear often at Buddhist meetings and yoga meditations, Om Mani Padme Hung, meaning, "jewel in the heart of the lotus." A woman sings the mantra accompanied by Buddhist drumming and bamboo flutes, and her voice spirals an octave higher at the end refrain, capturing a grace that transports us far from the rich blues rhythm of our cotton land to the hard rocky landscapes of Tibet. We listen, but the music is only a short refrain overrun by the voices of music commentators, who, in spite of Joel's and my anticipation, fail to clearly deliver the name of the artist. We know nothing about Tibet. We know next to nothing about Tibet. The name of this enthralling singer eludes us like the secrets of the mystical Buddhist land that birthed her.

And now we've reached our destination, but before Joel has found a parking spot, the music critics have introduced another track, an acappella piece. Without understanding the meaning of the Tibetan words, ringing with heartbreaking clarity in spite of the low sound quality of our car speakers, I am suddenly in another place, a place I have never been to before, a place of rock and ice and blinding light, a place where the sun never warms the ground enough for comfort. And as the woman sings, her words reach deep inside me to that place, dig like the sharp claws of a hungry animal, tearing up layers of rock and soil, and within seconds, I am rendered helpless, crying as her voice gathers in my chest and digs and overturns the hard cold spaces in my conscience. I do not understand Tibetan or the meaning of her chant, but the power behind the woman's voice pounds and grinds and corrodes, and then I feel as though I am dust, seeping into the terrain of that land, mixing with salt and mineral, with soil and dirt. An unbearable longing sweeps over me with the power of absolute mourning. Having never been a mother, I feel like a mother who has lost all her children to hunger and violence, a mother forced to watch her precious charges wither with bruises and skin sores; I am experiencing a loss so complete that it leaves me wordless, breathless, paralyzed with a pain so subterranean it is something older than I am, primeval, pain so inevitable and compassionate that it becomes the utter surrender of the religious mystic, the complete abandonment of faith that one embraces against absolute despair. Joel asks me something, but it is all I can do to try and breathe, and I burst into hard, wordless sobs. Concerned, Joel pulls over and places his hand over my heart, but by now the track has ended, the show is nearly over, the music critics have failed to repeat the name of the artist for late-tuning listeners, although they have managed to leave behind a clue: This song, they explain, is a call to all Lamas who have abandoned Tibet, a call to please return. Now I cry, like I cried when I saw the film on Tibet, I cry in complete idiocy and against all logic, I cry tears I could not shed for the Chinese occupation that I cared about only sometimes, when reading grassroots emails and newspaper articles. The

spell of the song has elapsed, a throbbing heaviness in my chest the only reminder of this strange event, but a renewed awareness of transcending connectedness with the world takes its place.

Somehow, the meaning of Lhamo's words have broken through the barrier of language, awakening the need and longing to return, with every step through life's journey, across physical and emotional landscapes, return to that human dignity that binds us all with every act of love, with every gesture of compassion.

It takes almost a year before I find the song again, by accident, browsing a Web site for a meditation cd I heard about through a friend. When I read a reviewer's comments about Yungchen Lhamo's preference for *acappella* I become hopeful and eagerly buy both of this artist's cds. My intuition proves right, and today, in the comfort of my quiet and safe house by the Vernon river, I listen again to the voice of Tibet, the voice that in a few unexpected seconds gifted me with an experiential understanding of that transcendent love that binds all beings from all corners of the earth. The song that broke my heart is titled "Someday" in the Ama cd. As I flip open the covers I read Lhamo's prayer:

This song is for the Dalai Lama and all of the Lamas and people who left Tibet already many years ago. Losbo means come home. Please come back to your homeland...

Yet, even as I listen now, even as I am still moved to tears by the surprises that Lhamo delivers, the wanton energy of her voice, for example, in the coda of Om Mani Padme Hung, an energy that speaks of unnamable courage, a voice that charges the suffering to have hope -- even as I am still carried by the beauty of that rare grace, I am feeling only an echo of the transcendence I felt that Sunday in my car, surprised and speared by her call to return to Tibet.

And I think that the singularity of that event, too, is significant, a reminder of the preciousness of every moment, of the pungency of each unexpected breath that, through grace, pervades us and gifts us with terrible, beautiful, inimitable life.

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