



: Tom Fricke and Yhebe Ghale outside Yhebe's house in Timling, 1987.  
 tom: Yhebe (far left) listening to Timling lamas, 1987.

TOM FRICKE

2006 *Michigan Quarterly Review* 45(1): 196-217.

## IMAGINING YHEBE: OF FRIENDSHIP AND THE FIELD

Here a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he exists, in actual being, as you do or as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact.

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

*Yhebe: When will you be coming to Nepal again? Next year?*

*Tom: Maybe next year or the year after.*

*Yhebe: If it's the year after, then this is the last time you'll see me. I'll be off to do my dharma's work.*

*Tom: Then I better take good pictures now.*

*Yhebe & Tom: [laughter]*

Riding my bicycle through Kathmandu in late March 2005 after a two-year absence, I looked for Yhebe Ghale. After two days of rain and four days of building heat, the high hot sun burned the sky and pierced my eyes. I searched out the shadows where the shade was round and cool, favoring the old parts of town as much as I could—narrow rough streets of cobble, dirt, stone, and broken pitch, the half-light hushing the canyons between tall Newar homes. People sat in their carved windows, intricately askew, and watched the movement below. I rode hard through town, watching the watchers, noticing how the dust powdered onto leaves—ancient peepul trees and cracked temple brick paled by wind and light.

I wanted Yhebe to salve the bite of my dislocation, my return to a country pushing at the limits of endurance. The

Maoist insurgency was in its ninth year—eleven thousand killed, the valley filling with people fleeing the violence, looking for work, looking for light. King Gyanendra had declared an emergency, abolished the democratic government, and assumed power. Opposition leaders had been arrested along with academics and labor leaders. Police and soldiers were thick in the valley. Taxis, buses, and private vehicles were being pulled over for random checks. I've worked in Nepal for twenty-four years, and this new edginess weighted me with sadness. Because of the civil war I was unable to leave the valley for the six-day walk to Yhebe's home in Timling. I had never been in Kathmandu for so long and my letters home jangled with litanies of raw sensation:

Roadside garbage, pie dogs root and gobble, snap and snarl. Skill saw scream of the woodshop, carpenter's swift cut, kneeling in the gravel. Butcher's wave, flies on layered meat. Sewing machine buzz and rattle, thin women at benches in a line. Marble skip, the play of little boys. Spitting fizz of the welder's torch, re-bar curled and banded, dragging and sparking on pitch pavement. Greasy ground, black hands at the tire shop, hammer ping on steel plate. Two friends meeting, shoulder tap and outstretched hand. School kids walking, pressed shirts and ties. Teashop babble, hot glasses held by the rim, two fingers and steam at the lip. Shopkeepers spraying water into the dusty streets. Huck and spit from a passing bus.

When I heard Yhebe had come to Baniyatar, a small town just north of the city, where half of Timling's families had settled in the past few years, I rushed to see him before he returned home. I knew he needed to beat the Maoist strike that would close the roads outside Kathmandu soon, that his wife was alone, and that he had work to do. The corn was already planted, but he would need somebody to haul wood. Now eighty years old, he couldn't do that himself, but he could pay the hundred rupees it would cost for each load. "Everything is a hundred rupees now," Yhebe had told me before, "A day's plowing, a day's cutting firewood, all the same. Timling has gotten expensive."

\* \* \*

*Yhebe: Now if a person is to teach, they shouldn't teach what they don't know—there should be nothing taught that they don't know.*

Yhebe Ghale was my "key informant," a term used by many anthropologists to describe those upon whom the field worker especially relies for information. But to put it like that is to already contain Yhebe's meaning within my research and to deny what he had truly become. To be fair, other anthropologists have themselves grown squeamish about that word, *informant*, offering alternatives—teacher, consultant, collaborator—meant to soften the hierarchies between the studier and the studied. But even with thirty years of sensitivity to the moral questions surrounding these relationships, these new words still proclaim what is at heart an instrumental attitude bent on fulfilling the ends of research problems determined elsewhere.

We have not yet developed a way of talking, as Robert Coles does in his *Doing Documentary Work*, about those people "who are, after all, slowly becoming not only one's 'sources' or 'contacts' or 'informants,' but one's graciously tolerant and open-handed teachers and friends—*there*, week after week, with answers to questions, . . . with the courtesy and hospitality of food and drink, with advice, with revealing second thoughts to discussions one had long ago put aside, but more important, *there* in their available yet so vulnerable and hard-pressed and precarious lives." When I think of Yhebe now, I still sometimes use words from my profession. But when I more truly *imagine* him, I lose these abstractions and see a man, a man with whom I am joined in a common story. The language we anthropologists have not yet found is the language adequate to friendship and to love.

I first walked the six days to Timling in 1981 as a graduate student doing my dissertation research, my pack overloaded with clothing, sleeping bag, blank notebooks, and things to read—I remember carrying Gary Snyder's *Back Country*, Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, and a collection of ethnographies. Timling and its spin-off hamlets were as far north toward the Tibetan border as you could go up the Ankhu Khola River valley before pressing against the high

Himalayan ridges that buttressed the mountain called Ganesh by Nepali speakers and Lobsang Gyarpo by Timling's people. The village had been settled about two hundred years earlier by Tamang clans who followed the ridges from the east. Later, a single clan of another people called Ghale, meaning "kings," came from the west. The two groups had intermarried since their arrival. I was there to study kinship and economy.

I lived in a newly built stone house, its shake roof letting cold monsoon rains drip onto me in the warp and shift of the uncured slats. I was twenty-six years old, my wife was in the United States, and I was lonely. "Failure is my biggest fear, my way of letting everybody down," I wrote in my journal. "I'm disoriented out here. The strangeness of life. Even people's smiles are somehow unnerving." I built the habit that first year of returning to Kathmandu every three months to collect mail and write to family and friends.

Yhebe entered into that anxious fog, first appearing in my journal as the unnamed Ghale who would sit on my porch while he twisted hemp fibers into rope anchored by his big toe. I would give him tea and tobacco. We never spoke much in those first encounters. Yhebe worked, sipped tea, and smoked. He watched me read and write and, often as not, stare miserably into cloud. It took time for him to bring up my reasons for being there. "You can't do this work alone," he said. "You're an outsider. You don't know this place." He told me that I needed his help. I thought he was a strange sort of character, but I also thought he was right. So began the pattern, that I continue with this writing, of going to him for answers. Yhebe went with me on my visits in the village. He showed me the herbs you could find in the forests to sell to Newar merchants in Trisuli. He showed me the wild tubers that the Tamang would eat in famine times. He explained how families exchanged daughters in marriage, how young men worked for their parents, how it was dangerous to walk the village alone after a death, when hungry ghosts sated themselves on living souls.

For all his help, the unseen presence behind everything I began to know about Timling, I am embarrassed to look back into my journals and notes from that time to see how little my questions turned to Yhebe himself. My focus was on my work,

Yhebe no more than a tool for completing it. And yet, buried in my self-interested accounts, I see that Yhebe was always teaching beyond my questions.

When I mentioned to Yhebe, late in October, that I wanted to take a long day off to get away from people and hike the ridges above the village, he insisted that he come along. Our plans grew into a four-day walk to the high pastures and, higher still, to the barren ground above the pass at Pangsang. My notes are an ecstatic recounting of morning frost and cold at altitude, of the conical aloofness of peaks trailing white streamers of snow against cutting blue sky, of the wind-ragged pines. "At 14,000 feet," I wrote, "even close conversations seem distant, tattered by wind. The weight of my backpack, these broken-in boots, old jeans, and corduroy shirt are enough for me."

I pretended to be alone, but Yhebe was always there. Two days into our hike, we went to a shelter near the pass to make camp. We cut wood after starting a fire from the remnants left by a herder. Yhebe went for water while I stoked the fire and began a journal entry that opened with the air's fresh chill and my relief. But darker sentiments intruded and the entry turned sour. I complained about feeling oppressed in the village, constant demand rubbing against my desire to be alone. I complained, too, about Yhebe. My complaints chugged and gathered into an angry cry. They stop with the words, "Yhebe returns with pots of water. He is singing!" I wrote later of our standing together outside the shelter, looking into the night sky—how we creased our faces in goofy smiles against a bitter wind.

\* \* \*

*Yhebe: All these people think that once you're a Christian, you have to quit drinking. I quit every day! Quit, drink some more. Quit, drink some more.*

My return to Nepal in 2005, one of many such returns, began a study of Christian conversion movements in the Himalaya. These movements especially intrigued me because nearly every person in Timling had given up their Buddhism for Christianity. I had planned to go to Timling soon after

arriving in Kathmandu, but the lower trails along the Ankhu Khola went through places where the rebels were dense and threatening. The safer upper trail through Syabru Bensi and over the high pass at Pangsang was deep in snow. Even the Tamang who most wanted me in the village told me that the time wasn't good for travel.

News from outside of the valley came in rumors. I pieced together the censored newspaper stories to guess that things were bad, that human rights abuses must be profound, that innocent people were dying or in jail. The only road travel possible outside the valley required escort, long convoys of army, commerce, and private vehicles. Delays were constant. Outside, the government retained a bare control; inside the valley's seal, a tired hope contended with the surrounding mystery. The rumors signified unstated fears.

I walked my bicycle through the shallows of the Bishnumati River away from Baniyatar toward the house pointed out as the place where I would find Yhebe. I watched a dark figure with a cane move with authority between billows of juniper smoke. He was tending the fires beneath the clay pots used to distill clear alcohol from millet beer and I could see, even from a distance, that it was Yhebe. Yhebe saw me, too, waved, and disappeared into his son's rented room, darker and cooler than the open ground of the distillery out front. When I stuck my head into the door, I saw that he already sat on woven grass matting. The ground floor room, hens scratching in and out through the bright open doorway felt like a village home. "Come and sit!" He offered me a cured goatskin to rest on, but I took the plain mat alongside him. We sat close to each other, cross-legged, so that he could tap my thigh to make a point or hold my wrist for dramatic effect.

"Now the weather is turning. It's getting too hot down here in Kathmandu. I want to leave soon." Yhebe had come down from the village, walking for days to reach a bus, so that he could see his son's new daughter, born just a month before. He was sitting alone while she slept in a cradle on the floor to his right. He had pulled the cradle close so he could rock it when she stirred. "This little person is black," he said to me—her skin was darker than his—"Maybe she'll get a little lighter when she's older."

I thought of how long I had known this man, our travels to-

gether, how he seemed shorter. When he walked now, his cane searched the ground. But standing, his body was still straight, his full height just below my shoulder. I could see that his face had more lines, but not so many as to gnarl and bark his smile. Yhebe's look has always tightened around clear, serene eyes. When I looked at Yhebe, I would always wait for him to reveal the joke to the rest of us, the one that he has known about all along. It was no different then. In this room where dim light masked the gathering pre-monsoon heaviness, Yhebe was already smiling. He knew when I came that he could talk about things his own way. He could tell the stories as often as he liked and I would never grow tired of hearing them.

Now Yhebe had become an old man. He no longer wore the large white turban of the Ghale kings, nor the homespun cloth tied at the shoulders. He sat in blue cotton pants cinched with a drawstring, a dirty polo shirt, and a black cotton sports coat with pockets that he could reach into to pull out rupees or a letter, tobacco, or a lighter, as he talked. He often reached up to take off his cap. When he put it back, it would be sideways or backwards, but the cockeyed look never diminished his elegance. It was hard not to keep your eyes on Yhebe.

I pulled the tape-recorder out of my pack, attached the microphone, and set things up for recording. Yhebe nodded: we had done this many times. When I asked about Christianity and how it came to Timling, he launched into the tale without a pause.

"Well, the Lord is more powerful than our old gods. And there is a history here that is bigger. When the Lord made people—these are old things—he made them naked and they lived in the forest like wild animals. The Lord kept an eye on them. He taught them how to make clothes, how to plant their own crops for food. He gave them *bikas*—he gave them development. Our old gods didn't do this. And the Lord gave development to people and they took that development in their turn and spread it to others."

In the old days, Yhebe was a curer. He could heal the sick by locating the afflicting spirits, whether they came from the forest or were the hungry ghosts of those who died violently. He blew mantra to bring cures. Now Christian, he told me that he still remembered his past three lives, how in the last

one he died while still a little boy, how he came back in his mother's womb, how a fiercely clawed ogress tried to kill him before he was born, and how he was saved by a beautiful light-filled goddess. Now that Christianity had come to him and to Timling, Yhebe still thought he would be born again, but also that things would be different.

While we talked, the hens clucked at the door and his granddaughter stirred. Yhebe reached over and rocked the cradle, calming the baby. He continued talking and rocking all at once. I looked at his hands on the cradle. They seemed to have grown oversized as his body shrank into age. Thick joints and nails, calluses cracked and rehealed many times over. They looked more like tools than hands.

And I thought of how gentle those hands could be, of that time just fourteen years before when Yhebe and I walked together from Trisuli to Timling in the hot sun and I burned with fever the second night out. When we broke for the night, I refused supper and went to my sleeping bag, restless and sweating. I remembered waking in the night, burning. I remembered that the thing that woke me was the cool touch of Yhebe's hand on my forehead. His other hand held my wrist. And I remembered how he touched my cheek, how he bent down and muttered old Tamang prayers, and blew mantra over me, and how comforted I felt to be watched over by this man who called out to the spirits that had taken hold and made me sick. The next morning I was well and Yhebe laughed when I ate five brass platefuls of corn porridge. He told me what he had done. Later, after we reached Timling, he rubbed bear fat into my forehead and neck and told me to go to sleep.

Yhebe wore a rosary around his neck. He wore it for the cross. "In the old days, before jail, I used to go to pasture cattle in the forest above Timling. I'd stay there for weeks and at night burn a big fire that would die down into ash and coal. At night, at the edge of the light, I'd see the forest spirits. They came to eat souls. Since I began to wear a cross, I've never seen them again. The Lord and his son, Isu, are bigger than these spirits."

His granddaughter grew restless as we talked and the rocking no longer calmed her. Yhebe looked harried. He took her from the cradle with those same hands—that chop wood, that

split the sheathes of tubers in famine times, that move rock and plow, and that gentle fevers on the trail—and crooked her into his arm. "We never have to do this in the village—people carry their babies with them when they work. Now her mother can't do that and a grandfather learns new things!"

Yhebe's daughter-in-law came in at last. She still looked like a village woman, the high Tibetan cheekbones, the dirt worked into the creases on her face. She took the baby and opened her blouse—her breasts were heavy and veined—and fed her daughter in the quiet cool room. The murmur of Yhebe's voice resumed. More stories to be told.

\* \* \*

*Yhebe: It was then, when I was a Gurkha soldier, that I met Gandhiji.*

*Tom: You met Gandhi?*

*Yhebe: Yes. I was in a line of soldiers. The British were leaving India. Gandhiji noticed me because I was so small. He was small, too, a little man, almost naked. He touched my shoulder and we spoke to each other.*

*Tom: You met Gandhi?*

In 1987 I went to Timling for my second long stay. No longer a graduate student, I came well-funded with a team of interviewers, two cooks, and research assistants to study the changes in people's lives, how the search for wage labor and more frequent travel made young people less beholden to their parents. As we approached Timling, I wrote of the last sleepless night on the trail in snow and rain, of the phalanx of peaks that filled the sky above clouds and ascending ridges the morning of our arrival, and of how, from that place, I could see the last ridge before Timling. "I'm home," I wrote. But I also confessed to being "nervous and excited" wondering about my reception after six years. And, finally, I wrote of my joy at the rush and yell of greetings from the fallow fields along the last stretch of trail. "You've come back!" people shouted, while others chided me for staying away so long. Yhebe watched the whirl, the settling in, and the later dispatching of interviewers to conduct the village census and fill out questionnaires. Remembering the lonely anxious person

he had helped a few years earlier, he clapped his hands and laughed. "You've grown big!"

I had come with a new project, and also with a new affection for Yhebe that allowed his presence to fill my notes and journals. Yet, I still sought theoretical ballast in the research that brought me to Timling to justify my pleasure in his company. At sixty-two years, Yhebe's life mapped the changes in the village I had come to study so that even then my questions to him about himself tracked my work. I can still see my earlier single-mindedness in the transcripts of the taped conversations I had added to my notebooks. Yhebe still walked with me through the village and I still asked him to clarify the things we had seen. But my gaucheries and failures to recognize the contexts of my questioning are also documented by these pages. In my enthusiasm I would often forget myself.

Sometimes I irritated him. "Tell me what you heard about how it was before you were born," I'd said more than once, "Tell me about the history." He finally answered, "You're always asking about Timling's history. I've told you about our history. We wake up in the morning and work. We wake up and cut wood. We wake up and grind flour with stone. We go off and tend our cattle. We chop wood. We plow. We work and eat and work again. Then we sleep. Then we wake up and do it all over again. That's our history!"

At other times, I tested his patience with naive and dangerous requests, once asking him to name the witches in the village. The tape records an abrupt silence, my memory a look to match it: any witch would know she had been named and by whom. Or I would ask about things that could never be said in front of others. Once, the morning after an argument broke out over a declined offer of food and drink at a celebration we attended, I rushed to Yhebe and asked him to explain what happened. He shifted uncomfortably, looking down the path at approaching visitors.

"Yeah, but that was just joking," he said. "It wasn't a fight, that was just joking." He looked over my shoulder.

I burrowed deeper. "Oh, they were playing! In that case, that's good! This is great! And after that the shaman said some other things . . . something about a girl who bore a Sertung man's baby . . . I didn't know, everybody was drunk, but he . . ."

Yhebe shifted the topic to me, who hadn't been drinking,

"You shouldn't get so drunk." He made one last effort at polite dismissal. "Listen, I forgot about these things. Who knows? Who knows?"

I kept on, wondering why he was being so difficult, finally forcing Yhebe to break it off just as our visitors arrived, "Look, I can tell you about these things at a later date, ok?" The tape rolls on with a third voice asking, "Who left? What happened?" and Yhebe gracefully changing the subject.

But for the most part, the call and response of our conversations deepened the what and how of our knowing. I began to know about Yhebe, about his singularity, in ways that left my research behind. Learning about Yhebe through the things that *he* wanted to say and in the manner that he wished to say it only increased my appetite for his company. I began to note things that enriched my connection with him. Some of them were smallish—that we were both the second of six children. Others were bigger and harder to count—that we shared opinions, tempers, and sentiments, that we liked to sit together and not talk at all. Even this contrast, the small and the big, I take from Yhebe who seemed always to enjoy the paradox of the large dignity contained in his small stature.

Yhebe liked to say his bone, the part of him that passed through his lineage, was the bone of the Ghale kings that ruled Timling before Prithvi Narayan Shah's armies poured east from Gorkha to conquer Kathmandu. His ancestors drove Prithvi Narayan's father back before these later Shah victories created the Kingdom of Nepal. It was his lineage that brought the dharma to Timling, giving the land to the lama who built Timling's Tashi Chetsong Gompa in 1804. As late as 1872 his grandfather's grandfather, Changyel, was acknowledged as a "king" in a court document from Kathmandu. And, Margyelbo, Timling's last powerful king before its leaders became headmen in the service of the Nepali state, was his great-grandfather.

When Yhebe was born, in the year of the sheep, 1925, the forest edged the village just outside his house. By twelve, he had begun to work the plow behind his family's oxen, to chop wood for the hearth, to travel with his father to Kyerong, in Tibet, for salt. Nepal was a closed country, but young men could join the British Gurkha regiments if their homes were beyond the districts nearest to Kathmandu. Within that boundary, young men of certain ethnic groups were expected

to give their labor to the needs of Nepal. Timling was inside that line, but in 1940 when Yhebe was fifteen word came to the village during a festival that the British needed men to fight Japan and the next morning Yhebe went west with a crowd of young men to join.

"We were young and in a hurry," he said, "Let's go! Let's go! Go! I felt that excitement and the intense urge to go, too. We lied and said we were from a different place so they would let us enlist. But soldiers were big and fit so they looked for ways to fill me out. They fed me milk all day long, gave me a rifle and a staff, and let me join the drills. They all saw how small I was. In a parade, they'd only see me, not the others, because of my size."

Yhebe stayed in the army for eight years. He trained in Kashmir and traveled to Malaysia and Burma. He was happy with the British, but with independence his regiment was transferred to the Indian army. He left less than a year later when his father died. His stepmother had begun to sell the family land and he came back to Timling to reclaim it. He stayed to herd his cattle, plow his fields, and raise his family. He expected to live his life in the mold of his father, as a Ghale who shared the bone of Changyel and Margyelbo, closed off from the outside in a village too far from Kathmandu or Lhasa to matter.

But the changes in Timling came faster than he had thought possible. The forest rolled back. Borders opened and closed—Nepal's to the outside, Tibet's against it. A mine opened in Timling's high pastures and the army set up work camps over the high pass to build a road to it. Young people grew restless as the ground shifted under them and they began to range the countryside in search of work. Timling's women joined the young men in that search—"Now, they have no fear," Yhebe said—and many became prostitutes at the camps.

I noticed, when Yhebe talked about these things, how his words grew harder and more emphatic than in the earlier stories. He would savor the accounts of his life, adding jokes and side stories until, listening, I was sure the thread would be lost. If it were, I rarely cared. More often, I was a breathless witness to his mastery, the inevitably recovered narrative. But his commentary on Timling's changes took sap from a different, moral source, in its turn calling me to a different kind

of appreciation. I was learning to admire Yhebe. And more, I was learning to care about Yhebe, and to hope, too, that my sentiments were shared.

Yhebe considered the intrusions, the coming of the outside world to his Timling, and his anger grew. He went to the camps to rebuke the soldiers. "When they first take a look at me" he told me, "they think I'm simple. They try to joke at my expense. But then I tell them that I, too, was in the military, that when I was a soldier we didn't do these worthless things. If all you want to do is ruin another person's daughter then you are barely human, I told them. People who would use these girls like this would sell their own lives if they could. Poor people do this labor. The children of poor people come to do this labor and they only think of using them! They use these people today to satisfy their appetites. By the next day they'll be forgotten! And this is what I said to those soldiers! These people without dharma, when I said these things to them they just sat there filled with shame. And then they left."

"But what about the girls?" I asked

"If they go, they are completely gone. Everything they have been taught in the village leaves them. Even the memory of village ways is no longer with them. They do this stuff without thinking, without understanding, and they are gone. As long as they are young and strong and until the flesh on their faces becomes drawn and wrinkled, they can get what they want; in the prime of their youth they get it. Oh the food is delicious—excellent food! And the clothes they wear are the best and this they get, too. But when their youth and vigor have diminished, they are left exposed and open.

"In the village, everybody is joined. But in the city a person makes his own way, his own provisions for tomorrow's food; he's alone. He builds one house for himself. And then another builds one for himself and so on . . . everybody for himself. And in that way the old habits are gone, finished."

\* \* \*

*Yhebe: The Kali Yuga has come, it's like that.*

My conversations with Yhebe began a long turn in the way I looked at my work, even in the way I looked at myself. When I

returned to Ann Arbor in 1988, I searched for the language that would bring order to feeling as well as thought. The field work manuals from my own discipline, caught up in the instrumentality of science and objectivity, had little to say about what our relationship had become. They concerned themselves with such things as "frustrated" anthropologists and "difficult" informants, with informants' "motives" and anthropologists' "roles," with rapport, status, and reliability. These are necessary things for research, but their echo of my own early single-mindedness with Yhebe disturbed me. I noticed how the language of friendship, for that is what Yhebe and my relationship had grown into, when it occurs at all in these manuals, would retreat into stiffness or, worse, treat it as a threat to the research itself. One manual warned how "friendship implies loyalty, and loyalty may have to be demonstrated by taking sides, and taking sides will prejudice relations with other people."

I began to see the paradox of a discipline so dependent on people—their good will, their trust, and their generosity—and yet so miserly in its advice to its practitioners. Like Yhebe's young women, we do this without thinking, without understanding, and in pursuit of temporary satisfactions. We need to begin from a starting place well before that fork where the people we study become tools for the fulfillment of our own ends. When James Agee wrote "a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger," he drafted a guiding charter that I have yet to see in any of these manuals. We need to begin with what it is to be a person.

It is easy to see why we avoid these things. Vincent Crapanzano, in his *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*, one of the few anthropological accounts that sensitively explores these themes, writes of the psychology of our retreat into "ethnographic distance," of how "the methodological strategies of the field worker are . . . frequently the result of his anxieties." And our anxieties, as he writes and as my own account makes clear, are as often as not about ourselves as about the integrity of our research ends. Crapanzano, too, saw his own transformation into a person who cared about and empathized with his "informant." It seems no accident that his account of that transformation leads him to write that we "should respect in

the Other the same mystery we expect others to respect in ourselves."

The skittishness of our field manuals on this matter of friendship was of a piece with my own nervousness about my changed relationship with Yhebe. Iris Murdoch, whose essays I also read to find a new language, captured my new anxiety. "What is feared," she wrote, "is history, real beings, and real change, whatever is contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly still to be explained." To care for another for his own sake, shorn of the instrumental reasons, was to enter into that wild ground where you relinquish control.

In 1990, Nepal's government fell after a student movement demanding democratic reform spread through the general population. A new constitution reestablished the party democracy that had been suppressed for thirty years and elections were scheduled for 1991. A month before the vote, I returned to Kathmandu where I was met by Yhebe for the walk up to Timling. Yhebe was jubilant. He despised the old order, now represented by its own political party, the RPP, and had begun organizing for the opposition Congress Party in Timling. My journal from our walk is an account of constant political talk, gangs of party activists on the trail, posters and pamphlets and the Communist sun, RPP plow, and Congress tree painted onto every tea stall, school, and trailside house along the way. People referred to themselves by the Nepali words *surya*, *halo*, or *rukh* to announce their allegiances.

We reached the village late on a Monday and my notes for the next week fall into the easy rhythm of catching up on its changes since my last visit. "Timling so beautiful," I wrote, "the nearer fields green with young corn, the farther fields yellow with ripening wheat." I wrote of the new schools and stores, the beginnings of Christianity, the casual talk, and the invitations to share food with old friends. There are entries for Shelzathapa's plan for raising yak-cow hybrids to market cheese to Kathmandu, Yurtchathapa's butchering a goat with Ramleka, Chiba's plans for a church. There is a note about being whisked to Yhebe's with a cover story only to be met with a feast.

On Thursday I sat with Yhebe and other Congress organizers while they talked about bringing reform to Timling. Timling had a strong faction supporting the old order but was



well on its way to going Congress. The following Monday, a Congress activist distributed badges and posters, and spoke at a gathering. "The RPP people act like kings," he said, "but there are no kings! Look! We need to follow our hearts. If this village wants to get above the bears in the forest, to get developed, to have electricity, to have a road, then it will go Congress!" The political talk was laced with distrust of two neighboring villages, Sertung and Borang, home of an RPP minister and strongly for his victory.

The next day a crowd of Sertung men came to Timling led by Rekhman Tamang, the brother-in-law of the RPP candidate. They warned people that if the village went Congress, they would cut them off from the trails through their village, that they would beat anybody who voted against them. The argument spilled into old complaints of Sertung people stealing Timling grass and fodder from the communal pastures. Yhebe was called because he knew the history of land agreements. After a few hours, the roiling talk calmed and Yhebe touched my arm. "Let's go, it's finished here." We went to eat and talk into the evening until Yhebe said I should sleep, the day was long.

I woke the next morning to loud whispers sifting up between the floorboards to the room where I slept. My host came up to bring me food, leaned over, and whispered, "A man was murdered in the night." He was terrified. Rekhman Tamang was killed with a knife to his chest just ten yards from our door.

When I joined the group downstairs, I discovered that Yhebe and several others had fled the village. Those huddled around the fire claimed to have been elsewhere, but the conflicting stories leading to new rumors were already beginning. Some said there was an attack on the Sertung party as it was leaving. Others that the knife was drawn to frighten them. Others that it was self-defense. There was talk of seventeen wounds, of stoning and kicking, and the final spitting on the body. All of them said that Yhebe didn't murder Rekhman, but that he was there.

I walked the village looking for Yhebe, stopping at the dead man, noticing the red blood, weirdly festive, like a spray of flowers on his white shirt. Nobody would tell me where Yhebe had gone. His son said he thought he must have gone last

night to tend cattle. Men from Sertung had already arrived in the village. I wrote in my journal, "They have come, now, from Sertung, furious looking men armed with long staffs. They kick and beat people, men and women both, demanding names. No matter what name they mention, they get the same answer: he's gone away, he's at his cattle shed, he's in the forest. Black clouds boil down from Ganesh. Cold rain. The weather fits the new gloom in Timling."

My friendships crossed factions and I sat with Timling's RPP supporters. They told me that some in Sertung thought I must be involved. My friendship with Yhebe was well known. We had walked to the village together just a week before. One of my friends leaned over and whispered, "Don't worry, you're safe. We're taking care of you." When I mentioned Yhebe's name, he looked away.

Thursday was a bad day. The RPP gangs had grown and they now stayed in Timling with their supporters, drinking until late, making lists. That night they gathered around the body, keening and shouting out the names. "Tell them to come so that we can beat them. Tell them, if they don't come, we will take their wives. If they have sons, we will take them."

The stories came from all sides. One man told me that Yhebe had been there, that he held Rekhman's arms in the scuffle. Another said that he took Congress money to do this work, another that he was in the pay of both Congress and RPP. I wrote in my journal, "I tell them that I don't believe it. But it's clear he was there. If he is caught he will surely be beaten, maybe killed." That night Yhebe returned to his home in moonlight.

At midnight, a scratching tap at my door. It was Yhebe's son. "My father is here," he said. "He asked for you." The two of us crept along the narrow village paths, pausing at every dog's bark, and continuing on. Yhebe's house was at the edge of the village, above the spring, just yards from the house where a crowd of Sertung men were staying. We could hear them drinking and talking when we rounded the corner to the porch where Yhebe leaned against the wall. He watched me step into the shadow. He was laughing!

We sat together and talked. I told Yhebe that he had to get out of Timling and to Kathmandu or the district headquarters to turn himself in. I told him his name was on their list. If

they caught him in the village, I said, he would be beaten. Yhebe spoke, too, of how good it was to be in the forest, to look down on the village and see it from a distance. He kept an eye on the house where the men were. When a drunken RPP man came out to relieve himself, Yhebe joked and I smiled in spite of myself. Yhebe's wife brought us food and alcohol. The low murmur of our voices, the crack of a dog's sharp bark, our alertness to the surrounding night. I thought of how Yhebe's singing brought me back to myself that night at Pangsang. I thought of love.

It was time for Yhebe to leave. I gave him some things I had gathered for him when his son came for me—packets of trail food, a shirt, some rupees. We said we'd meet on the trail, toward the pass, in the forest above the village. He touched my shoulder and we parted.

That was the last time I saw Yhebe that year. The beatings grew worse across the next two days. I traveled the village, thinking my presence would stop the worst of them. But my sense of immunity began to fade. I wrote in my journal how "I stood on the wall outside the house when they wandered the village at dusk tonight and, for the first time, I was scared. Some pass by looking at me angrily. This afternoon, the Timling and Sertung headmen, both RPP, were talking. When I sat with them, they abruptly stopped and pointedly walked away—no way to know now what anybody will do. I think of how involved in this I must seem to them!"

A day later, near dusk, a German development worker raced across the upper trail to a house in Timling. He stopped for the night and I went to talk with him—he had been working on a project in Sertung. "It's crazy over there," he said. "They're drinking and talking revenge. They keep talking about you. It's not safe anymore. You need to leave with me." I walked with him the next morning, over the high passes, over Pangsang, over Khurpu, and toward Kathmandu. On the way, we passed the places I had camped with Yhebe.

\* \* \*

*Yhebe: I had lots of time in jail. I read the whole Bible there. It took me three months, but I read it every day and after three months I had read it all. I think I am the only person from*

*Timling who has read it all. It's good I read it then—now my eyes can't see print that small.*

Kathmandu. Nepal. Rich and poor in a jumble. The poor walk in borrowed shoes, cracked soles, taped and sewn. They stare into the windows of fancy new stores. The rich drive up in SUVs, Pajeros, and Land Cruisers, protected from the dust. They go inside. The shack and the mansion occupy a shared space. The maimed and the whole walk the same road. A baby's wail and a friend's laugh under the same bright sun. The streets are full of people. Bright lights, big city, the neon speed of Kathmandu. Sometimes, the light blinds them. They get scorched by fire. Sometimes, the ones who know who they are, they do okay.

Yhebe walked to the district headquarters along the upper forest trails skirting Sertung and surrendered to the police. He had made the national news along with sixteen others named in the murder. Rekhman's killer had confessed, but nine men, including Yhebe, were sentenced to twenty years as conspirators. For the next nine years, I visited him at the central jail in Kathmandu. The guards called his name when I came. We clasped hands through the bars and talked. I brought him clothing, soap, biscuits, and money. Yhebe passed on messages for me to take to Timling.

Cap Miller, a Jesuit friend of ours, visited Yhebe, too, and worked on his case. I wrote a letter to the King asking for amnesty and early release. I gave money for lawyers. In 2000, when Yhebe was 75 years old, he was released from jail with the others. The Jesuits threw a party for them and Yhebe walked back to Timling the next day. He told Cap that this was the last that Kathmandu would see of him.

\* \* \*

*Yhebe: I've thought of you often. When I wear the clothes you gave me I remember, not the clothes, but the man who gave them.*

Yhebe broke his vow and returned to Kathmandu twice, in 2002 and 2005. I met him both times. He told me that he knew he had cost me much, all those rupees gone to get an old

man out of jail. Once we sat together on a low slat bed with Rekhman's killer. We shared a bowl of liquor, talked in murmur of lighter things, only acknowledging the heavier presence of our shared histories in the occasional darting glance or quick nod.

I could see in that first visit how Yhebe had slowed, how he leaned on his staff when he walked. He was at the age when nearly everybody in Timling called him "mheme"—grandfather. Outside, walking along the narrow rutted streets, I hovered over him, guiding him through traffic with my hand. I could feel the hard wing of his shoulder. "You're all bone!" I said. "Where's the meat?" He laughed, but when we sat together later his talk canted toward the funeral pyre on the ridge above the village. "When you're old," he said, "the only thing left is fire. At first, it's because you need to be warm. For every night you need a full load of firewood. But when it comes to the time when you burn much firewood . . . ahhh . . . then that's the only use of wood for you, the only harvest left to you."

Yhebe still joked, too. The Maoists had come to Timling, he said, to recruit for their cause. Most of Timling's young men had fled to the city to avoid them. "They want some guy to walk in front of them and carry their flag while they follow behind and leave a bomb. What good is that to us? I went up to them and said, 'You don't need a young man to carry a flag. Take me instead!' But they just said I'm not worth it!"

He laughed again and continued, "But I'll tell you, there's nobody in the village now—a few old people, but that's it. All this fighting, all this looking for difference. Even the Christians say they're one kind or the other." Yhebe still used the Nepali words *Krishhi Dharma* to talk about Christians—words that could as easily mean "the agricultural religion" or "the farmer's religion"—and I have always thought he did it intentionally. "But they're all really the same. Some honor Isu's mother, some don't. There's not much difference there."

"But everybody looks for difference—the Maoists, the parties, everybody. And then they fight. When I think about it, I think I liked the old ways best, before foreign money came, when the old habits were honored, when nobody sought their own advantage. Even the old clothes were better! Made at home and you didn't need all these colors, all these layers to

stay warm! You know, it's greed that makes us look for difference."

He turned to look at my face. "You're like me when I was young. I remember when I was a little boy and sat around the fire. The old men would tell the stories and I would ask them to tell the same ones, again and again. My grandfather would play at swatting me away. We smelled the incense from the fire. We heard it crackle and watched the embers grow red in the pit. And he would always be happy to tell the stories again. You're the same way and here I am telling the stories again and again."

We sat together on the mat, Yhebe running his fingers over the seams of his clothing, discovering lice, crushing them, continuing his stories until I needed to go. My flight would leave the next day. I reached into my pack and pulled out the shirts I always brought for Yhebe and handed them over.

"When will you be back?" Always the final question when we met.

"Later this year, in the fall."

"Well, you'll have to meet me in Timling this time. I mean it. I'm not coming back to Kathmandu."

\* \* \*

*After twenty-four years, Nepal still sings new to me. Its mysteries arrive in the same timbre as long years before. I still try to capture them and make them mine. Sometimes they disturb and I stand open-handed and uncomprehending. Other times they console and I hold them close. When cruel things become casual, I search out beauty to gird my delight. I imagine Yhebe.*