

Sketches from "Welcome to the Monkhouse"

by Robert Moor '08

Winner Casey Shearer Memorial Award for Excellence in Creative Nonfiction

1.

Each morning we awoke to the dark clanging of a bell. I would rise, mumbling, cloudy-eyed, splash my face with water from the sink in our little bathroom, run my hand over the grippy skin on my bald scalp (feeling every bump and crag and cranial fissure), and brush my teeth with the tap water. I would pick up my robes from the chair where I had hung them the night before, carefully wrap the under-robe around my waist, fold it over twice, belt it off, toss the upper-robe over one shoulder, under the other, back around my torso, over the left shoulder once more, and then wrap a red blanket around my shoulders to keep out the cold. The bell indicated that there were 30 minutes until breakfast, so I would prostrate, prepare my cushion, and sit in meditation for 21 minutes. Sometimes Sergey joined me. More often than not, he just rolled over and went back to sleep until I roused him for breakfast.

At the door to the dining hall, we would be met by an older monk, usually Nandacara, who would check our robes, find them lacking, take them off, and, with us standing half-naked and shivering in the early morning courtyard, carefully re-wrap the robes so that every hem matched up evenly.

Since we were the newest initiates, we sat cross-legged on the floor at the last table in a long row. With us sat a group of young Laotian monks who did quite a lot of nodding but very little talking. They told us they missed home terribly, but this monastery was more respected than any of the schools they had access to back in Laos. When asked what they missed most, they said it was the food.

The local townspeople walked around and placed various dishes on the table. It is considered inappropriate for a monk to thank a layperson for a donation; we were told only to look down into our bowls and keep quiet. Since monks don't eat after mid-day, for us new initiates breakfast was a time of jittery and thinly veiled anticipation.

Each monk was given a cup of sweet, milky instant coffee, a cup of green tea, and a bowl of white rice. Aside from that, we ate family style from a carousel of large bowls filled with white beans, meat-on-bone yellow curries, a salty soup consisting of dark leafy spinach, bowls of cold boiled vegetables, an assortment of dragonfruits, papaya, pomegranate, apples, small sweet yellow and black bananas, big buttery red-skinned bananas, sour oranges, and unfailingly, at every breakfast, a small dish filled with tiny, red, dessicated dried fish floating in chili sauce. These fish, if you have never tried them, taste exactly the way a pet store smells. It is the flavor of Burma, the smell of my time spent there.

2.

As a monk, you abide a scripture of No's.

No killing.

No stealing.

No sex.

No lying.

No drinking or taking intoxicants.

No sleeping in a high or luxurious bed.

No dancing, singing, or entertainment.

No perfume or cosmetics.

No owning gold or silver (i.e. money).

No eating after the clock strikes noon.

(There are 217 more.)

While all sex acts are banned by the *vinaya*, "while alone, or with a woman, a man, or even an animal," the monastic code does make special compensations for those accidents that might happen "while a monk is asleep." In my short time living in the Sitagu monastery, it thankfully never came to that. However, the lurid did begin creeping increasingly into my thoughts. I asked a fellow monk how he deals with this problem, and he told me that he uses the *vipassana* method of "noting." Whenever a lustful thought arises, you simply note the mental action as:

Lusting.

Lusting.

Lusting.

This technique very well may work under normal circumstances. But when you are sitting in meditation for upwards of an hour at a time, two or three or even four times a day, and pornographic images start blazing up as bright as celluloid on the backs of your eyelids, noting the experience seems only to perversely intensify it. The words melt into a bizarre tribal incantation, providing a soundtrack to the lascivious images writhing on your mental screen:

lust-ing

lust-ing

lust-ing

lust-ing

lust-ing

lust-ing

which repeats, as if on a loop, for the duration of the sit.

In my free hours I would sometimes sit alone in the monastery library reading an old split-spined paperback copy of *Welcome to the Monkeyhouse* some visitor years ago had left behind. As literature, it was not technically considered entertainment, and therefore not banned by the monastic code.

One day, Nandacara asked me what the book was about. I was stumped. What meaning could Vonnegut possibly have for a man who, having been ordained since the age of six or seven, had not only never had sex, but had probably never even thought about it in a way that was not radically divergent from my own? Would he find a world in which people took pills to deaden their sexual organs bizarre and nightmarish, or an enlightened utopia? I could not imagine a way to put this story in terms that he would understand.

So I lied.

3.

At the monastery down the dirt road from ours, Nandacara introduced us to the extravagantly named Dr. Nandamalabhivamsa.

We stood waiting in his office. Young novice monks crowded around the windows and the edges of the doorjamb, peering shyly in at us. The doctor looked about 60 years old, but he carried himself with the peculiar grace and fragility characteristic of a much older man.

He sat himself in a straight-backed chair as we prostrated on the floor before him. Looking up, we discovered that beneath the high-necked robes his neck was held in a white plastic-and-foam splint. He could not incline his head downward even an inch. He said that he was suffering from a disease of the bones, which was weakening his spine to the point where it could no longer support his head. He peered down at us through the bottom of his lenses.

"I am going to die soon."

In his faint British accent, he insisted that the dissolving of his bones was nothing special. All things are like this; all bodies fall apart and drift away.

These are things we had heard hundreds of times, but because he was a renowned preacher who had traveled to India and Europe to give these teachings, we kept quiet.

He explained that the cornerstones of Buddhism, the most essential parts, were the Three Seals: *dukkha* (suffering), *anicca* (impermanence), and *anatman* (no-soul). All three are interdependent. Things cause suffering because nothing lasts, and nothing lasts because nothing has an eternal essence. People like to believe they have a soul, or some concrete immutable identity, when in fact they are just a bundle of matter and mental functions, likely to crumble and fall apart at any moment.

He likened it to the old story of the ox-cart. In an attempt to illustrate no-soul to a farmer, the Buddha once removed the wheel from his ox-cart. "Is this an ox-cart?" the Buddha asked. The farmer responded it was merely a wheel. Next the Buddha took off the axle. "Then is this the ox-cart?" The farmer, again, conceded that it was not the ox-cart. The Buddha continued in this manner until the ox-cart was completely disassembled. He pointed to the pile of parts. "Then is this the ox-cart?" The farmer had to agree that the pile of parts was not, strictly speaking, an ox-cart. The Buddha's point was clear: the word 'ox-cart' is an abstract notion for a specific function, composed of multiple interlocking parts, just as 'soul' is the deceptively reifying title given to the function of the five psycho-physical aggregates that make up a human being: physical form, sensations, perceptions, mental habits, and consciousness.

Dr. Nandamalabhivamsa sat above us, his neck propped up against the back of his chair.

"Now imagine if I were to do the same to you. Imagine I pulled out your eyes, and held them up in front of your face. *Is this you?* I ask. And then I pulled out your tongue. *Then is this you?* And then I pulled out your bones. *Is this you?* Then I pulled out the left side of your brain, or the front bit, or the wee part that the scientists say holds your memories. *Well, this must be you.* But it isn't you, is it? Imagine I pulled apart all of your pieces, and I spread them out on a table. *Where are you?* I ask. *Where on earth did you go? You were just here a moment ago...*"

The doctor explained that our many parts were joined together only by strands of causation, like a string of falling dominoes. Each part contributes to the growth of another; each component is balanced carefully against the rest. Now the doctor's body, which had risen from nothing, was falling back to nothing, link by link, vertebra by brittle vertebra.

4.

When we woke up the next morning, we didn't even bother to put on shoes. We were told we would not need them.

Nandacara and Surya were waiting in the courtyard outside of our room. The dim morning air was cold. Cold rose up from between ice-watery strands of grass crushed beneath our toes; cold clung to our bald heads; cold crept and leaked into every crease and fold of our thin robes. Surya and Nandacara insisted that we ditch the blankets, which, they said, were inappropriate for begging. Next, they unwound our top robes and re-wrapped them in the ceremonial style, crimped down the left arm like a sleeve, high around the neck.

The monks sent us off, waving like parents sending their children off to kindergarten. Nandacara even offered to walk us to the end of the street.

5.

We walked with eyes downcast, stepping around sharp pieces of flint and thin patches of milky cracked ice. The sun rose yellow and wavering over the hills and lit up clouds of dust-smoke rising above the village.

Most of the townspeople cooked their breakfasts over small coal fires in tin pots. The smoke smell like death, like trains. It tends to hang in a sort of purgatorial state, a micro-mesosphere, too light to settle to the earth, too heavy to float off and join the clouds. Some of the poorer villagers burned dry twisted branches of wood. The wood smoke (whiter, lighter) filled their huts, pouring out of the open façades, roiling in white eddies around the wood supports, corrugated metal roofs, and finally thinning out into thin spires that angled towards one another high above the town. People peered through this smoke, white-eyed. No one coughed.

Through this haze we walked, slowly. Other monks began materializing from all directions. They looked sleepy, disinterested, with the air of routine familiarity one might expect from a farm boy milking the family cow before heading off to school.

The first few villages, children mostly, greeted us with suspicion. Angling their eyes coyly up at our faces, they spooned tentative quantities of rice into our alms bowls. By the time we reached the main section of the street, however, word of the "white monks" had preceded us. A restaurant owner and his wife stood in their doorway, hailing our approach with eager nods and smiles. The next house was the same, and the

next. Our bowls were soon filled to spilling over with piles of white rice, yellow curry, skeletal fried fish, flatbread, donuts, plastic packets of biscuits, whole oranges, bananas, more rice, more fish, spicy wilted vegetables, and pink gelatinous sweets, in layers and pockets all adjacent and bleeding into one another.

At one point I looked up from the street and was surprised to see Sergey following a man into his café. The man was beckoning us to sit down at an empty table. He set down two cups of tea, a pot of coffee, a packet of cigarettes, and a lighter. I looked nervously to Sergey. He gently shook his head.

The man returned with a plate of fried dough, bubbled and greasy like fried pigskin. At his fervent urging, we reluctantly began tearing off pieces of the bread, being careful to wipe our fingers on the paper tablecloth after each bite so as to not stain our robes. We ate in silence, avoiding eye contact with the man, who studied our every move with rapt attention. Judging from how I later saw monks sitting in coffee shops in Yangon, chatting with friends, occasionally even smoking, to him we must have looked like some species of strange panicky animal, pale and stiff and silent, at once outwardly composed and deeply fearful, petrified in each sense of the word.

A customer in the café led us to his small house next door where he wedged an unpeeled orange and some sweets into the last available centimeter of our bowls. He urged us to sit down on a couch in his low-ceilinged living room while he and his wife and two daughter prostrated before us on the dirt floor. I could watch the whole scene from another angle, reflected in the dead gray bubble of their old-fashioned television screen. They family sat back on their heels, hands folded together, and looked up at the two foreign monks seated on their couch. They were waiting for something to happen.

I looked at Sergey. Sergey looked at me. I caught a glimmer of panic in his eyes, and then I realized it, too. It is a tradition in Burma, after a donation of a certain size, for the monks to chant a blessing in the ancient Pali language.

A gap opened up in the living room. We sat in silence, frozen to the couch, our toes dangling over a curious abyss of absurdity and damnation.

6.

Nights at the monastery ended with chanting. We would gather in the Buddha Hall before a row of ten gold-painted Buddhas, the statues at once indistinguishable and idiosyncratic like fraternal twins. With palms pressed together, we would chant in a low staccato drone. Rather, they would chant. Because they chanted quickly, and in Pali, and because we were supposed to have memorized the chants during our many (non-existent) years as novices, Sergey and I were quickly left behind.

Yo so Bhagavà arahaṃ sammà-sambuddho

Svākkhàto yena Bhagavatà dhammo

Supañipanno yassa Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho

Tam-mayaṃ Bhagavantaṃ sadhammaṃ sasaṅghaṃ

Imehi sakkārehi yathā'rahaṃ āropitehi abhipājayāma

Sādhū no Bhante Bhagavà sucira-parinibbuto pi

Pacchimà-janatā'nukampa-mānasā

Ime sakkāre duggata-paḍḍākāra-bhāte paṇiggaḍḍhātu

Amhākaṃ dāgha-rattaṃ hitāya sukhāya.

After the chanting and a round of prostrations, the monks huddled together in groups of threes and fours, crouched down on the balls of their feet, to confess their sins.

Sergey and I would huddle together off to the side, just the two of us, and confess to one another. Since neither of us had yet memorized all of the 227 rules, our confessions usually centered around the things we felt guilty about, like talking maliciously about Nandacara's hairy mole, or wanting to go out and buy a hamburger, or just wanting to go home. Oftentimes we chuckled nervously, like we did so often when we felt left out.

When the other monks shuffled out of the Buddha Hall, Sergey and I were left alone to meditate. The only people who ever joined us were two female cleaning ladies who spent immense amounts of time counting prayer beads and chanting under their breath. I never saw the other monks meditating, not even once. Most

said they were too busy studying, while a few claimed that one day when they were old they would retire to the forest and meditate in solitude until their death.

7.

There came a night near the end when I was left completely alone. Sergey had gone off to photograph something in town, and the cleaning ladies had gone home. I sat for a full hour and a half, maybe more, without any way of keeping the time. I simply drifted along in a state of quiet observation, with only the faintest hot twinges of anxiety, restlessness, boredom. I watched my breath for a while at the tip of my nose, a concentration exercise, then I widened my scope of observation to encompass everything, watching for whatever protruded from the murky depths of my shut-eye landscape. I cannot recall what I thought of that night, but I do remember that the thoughts were thin, thready. Mostly I just watched my breath go in, and out, like the sea.

For the first time I can remember, I observed my breath as a sensation disembodied. My nose was a nose, connected to other skin and tissue, a vast architecture of creaking joints and struts and tension rods, but ultimately it was hollow, dusty, full of holes. This is something I had been told to do for years, but it took weeks of going to bed hungry every night and waking up tired every morning, holding my tongue and minding my robes and wavering continually on the borders of things for me to finally loosen my grip enough to let it slip from my fingers.

When my legs began to ache through the numbness, I opened my eyes and prostrated to the golden Buddhas and stood up, stiffly. Outside the night was cool and clear. I slipped on a pair of rubber sandals.

Cool air on the neck and scalp.

Tiny hairs rising up like grass.

Tingle.

Shiver.

The pathways at night were lit with fluorescent lights and the leaves on the trees shone white instead of green. Walking slowly, I could see each individual leaf, each slender branch, each trunk and behind it each whitewashed wall passing by at different speeds, as if I were at the center of a giant spinning record. It all turned, and turned. I felt at once at the center of everything and nowhere at all.

8.

I was ugly, and I was pale. Cheekbones overly pronounced, lips drawn thin. Misshapen skull. Strings running taut in my neck. There have been times, on a poorly outfitted two-month hike in Tanzania, or on a protracted ascent of Mt. Aconcagua, when the flesh beneath my eyes has dissipated to where two points of bone at the bottom of the orbital sockets rose up to press against the skin, like two pebbles in a sock. These two points of bone are how I know when I've grown too thin, when an inner equilibrium has been tipped to some unsustainable angle.

There is a strange satisfaction in watching yourself waste away. There are monks, Tibetan in training but American by birth, I have seen in India and Nepal and elsewhere, who were thin like this, pale like this, calm and cold and drained like this. These men were objects of envy for me when I was young. Much like the professional mountain climber, the writer-hermit, the tropical ex-pat recluse, they were beacons of the exotic lengths a man could take his life if he made a conscious choice to cast off, cast away. I used to envy their withered physiques, their elegantly stooped postures. I used to envy their unencumbered lives. Most of all I suppose I envied their ugliness, the conscious and concerted-and to me, terrifying-destruction of one's vanity, and with it, one's good looks.

I stood before the mirror in my tiny bathroom for a long time that night, caught by my own reflection. I stared until I could see my identity strung out across history like a thread or a chain in my bones, reaching back to photos of when I was an infant, back to my parents and their parents before them, and farther back to even less recognizable pieces of myself through the ages. I saw myself not as a monk, nor as a man, but as a bundle of mechanisms inexplicably driven to be both.

I stared until my two black pupils locked in with their mirrored counterparts, like two tunnels connecting in the center of a mountain, and I was suddenly free to take in the whole shimmery picture in the periphery. There in the margins was a man, or a boy, white, thin, soft, stoned-looking, wrapped in red robes, standing

alone in a tiny tiled bathroom staring at himself. I saw nothing that I could recognize. I saw nothing I could call my own.

Where are you?

Where on earth did you go?

You were just here a moment ago...