

Bitter seeds

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Six in the morning. Bells pealed outside. Shouting and laughter rose in the wakening of the day. Monks were asking around for some breakfast. My neighbors, eyes half-shut, shoes half-tied, were preparing some rice in boiling water. I could hear a woman singing in a deep, low voice, and it seemed to be carried back and forth in the air, as if the morning breeze brought life in through the open window. I tried turning around on my mat, but somehow got caught into the mosquito net. As I searched for the zipper to open it up, I spotted a family of cockroaches casually crawling across the room. I sighed, and stepped over them to reach the door, heading for the water bin outside.

A little girl with long, thick, black hair was bending over the bin, as if looking for something in the troubled water. I came next to her and she suddenly moved away, tightly closing her hands on her chest. We gazed at each other for a while. Between her fingers I figured was a sample of shampoo, which people bought once a week. It was worth a few hours of exhausting work in the heat. I smiled to avoid frightening her more than I'd already done, and she smiled back. Her cheeks covered with golden powder contrasted with the blackness of her tiny eyes. She slowly walked away, glancing back to me from time to time, nimbly advancing between the crevasses and the trash spilt on the ground.

Writing without lying... Writing without betraying! Writing and giving yourself away to the thickness of words. They wrote logbooks, travel diaries, didn't they? Did they ever write about anything but themselves, about *their* discoveries and *their* impressions and *their* vagaries? I'd like to see and watch without imposing my presence upon the world. I'd like to write about desolation, about violence, about what one cannot accurately grasp but which lies there, so irremediably strange and appalling, so intimately humiliating. I'd like to describe the unnamable pain of those whose daily life is ridden by fear, describe the unbearable disgust of dirt and dryness, litter and bareness.

My colleague at the Guardian the other day was arguing that traveling alone in Cambodia to experience roughness and crudeness of lives was a very feminine, oversensitive, pitiful approach to the world. He was telling me about how the scientific approach, the quantitative approach, with figures and research papers, specific budgets and comparative studies was much more pragmatic, much more efficient in solving problems – definitely more manly. All I could do was laugh in his face, and walk away. My understanding has its limits. But as usual it did make me think a lot, because I would like to see things neither through an objectifying glass, nor from a lachrymose point of view – the two imply a certain sense of superiority which I strongly loathe.

Before going to Cambodia I'd been to China, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. It seems I have very distinctive memories from these countries. I don't think of them as countries but as certain atmospheres. A smell, a look, a taste, a rhythm. They're more a combination of striking images than enclosed entities.

I remember a Chinese worker in the countryside near Wuhan, carrying ten times his weight of straw on his motorcycle. The straw was piled up behind him, which made him look like a peacock stretching out his feathers. I remember travelling by night on bumpy dark roads in the middle of Laos, with no light surrounding us except the fluttering glow of the tuktuk lamp – Have you ever been to a place where everything is black, miles and miles around you? It was very intimidating. We could only hear the sound of the engine,

and the barking of a dog when we came close to a farm. And I remember watching the people in the small streets of suburban Hanoi, standing in line to buy their morning baguette and sugar cane water in transparent plastic bags with straws.

These moments are not mere details, they condense and withhold many experiences, many ideas. Some prefer describing landscapes, but there's a sense of infinite slowness in descriptions. Slowness tends to estrange, and dramatizes the distance of observation. In the moments I've described, and particularly in my encounter with the girl next to the water bin, I felt part of the scene, part of what was happening. I'm not travelling and sightseeing and writing. As I write and live these experiences, it all travels within me, explores me, changes me.

I splashed my face with water over the bin, rubbed my forehead, my chin and neck and went back into my room. The weather is getting pretty hot already, I thought.

Rami had always been tough and leading. The people back at the care center used to call her "big sister", as she was followed around by a merry troop of a dozen children, wobbling and humming in her footsteps. She had a very clever face, and was known in the neighborhood for being particularly quick. She hadn't been able to go to school for almost ten years, but she had now made it in the rugby team of one of the most popular middle schools in Phnom Penh, and had started catching up her education there. "Go Rami, go Rami !" cheered the children, heaped up on the wooden benches. She couldn't disappoint them. She was strong. She wasn't afraid - or rather, she had come to understand that hiding her fears and fragility by showing excessive assurance was the best way to get somewhere, and to help other people get somewhere too. She had learned that sometimes, the only way not to get fooled was, inevitably, to fool others. "The virtues of performance," she had once read on a movie poster. When she played rugby, she felt like she was performing. She felt deeply rooted in herself, solidly attached to the ground. Performing had given her confidence, had taught her how to negotiate the distance with others. Most of all, she didn't feel light anymore. She believed her existence weighed in the world.

Heavy breathing. Left leg was grabbed. Swift turn. Suddenly everything accelerated. All she could see was a knee. A bony, hairy knee. And then eyes. There was pain. Pain in the eyes. She forgot everything. The eyes consumed her. Her eyes had witnessed too much. Eyes! "No, Rami, no pain," she tried to repeat to herself. "Strong, strong! Forget! No suffering!" But she was overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by all that pain. Unfathomable pain. Ball got tossed away. They all ran after it like a cloud of wild shadows. And she stood there. And she was gone.

"Did you see how he scored? That was fantastic, just right through the crowd, and they couldn't even make a step forward to stop him, he was already on the other side! If he trained more he'd be real good." Ponleak was getting very excited.

His voice hardly even covered the ambient hubbub, the sound of the plastic spoons against the stainless-steel bowls. He was eating and shouting at once, and a drizzle of rice grains was dripping from his open mouth. Rami didn't say anything, she wasn't quite hungry either. She spotted Sangvhat at the end of the opposite table, but he seemed too busy with his boyfriends to pay any attention to her. They all had nail polish

and lipstick on, and Sangvhat's right hand showed a colorful Pokemon tattoo. It made her smile. It was their way of performing, she guessed.

"Rami!" Ponleak suddenly shrieked. "You aren't listening, are you?" She made a funny face and tapped his nose with a spoon. "I'm off" she said, getting up with her bowl. "Aren't you finishing your tomatoes? I'm having them!" She handed her bowl and he ferociously gulped down the food, and then leaned back in content, as if to say, "you can go now."

She walked to the washing spot, grabbed a sponge, mechanically scrubbed the bottom of the bowl, and tossed it in the water. As she was heading back to the dorms, she heard someone close behind her and saw Chhean.

"Hi Chhean," she said, putting her arm around the little girl. A large smile spread over her face - that's how she always was, smiling and silent.

"Foreigner," she quietly murmured. "Foreigner in Bopha's room."

"You saw a foreigner? That must be the journalist... Papy and Mamy told me about her." She paused a moment. "Thank you for telling me, little Chhean," she said. "Do you want to come with me to see her?"

Chhean nodded and Rami took her hand. They both started walking to the east building, cut across the deserted rugby field and bypassed a crowd of boys gathered around a dice game. The little girl looked like her shadow, swaying from left to right, from right to left, according to the foot which she first set on the ground.

Chhean had been adopted by Papy and Mamy too, three years before. Papy and Mamy were the founders of the care center, and for many of the children they were rescuers and protectors. Interestingly enough, they were getting quite old. They appeared puny and fragile, and yet almost seven hundred children depended on them. Their hands were skeletal and shaking, but when they lifted the kids up, they were robust and vigorous. The children gave them the strength they needed, the courage and the will not to give up.

The wooden door was half closed. The padlock was hanging loose. The wood smelled like childhood, her childhood back in the south dorms, where she used to have her mattress in between two cardboard sheets. She couldn't sleep without these boards. She couldn't sleep if she felt visible. She thought someone was scrutinizing her, surveying her, someone wanted to steal her away, send her back to a place where she wasn't allowed an existence. Chhean knocked on the door, and a head popped up in the gap.

"Hi girls," said the woman in a drawling voice. She pushed the door open, and her silhouette stood out from the dark and dusty room behind her. She was wearing a pair of jean shorts, a khaki t-shirt and her face seemed very sweaty. Her red hair was tightly pulled away in a tied bun.

Rami stepped back and simply said, "I heard you just arrived."

"Yes, I arrived yesterday, I'm starting work tomorrow... Your English is very good, eh! Let me grab a water bottle, and let's go outside." She disappeared back into the dark room, and then rushed out. She closed the door and led the way out of the building. Her determined gait contrasted with her languishing voice and her slow accent.

"Are you here to teach? I heard you were a journalist. Will you interview us?" Rami asked, trying to contain her curiosity and conceal her trepidation as much as she could. The woman laughed a little and explained, inviting the girls to sit next to her on the bench near the delivery gate, "Yes, and I might write a book too. I helped the association back in England, and now I've come on my own to understand things better."

Rami didn't say anything. She was starting to wonder how life really was out there, in Europe, why people came all the way to Phnom Penh to *understand*. They were here to eat and talk with them, that was nice, but then they didn't stay for very long. One day they vanished and never came back. Others arrived. And then left too. Because they had finished *understanding*. Of course, she wasn't asked if she understood this or not. It all seemed very obvious. "They raise money for us. And they help raise awareness: you know, they describe what they saw, they show pictures. We couldn't have done anything without these people coming in. They've built up a community." Mamy had once told her. Rami had looked back in defiance.

She wasn't fooled. She remembered Caroline. Caroline was a Spanish student. She looked excessively kind, her whole body exuded devotion and dedication. That's what had attracted Rami at first. When Caroline visited the center, when she went into the classes and played with the children, she looked worried. Worried, ill, almost devastated. And so the children felt very uneasy next to her. A few days later, she was gone.

Caroline had confessed to Rami, "I came here because I believe in God. I think the love of God makes great things happen. But here I see a lot of suffering, and maybe I can't do something that'll make God proud of me. It's too difficult. There are too many things to do. I feel overwhelmed. I thought I could make things better myself, and feel useful, and you know, all these people going to Asia. And they come back and tell their stories. They're heroes really. People admire them. They look so useful, their lives seems so necessary." She was getting carried away. Her words were drowning in a flow of noisy consciousness. She gazed at the window and suddenly remembered Rami's presence. Rami had gotten up, livid, outraged. That's what they were up to. That was the bottom of it all, the meaning of that fucking *understanding*. "They don't even realize they're as weak as we are." Maybe weaker. They're seeking for recognition. They're so thirsty of recognition. They need proof. Rami felt pity. And anger. "Fuck off," she had shouted, bitterly. Caroline had blinked, startled. Rami was a poor lost soul that had been saved from the abysses of doom and horror. She couldn't say "fuck": that was a biological impossibility. And yet, she had said it. Did she know what the word meant? All of this was too grotesque, too absurd. The boundaries were blurred, the roles and positions weren't clear-cut anymore. Caroline had lost her bearings. She had broken into tears. Rami had slammed the door and left.

The air was heavy and ubiquitous. The yellow wind was humid and intrusive. Insipid too. It carried an empty smell. Everything was immobile. Everything was so thick. Except for three silhouettes. A very tall one, a smaller one, and a very little one.

"You look very shy!" the woman said, smiling to Chhean.

"But her hair says a lot. When she's satisfied, she pushes her hair behind her shoulders, away from her face. When she's disappointed or embarrassed, she hides her cheeks and a lock falls on each side. When she's mad, you can barely see her face anymore. She can become invisible. Or very visible. It's some secret power she has."

There was a space of creativity, of formidable potentialities of creation, the woman thought, a space within which these children could reinvent ways of connecting with others and with the world. Somewhere beyond words, where bodies gently touch and eyes briefly meet. Communication flourished unexpectedly.

I turned to the gate and saw Rami, leaning against the fence in her ordinary nonchalant way. She was everywhere! Her presence seemed to be haunting the care center. This morning we had crossed paths in the game area, then I'd seen her with other kids, washing their blue and white uniforms near the dorms. In the afternoon she was reading a textbook, sitting near the goals on the football field and writing down the scores between two sentences. And now, there she was, waiting at the gate. But she was alone, which was rather unusual, and so I reckoned she might be expecting somebody. Actually, she was expecting me.

"Lidia!" she called, waving to me. "Come to *the corner*, I want to show you something!" *The corner* was the way the children called the small shop near the front gate. It was the closest shop to the care center. The owner was a friend of Papy's and Mamy's, and therefore was very aware of what he could and couldn't sell to the children. They all received a little pocket money if they went to their lessons, worked hard and followed the common rules properly, and they would go there in the afternoon to get some snacks, or buy tattoos, crayons and bracelets. I sat down on the edge of the sidewalk next to Rami and we silently watched the people passing by. A lot of students were coming out of the care center, laughing, some of them holding hands, some of them running after each other, grabbing each other's bags. Three boys were casually strolling by on a single bike, narrowly avoiding the bumps. As I was sitting on the sidewalk, I realized I could finally watch without attracting too much attention. I could witness all this without having to witness myself being noticed.

"It's interesting, isn't it? Once I figured things looked entirely different if you were sitting down, or even if you lied down. When you stand up, you're inside. When you sit down, you're outside," she said, very simply. I remembered Robert, an old man who used to beg in front of Hammersmith station back in London. I bet he felt outside too. Because all those people were walking and going somewhere, and he was an offence to all that mobility. Because he was sitting on a sidewalk – where you're supposed to walk – and in front of a tube station – a place which opens up multiple travelling possibilities. That's ordinary violence, I thought.

I looked around and realized it wasn't exactly the same here. We were not the only ones sitting down on the sidewalk. A group of kids were on the opposite side, a girl was chatting with her friend, boys were gathered around what looked like a smartphone and, I could hear some music coming out. Maybe it was because they were younger. Maybe younger people don't categorize space as we do, they sit wherever they want to. Children hold up a mirror to our own stiffness, I thought.

How old was Rami? I couldn't tell. She looked older than the others. She acted as if it was her duty to take care of the smaller ones, she helped them wash their clothes, she lifted them up to put them on the canteen benches, and she was the captain of the care center's football and rugby team too. Later I realized she was only fifteen years old. I also discovered that most of the *children* I had met were in fact a lot older than I thought. Most of them were about ten or eleven years old, Chhean was twelve. Most of them had overcome tough ordeals. Painful memories impinged upon their lives. But what brought them together wasn't the suffering. It was the courage to hope, to believe in a place where there wasn't any suffering anymore.

"When did you arrive here?" I asked.

“Eight years ago. I don’t talk about what happened before that. Now I’m Papy’s and Mamy’s adopted child.”

“Does that mean the others treat you differently? Like you’re the local boss?”

“Not really. I’d rather say I’m a big sister. A lot of us here don’t really have a family. Or are scared of thinking of it as a family. We just take care of each other. Nobody will take care of your stuff, but some people can help you. And most of the time I don’t help because the little ones actually need that help. They need to *feel* they can be helped.” She suddenly looked away, I couldn’t see her face anymore. The evening sun blinded me when I tried to turn to her. I stared at my sandals. Sandals and dust.

“I can ask questions too,” she said, quickly. “Why are you a journalist?”

I had answered that question a long time before. I had chewed on it and digested it and had got rid of it. I knew why: it was a choice – it was *my* choice. It wasn’t just a job, it made a lot more sense to me than just an occupation. But now I’d forgotten.

The question was stringy. The answers seemed futile, artificial. If I answer, I’ll be playing a role. I’ll be pretending. Stop pretending all the time, making up answers and reasons. Stop repeating what they say. Stop dumping in preconceived meanings. “The unbearable lightness of being” was the title of one of Kundera’s novels, I remembered. And in the emergency of distress, sitting there in the dust of the streets, with Rami on my right and a trail of pink candy on my left, in the middle of all that laughter and those children and bicycles - that’s all I could think of. “The unbearable lightness of being” I uttered.

Rami stared at me. “What?” But I knew it wasn’t that she hadn’t heard the words or understood them. I knew she stared because somehow it was what she was asking for, and because it echoed something deep inside her.

“Lightness...” she murmured.

“Lightness isn’t the opposite of weight. Lightness is the opposite of recognition. Lightness is when you just float on the surface and you can’t carve yourself any space in the world of beings.”

“It’s when you run for half of a banana you saw falling behind a plastic box lid and you forget the truck and then somebody pushes you back and the trash falls on you. And the truck dumps everything on you, the rotten food and the scraps and the glass bottles and the oil and the junk stew and...” Her voice broke off. I could only stare in terror.

Six in the morning. No bells, no voice. The truck was bouncing up and down along the bumpy road. I was sitting with the care-workers on one of the two benches in the back of the truck, holding on with both hands to the bar behind my back, and holding with both feet an imposing plastic bin full of white rice. We were carrying a dozen bins, filled with meat, vegetables, and mostly rice. Nobody was speaking. In the break of the day everything looked very gray, very blurry, and the bouncing made the landscape rock and dance rhythmically. There were small wooden and corrugated sheet habitations huddled up together, with dusty paths in between. Dogs sprang up and barked as we passed by. Litter was scattered all over the land. The engine stopped.

There was a fence. “Get out, quickly,” Sinat told me, “We don’t have much time.” I jumped down the truck with the care-workers, took a bin and we all rushed to the fence. Sinat snatched off one of the slats and carefully peeped inside. She hesitated a moment and then pulled off another slat, disappearing behind the fence. The care-workers lifted up their bins and followed her. “Can’t go inside from the front gate today, too many guys guarding the access!” whispered a woman next to me.

I sneaked in the open space between the laths, and the shock almost propelled me back out. The woman put her hand on my shoulder. We were standing on an endless mountainous dump.

Hills of putrescent garbage. Mountains of putrid waste. Lakes of fetid liquids.

It was not so much the stench, but rather the greatness of the sludge.

Smoke seemed to be bursting out from the burning heart of the hills.

As if it were a chain of volcanoes.

As if there were a consuming living force at work from the inside.

It gnawed away at me.

It was peeling my skin off, plucking my eyes out.

"Hey, come on, we have to hurry," Sinat said "If you can't go further, go back, but we need the food." I shook my head, I wanted to help. We walked along the fence, trying to avoid stepping in the sludge as much as possible. Suddenly we stopped and Sinat reached for the binoculars in her pocket. "We're trying to locate the children," she said. Children. *Children*. I remembered Rami. I remembered the falling garbage, the precious food, the danger, the distress. This couldn't be.

The sun wasn't up yet. But there they were, trembling puny silhouettes, riding the hills, emerging from the piles of the unwanted.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart: the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy in loosed upon the world.

What was the use of poetry anyways? When all is so indecently parading darkness and filth? For the first time words were useless, I couldn't transform sheer horror into letters and ideas. It escaped. It was draining every thought, wearing out every effort. It was overpowering.

Their legs were covered with black oil, their hair was grey and tangled. They ate silently. My attention was brought to a girl who had stuck up a blue mat under her arm. She looked frightened, and never looked up. She almost seemed hypnotized. I lifted the rice bin to ask her if she wanted more. She got scared and moaned. The other children watched me defiantly.

Some of them slept here. Rami had slept here. "My parents used to kick me out if I wanted to stay home during the nighttime. They let me stay in winter, sometimes. But, soon enough, I didn't even want to stay. Because of my uncle. If you get the first truck at five in the morning, you can get good stuff. But it's still dark, and so the trucks don't see you. Sometimes there's an accident. They don't even realize what they're doing. It's so dark."

"Oh no," I thought. I had pulled a stitch in my scarf, again. I carefully arranged my jacket in order to hide it. I turned sideways to check myself in the small mirror, added some hairspray to a rebellious strand of hair and hurtled down the stairs. I stopped at the front door, checking if I hadn't forgotten my keys. I could hear the neighbors fighting, again. "Admit it, just admit it! I can't trust you, I can't! You're so selfish!" In just a minute there would be a great *bang*. Then he'd stand behind the door and frantically turn the

handle until she'd open. Then she would cry loudly. And then he'd go to work. I sighed and left.

It smelled like winter. I decided to forget about the stitch and rolled the scarf up around my neck. I got teary-eyed because of the cold. I blinked and blinked, but still couldn't see anything. The watery surface of the pavement seemed to be ebbing and flowing. There was a man walking out his dog – or a dog walking out a man, you never really know. It must be Mr. Holley, I thought, so I smiled and said hello. The man didn't answer. So I guessed it wasn't Mr. Holley. I didn't feel very smart. I bit my lip and speeded up a little. I definitely didn't feel smart.

I forgot where I was headed and rushed inside the tube station, before realizing I didn't need to take the tube. I turned around very suddenly and bumped into a tall man wearing a shiny black hat and shiny black shoes. I stammered, attempted to apologize, and eventually escaped from the flow of people running in my direction. I tried to focus my eyes on something to put up a front. I stared at the board in front of Ben's Cookies.

"Good mornin' Madam, what can I do for you?" the woman said from behind the counter. What could you do for me?...

That's how I found myself buying two peanut-butter oatmeal cookies.

I walked out of the station, handed the cookies to Robert and concentrated on going to the right place.

There she was, waiting at a table inside the coffee shop. Her head was resting dreamily on her hand. It could have made a fine painting, "the girl by the window." Light colors, maybe a touch of blue in the middle.

A tinkling sound jingled as I entered.

"When I was a child I used to think, you know you're a grown-up when you start hitting people. That's what adults do. But then I figured some of the girls my age were already hitting each other. That's when I started to understand you can't really cut things up into categories. Because they overlap." I tried to imagine little girls hitting each other with sticks and metal bars, but the only thing I could picture was a flock of black-hooded hooligans advancing in an apocalyptic setting, with tires burning and broken windows everywhere. All I could see was what my television screen fed me with. It's a pity my imagination only expands when it comes to writing bedtime stories or solving cases quicker than Cal Lightman.

I took a sip of my coffee.

Too much cinnamon, I thought, and not enough milk.

Rami's eyebrows were hopping up and down. She was squinting, watching the swirl of smoke arising from her cup. I remembered the first time I'd seen her, in Phnom Penh, almost three years ago now.

"And what about your feeling of being a *girl* and living in a violent world?" I asked with a weather girl voice. It was the next question I'd written down on my interview sheet. Only when I saw the look in her eyes did I realize I shouldn't have brought it up.

Three teenagers were chatting at the table next to ours, blabbering about some guy's new profile picture. "He looks *awful*, is he even smiling or what?" "Oh and you know he's in my French class, he's so *awful*! I mean, no wonder he doesn't have any friends."

I could hear fragments of another conversation, two women at another table. One was wearing a maroon leather hat tilted over her face. The one facing her, in a loud green

sweater, was nervously fiddling with her open purse. “Matthew told me he wouldn’t get any tickets for the charity until Saturday, at least. And so Jenny and I were maybe planning to have our own dinner at Patty’s. What do you think? We could hire Kayla for the cooking, her pies are absolutely delicious, and we could leave the children with a babysitter.” “Oh Martha, that’s a wonderful idea... I’m just thinking, well maybe, maybe you could avoid inviting – you know who....” She lowered her voice a little, and closed her purse. “I would avoid any tension, you know, after what happened the other night at Dan’s place.” They both smiled in a conniving way, and the other woman nodded maliciously.

Rami took a deep breath and started talking. I’d forgotten my question. “The worst thing that can happen to a child is growing up without having any role model. How can a girl like me possibly find someone to look up to? If you choose a woman, then you choose a mother, you choose to sweat and be lonely and you choose to shut your mouth up. You choose to become a *woman*. If you choose a guy, then you choose to be like your father, maybe, and for me that means beating up every fucking living thing that dares to be smaller than you are. Because you have this need to feel you’re so fucking powerful you can leave physical marks on things around you. That bruise, that spot, it’s all yours! And when you’re helpless there’s no better way: you just need to feel they’re more helpless than you are.”

“That’s exactly what you said about foreign volunteers. About how they go to Cambodia to prove they’re not as helpless as they thought they were,” I said.

“Yes. It’s never black and white. There isn’t a father *and* a persecutor. There aren’t ‘helping people’ *and* ‘helped people’... There isn’t ‘sane’ *and* ‘insane’. It’s all so indistinct.”

“Except when you’re a girl?”

“When you’re a girl, when they try to make you live and walk and breathe like a girl, they’re just trying to make a distinction. Because they know everything’s all so blurry. They try to hold on to something. A way of thinking they are somebody, because there’s this very different, oh so different, *other*. But the truth is, boys and girls, we’re all in the same goddam dump. We eat the same goddam rotten stuff. But then you can’t get anything out of boys, really, you can’t use them as much. They’re just some kind of slaggy flesh. But eh, girls, they’re slaggy flesh you can rub yourself with.”

She had fierce, glowing eyes.

The two women and the girls at the table were hypnotized.

The coffee grinder was abominably loud and oppressing.

Some time ago, I read this book about linguistic interactions. It was quite technical, quite boring too. But it said, “Dialogue opens out in a community of shared space and shared time; sharing time implies that each partner participates in the other’s life: the multiple partners are mutually implicated in each other’s biography.” I thought that was a very appropriate way of describing the work of a journalist.

I’ve always considered that the difference made between interviewing famous individuals and recording ordinary people’s accounts was pointless. In both cases, there’s the same aesthetic of interaction, of crossing paths. In a way, it’s also true for people walking up and down the streets. Without even talking, they share something. Rami shared something with the people in London, and what she shared was the potentiality of expressing herself, of creating meaning. Crossing meanings, crossing

experiences. Just like waves, indistinctly merging and unfolding. Maybe Rami had never seen the sea. Maybe she had. It didn't matter after all. It was foolish of me to think about all the things she didn't have and didn't do. These children couldn't be defined on the mere basis of what they lacked. This 'sea' thing was a bogus.

I pushed the window open and sat on the wooden edge. The air was hot and humid. I took a deep breath. In London, when I couldn't sleep, I would look out the window, and saw all those cars rushing by, those lights on the buildings, in the streets. It was reassuring –appeasing, even. Noise, speed. Insomnia seemed a ridiculous moment of a ridiculous life in the face of all that moving and regenerating world. But here it was dark, just dark, it was silent, and desolate. The trembling halo of the street lamps seemed to be lighting up nothing but the lamp pole itself. It seemed to be a time of respect, a waiting time, a mourning time, a long apnea holding on till dawn.

I thought of Pierre. Pierre was a volunteer photographer. Papy and Mamy had relied on him to make an album, a calendar, with pictures from the care center and slums, ways of raising awareness and raising funds. He was very enthusiastic about the whole project, and had spent hours wandering around, his camera hanging down from his neck, in search of the right detail.

He would try to surprise the unusual and expose in bright colors what was hidden behind sheet metal panels. "Extraordinary, fabulous... *Extraordinary!*"

You couldn't be an artist using that sort of material, I thought.

Or can you?

It's a pornography fresco of horror. Pornography of shivering lives. There's something very indecent about it. The lens interferes, makes art out of it all.

There were chickens hanging from rusty hooks, in a row, and red meat on the small table beneath them. The butcher was cutting slices and arranging them in identical bags. Both sides of the street were full of hawkers. People were talking loudly, waving vegetables and smelling fruits. Monks were walking their yellow robes imperturbably along the barrows.

Rami, Chhean, Sinat, were floating in between the different cities, in between the cracks, in between the heavy unnecessary ornaments and the light breakable bodies.

Like a cry.

There was a bitten sunflower seed on the ground, opened up right through the middle. Bitten seed. Bitter seed.