



A Country Called Witness

by Georgia Kashnig

In “A Country Called Witness,” Georgia Kashnig navigates grief as a landscape of experience that includes the countries of Witness, Friendship, and Play. Taking up a passage from the Sutra of the Collection of Past Activities of the Buddha, they explore what it can look like to read with attention to each of these postures—and how reading can transform the way we treat ourselves, others, and the world around us.

When I read a text, I often feel as though grief is sitting on my shoulder. This is not frightening, and it doesn't feel particularly morbid. Instead, it is a comfort, and a gift. Grief is a keen observer, an intuitive listener. Grief reminds me of what is truly important.

In 2015, I lost my best friend to suicide. In an instant, my life was upended. It was as if someone took the contents of my mind, carefully tended and arranged, and shook them upside down. Yet it wasn't just the 'things' of my mind that were scattered about; perception itself was different. The sensations of my experience merged with what was around me, and the world appeared in ways that were startling and new.

When I try to describe what this was like now, I can't help but think of a scene from J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit*. At this point in the story, Bilbo and the company of dwarves are making their way across the Misty Mountains toward the Wilderland beyond. They have just departed from

the company of Elrond, the noble and kind elf-lord who offered them food, shelter and council, and they leave Rivendell with raised spirits and a renewed hunger for adventure. In the days following, however, the world shifts. The path is crooked. The wind is shrill. Boulders from the mountainsides come galloping down toward them. At night, the echoes are uncanny.

My experience of grief was like traveling through uncharted territory. I imagine it being similar to what Bilbo must have felt when, on his journey, the line between animate and inanimate blurred, when he strained to decipher which paths were cheats and deceptions from which ones led forward, and when, in moments of despair, he recalled his comfortable hobbit-hole with fondness and melancholy.

What it must have felt like to crest that mountain range! To see, in spectacular panorama, where you had come from, and where you were going. For me, this moment came when I realized that what I was experiencing might one day be useful to someone else. I started paying attention to my inner landscape with the eye of a cartographer. I wanted to draw a map for those who would be traveling this unknown land. To describe the sights, locate the cardinal directions, provide signposts at forks in the road.

This is what I learned.

There is a country called Witness.

It is vast and endless, stretching as far as the eye can see. On the other hand, it can be small enough to fit inside a glass of water. The topography is varied, and the conditions are always new. In the country of Witness, you will never meet two things that are just the same.

There are no maps of the country of Witness. You cannot observe it from aerial view. Its borders are more like doorways than lines, and they are unmarked. If you are looking for a door, you can only

approach what is in front of you and ask in a soft voice, “Who are you?”

Most people cannot stand to be in the country of Witness for too long. They wander in by accident and hurriedly back out the way they came. Some are travelers who realize, in a moment of sober recognition, that their thrill for experience stretches only so far. They will say, “I have come from the country of Meaning,” or “I am from the land of the Good.” But in the country of Witness, there is no meaning, and there is no good. There is only being seen, and not being seen.

There is a country called Friendship.

I found a doorway to Friendship unexpectedly. One day, I looked up and saw a tree standing there. The way it stood—as if it knew both weariness and dignity—I found myself wanting to be near it. I sat down at the base of its trunk and took a nap. When I awoke, the tree was still there.

Time passed, and I came to know this tree in different weather. It shined in the sun, and it also shined in the rain. One day, one of its leaves fell to the ground. I held the leaf in my hand and cried, realizing in that moment that I could shed parts of myself, too. In the winter, when my tree was completely bare, it was even more beautiful to me.

One spring morning I set out from my tree to take a walk in the forest. I heard the brushing of leaves with each step, and I realized that I was walking on ground that was cushioned by many trees. I looked up at the sky and remembered dangling my feet in the same light. In the place where two rocks came together, I saw the beginning of green.

Every thing shined in its own way.

There is a country called Play.

Play looks like many places you've been before, but there's also something different about it. You can't place your finger on what it is, until it dawns on you that you are lost.

When I found myself lost, I spent the afternoon trying to get back to where I started. Yet after arriving, I realized that I missed the feeling of not knowing exactly where I was. Being lost had made me pay attention to my walking in a whole new way. It had made me attentive to what I did not yet know. The next morning I set out again, in a different direction.

There were times, after some time, when I worried that I knew this country all too well. That there was nothing else I could discover about it. This fear turned out to be unfounded, as I learned new ways to disrupt my presumption of familiarity. I experimented with going backwards, with wearing snow shoes. I walked beside a path I knew well. I observed the paths that others made.

In the country of Play, what is unfamiliar arrives as possibility.

Witness, Friendship, Play. These are places I have been, and they are also places that continue to live in me. Just as one who has lived abroad is changed when they come home, I have been changed by my time in these countries.

Becoming acquainted with grief has also changed me as a reader. While I have always been captivated by texts for their ability to open me to new paths of inquiry and expand my sense of what is possible, these days I feel particularly drawn to *narrative* texts. This has been true regardless of whether a text happens to be in prose or verse, regardless of whether it is considered "Buddhist" or not. Narrative—I have come to know—is not simply a story; it is an invitation to a world, and an invitation to ourselves. Narrative is what allows for witness, for friendship, and for play.

One text I have been exploring recently is a passage from the *Sutra of the Collection of Past Activities of the Buddha*¹ in which King Suddhodana addresses members of the Shakya clan in the days following Queen Maya's death. At this point in the narrative, Maya has just descended from the Heaven of the Thirty Three to make offerings to her child, the bodhisattva. She also visits Suddhodana at this time, telling him not to worry on her behalf and describing to him the miraculous qualities of her son. After Maya returns to her celestial palace, Suddhodana assembles the elders of the Shakya clan.

The text is written in prose, though I find that making space between lines and phrases helps me slow down as a reader. These pauses allow me to see into the world of the text, and to notice what is happening to me as I read.

After having been visited by Queen Maya,

King Suddhodana summoned the elders and virtuous ones among the Shakyas,

who gathered like clouds,

and said to them:

“You are my kin, as well as the kin of this nation.

Now, this infant boy is without a mother or a wet nurse.

To whom shall I entrust him?

Who will teach him, watch over him, see to his survival?

Who will be a constant support, look after him, adore and protect him?

Who can raise him well,
with the utmost mind?

Who can be kind,

love him like a son,

and hold him with affection, virtue and joy?"

In earlier versions of myself as a reader, I would have probably skimmed through this passage quickly and moved on to see what happens next. Now, I find that I want to linger with words more and more. It can be enough for me to stay with a text for a day, a week, a month or longer to explore the depths I can plumb in relationship to it.

When I read with a mind to witness, I often try reading while holding in mind a particular person or character from the text. This can be someone who is named in the text itself, or it might be someone I simply imagine to be present in the scene. Reading in this way helps me situate my awareness relationally, and it encourages me to see those who inhabit the text in their wholeness and humanity.

With this passage from the *Sutra of the Collection of Past Activities of the Buddha*, I find myself drawn to reading with an eye to Maya's experience. Though she is not physically present when Suddhodana makes his speech, I cannot help but wonder if she was its inspiration, since it was only after speaking with Maya that Suddhodana summoned the Shakya elders.

As I read with Maya in mind, a variety of questions arise in me:

After having been visited by Queen Maya,
What did she say to him? How did she say it?

King Suddhodana summoned the elders and virtuous ones among the Shakyas,

How does her presence, and her absence, shape his actions?

who gathered like clouds,

Is she listening in from beyond the clouds, from her heavenly perch?

and said to them:

As she scans the crowd, do her eyes linger on anyone in particular?

“You are my kin, as well as the kin of this nation.

And perhaps she says in prayer, “Please be kin to me, too.”

Now, this infant boy is without a mother or a wet nurse.

How do these words land in her experience?

To whom shall I entrust him?

What does she see when she looks to her child in this moment?

The words of the text feel different to me when I place Maya at the center of my attention. With each line, I search for her presence, I listen for her voice. None of my questions bring definitive answers, but they do allow me to see possibilities within the text, and to practice being a witness for Maya.

When I read with a mind toward friendship, I invite myself to be open to the possibility that the text will transform me and teach me a better way to be—that if I can learn to see through its eyes, the world will shine in a new way.

Recently, I have been hearing the words of Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "the children of the poor" in my mind alongside this passage from the *Sutra of the Collection of Past Activities of the Buddha*. I have always found this poem to be astonishingly beautiful, though it has also haunted me. Haunted, because it points me to an aspect of human experience—to an aspect of my own experience—that is inured to the suffering of others.

The poem begins,

People who have no children can be hard:
Attain a mail of ice and insolence:
Need not pause in the fire, and in no sense
Hesitate in the hurricane to guard.
And when wide world is bitten and bewarred
They perish purely, waving their spirits hence
Without a trace of grace or of offense
To laugh or fail, diffident, wonder-starred.²

The stanza then moves on to contrast this "wonder-starred" way of being with "we others" who cannot help but hear the "little lifting helplessness" and the "whimper-whine" of children—that which makes, in Brooks's words, "a sugar of the malocclusions, the inconditions of love."

As someone who is not a parent, I read this poem as a warning not to become a person who can "perish purely" simply because I have not learned to love well, because I have not opened my ears to the suffering of others. Yet my mind also paces back and forth: How do I not become "hard" in this way?

Suddhodana offers an answer to this question. When he addresses the Shakya clan in the days after Maya's death, he speaks to one who would come forward to care for his child. "To whom shall I entrust him?" he asks, and his answer resides in the criteria he places before the assembly: a person worthy of trust is one who would teach, watch over, and care for the body of his son. Caring includes adoring, protecting,

and creating the conditions for nourishment and growth. It also includes kindness, joy, and treating him with the “utmost mind.”

These words feel like a balm of clarity to my mind. They impress upon me that genuine care does not begin and end with parenthood, or with womanhood, and they point me to that which I can cultivate to be a person worthy of trust—among them, affection, virtue and joy. That Suddhodana comes to the Shakya elders in this moment also makes me wonder if treating a child with the “utmost mind” must necessarily involve the care of an entire community.

One thing that strikes me about placing these passages together is that Brooks’s poem is about poor children, while the passage from the *Sutra of the Collection of Past Activities of the Buddha* is about a child who, having been born into a royal family, has great privilege. The baby bodhisattva has miraculous qualities, and he inspires miraculous care in those that surround him. Yet all children are miraculous, and each one deserves miraculous care. If a bodhisattva is worthy of being met with the “utmost mind” when he is at his most vulnerable, how much more so do the children of the poor?

Reading Suddhodana’s words now, I find myself asking, What actions am I taking to address the systemic problem of poverty, along with its interlocking injustices;³ to feed a revolutionary love⁴ in myself and in the world; and to resist all that does not uphold the inherent dignity of all people, creating what civil rights activist John Lewis called “good trouble”?⁵

When I read with a mind to play, I deliberately disrupt my usual reading habits so that I can move beyond my presumptions of familiarity and discover something new about the world of the text.

One game I often play involves changing the order or manner in which I read. I might copy down phrases from the text onto a separate sheet of paper and read them alongside

each other, noting the ways that they draw meaning from one another in this new context. On other occasions, I might try reading the text backwards, beginning with the last line and ending with the first.

Or, I might combine these methods, copying down phrases that resonate in my experience and then reading them backwards like so:

who can be kind
with the utmost mind
to whom shall I entrust him
who gathered like clouds
after having been visited by Queen Maya

Immediately upon reading this poem, I am surprised and delighted by the way the words sound as I speak them aloud. The first two lines actually rhyme, which makes me wonder if they somehow longed to be read in this way all along. It also makes me want to explore the potentially magnetic connection between being *kind* and having the *utmost mind*.

Reading on, I notice that the ‘w’s and ‘h’s throughout the poem seem to be dancing with each other:

who can be kind
with the utmost mind
to *whom* shall I entrust *him*
who gathered like clouds
after *having* been visited by Queen Maya

It is almost as if the text itself is aware of its beauty and has created this dance for its own pleasure.

As I turn to the meaning of the words, what jumps out to me is that the final two lines function as a qualifying phrase for the “him” that comes before. In other words, in this version of the text, it is the baby bodhisattva “who gathered like clouds,” and this gathering took place “after

having been visited by Queen Maya.” The following punctuation reflects this interpretation:

Who can be kind,
with the utmost mind?
To whom shall I entrust him,
who gathered like clouds
after having been visited by Queen Maya?

Reading the text in this way, I see an aspect of its world that I did not see before. The poem suggests to me that the bodhisattva was in grief when his mother died, and it was only after she came down from the heavens to make offerings to him that he was able to gather together the disparate pieces of himself.

As this realization washes over me, my limbs begin to feel heavy, and my chest aches. My body remembers what it feels like to be in the immediacy of great loss. I place my palms together, bow my head, and hold space for the grief of this baby bodhisattva.

As I think back now to that moment years ago when I saw my life in panorama, it occurs to me that cartography is not the right metaphor to describe the ways I have come to know grief, or the ways that grief has taught me to read. At the time, I was comforted by the notion that I could create a map that might be useful to another person. What I was experiencing was too new, too disorienting. If I could shape it into a gift for someone else—then, I thought, it would have found a purpose.

Incidentally, Bilbo is also fond of maps. On the day that Gandalf and the dwarves show up at his doorstep, a large map of the countryside, with all of Bilbo’s favorite walks marked in red ink, is hanging in his hall. And though he is not eager at first to make the long and dangerous journey with this group of strangers, he cannot help but feel excited

when Gandalf spreads out onto his table a plan of the Lonely Mountain made by the former King under the Mountain, which includes instructions in runes for entering through a secret door.

Even if Bilbo's love of maps inspires him to leave all that is familiar to him and join the dwarves on their quest, it does not ultimately sustain him along the way. It is telling to me that the times throughout the novel when the world shifts in particularly strange ways are generally moments when danger is afoot, Gandalf is away, and the old maps are of no use. When I read Bilbo's story, it is not how he maps the Misty Mountains that is ultimately compelling to me, but the ways in which he describes his journey, in all its difficulties and its complexity.

Grief, I see now, is something that cannot be charted on a map. Like the country of Witness, it cannot be seen from afar, or mastered with a glance. The same is true for texts. How we read is often a reflection of the way we treat ourselves, the way we treat others, the way we treat the ecosystems we are a part of. When I read a text now, I try to approach it not with an attitude of mastery, but with a posture of care.

¹ 佛本行集經. T0190_03.0701b29-c06. The translation is my own.

² Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems* (New York: HarperCollins, 1963), 52.

³ The Rev. Dr. William Barber II, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign, speaks to these injustices: "We have launched the Poor People's Campaign, a national call for moral revival, and launched it with an understanding that to address poverty, we must simultaneously address five interlocking injustices: systemic racism, systemic poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy, and the false and distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism." Rev. William Barber and Rev. Liz Theoharis, "A call for a moral revival," filmed November 2018 at TEDWomen 2018, Palm Springs, CA, TED Talk, 20:06.

⁴ Valarie Kaur writes of revolutionary love: "'Revolutionary love' is the choice to enter into wonder and labor for *others*, for our *opponents*, and

for *ourselves* in order to transform the world around us. It is not a formal code or prescription but an orientation to life that is personal and political and rooted in joy. Loving only ourselves is escapism; loving only our opponents is self-loathing; loving only others is ineffective. All three practices together make love revolutionary, and revolutionary love can only be practiced in community” (italics in original). Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (New York: One World, 2020), xvi.

⁵ “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.” John Lewis, Twitter post, June 27, 2018, 11:15 am.