

My first morning in Siem Reap, Cambodia, while sitting behind my young guide, Laa—my knees spread outward, feet hovering over his motorcycle's scalding exhaust pipes, the humid jungle air breaking over us—I had my epiphanic traveler's moment. To the sides of the dirt, bumpy road we rode stood lush palm trees that soared to an azure sky. In the distance, a green bank ran along the moat that encircled the outer walls of Angkor Wat. An occasional band of children walked or chased each other along it, the boys wearing tank-tops and shorts, the girls wearing beautiful skirts and shirts, both in worn flip-flops. Ahead of us, as I peered over Laa's shoulder, the road appeared to stretch without end. We passed a few tuk-tuks, carrying European couples, donned with hats, designer sunglasses and indifferent gazes as they lounged from their seats and gazed about, cameras and water bottles at hand.

The wind—the whirling, calm sound it made as it broke over our faces—seemed so fitting as we rode to the temples, the ones I had read so much about. Laa didn't ask any questions or point anything out like he had before, perhaps sensing the flutter of emotions bursting within me, expressed only through my silence.

The Khmer temples—the opportunity to see and feel them with my own hands—was the main reason I had gone to Thailand and Cambodia. Dreams of seeing them, their land, their people, had been woven over years. First, through the photographs I saw of the temples, decaying in serenity with the jungle around them, then from the haunting cinematic poetry that was the end sequence in Wong Kar Wai's *In the*

*Mood for Love*, the last thread coming from the Khmer's amazing music itself: their traditional melodies but mostly, their fantastic renditions of 1960's psychedelic rock & pop (Jimi Hendrix, Cream, the Beatles and Jefferson Airplane to name a few) that reached them when the Vietnam War spilled onto their land and radio airwaves. Before my trip, I read anthropological elucidations of their temples, about the ancient Khmer empire, and about the violent, late 20th century history that the country was still healing from. It was startling to be there, seeing and breathing their land instead of conjuring it from words and photos.

While staring up at the tops of the palm trees, which seemed more beautiful than any I had ever seen, I thought of the ancient Khmers that walked these very grounds. Visions of their royals, adorned in vibrant colors, wearing gold regalia as they rode atop their elephants, their royal dancers twirling, dancing, and singing beside them, swooshed through my head. My mind drifted to the actual temples I would soon see: their gray columns and naves, the tenebrous hallways bathed in occasional pools of light; the Buddha-faced towers of the Bayon; the serenity I would assuredly feel once I saw the roots of a tree, hundreds of years in the making, parting the stonework of a temple, covered with moss and vines.

While I conjured them, I suddenly thought of my mother but mostly my father. If he had not decided to strike out on his own, to head to America when he was eighteen, this moment in my life would not have occurred. We would have likely stayed in Peru, stunted like the rest of our family, never having the means to travel outside our borders, let alone to a far-off continent. I went to Angkor, in a way, to behold something that he will likely never see, especially since his MS condition makes it painful for him to walk short distances.

That's when my eyes got watery, and I turned away from any motorist or tourist that might spot them. In a way, it's laughable how we often have to travel far from home, exchange our currency for another (and try to make heads and tails of it), immerse ourselves in an ocean of words unbeknownst to us in order to stumble into gratitude in the most exalted sense, for all we have, and all we've been given.