

The Closest to Love We Ever Get

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There is another world, and it is this one. - Paul Eluard

I'M A PERSON WHO CRAVES quiet and solitude, yet I've lived in the crowded, noisy Los Angeles neighborhood of Koreatown for eleven years. I tell myself it's because I have a spacious, beautiful apartment and a gated courtyard filled with hibiscus and pomegranates. I tell myself it's because I pay only \$760 a month - half as much as almost anywhere else in the city. But the longer I stay, the more I see it's not just the apartment that keeps me here: it's the challenges, the dilemmas, the paradoxes. People blast *ranchera* music at three in the morning but they also prune bougainvillea into glories of cascading blooms. They spray-paint gang slogans on my garage door by night and scrub the sidewalks clean by day. As I hang out my clothes on the line by the lemon tree, my back is to a busted washing machine; across the alley, a brand-new down comforter, still in its package, sits on top of a dumpster.

Part of my impulse living here is to hide out from the rest of the city—from the cell phones and SUVs, the hipsters, the people writing screenplays in too-cool-to-care coffeehouses - but in Koreatown I can't hide out from myself. Here I come face to face every day with the cross of my irritation, my anger, my racism, my fear. Here I am plunged into the deepest contradictions: between abundance and scarcity, community and solitude, sin and grace, my longing for wholeness and my resistance to it.

Here, I have no voice, no particular power. At Mass at St. Basil's, at 24-Hour Fitness, at Charlie Chan's Printing, at Ralph's Grocery, at the Vietnamese shop where I get my pedicures, I am often the only white person present. When I call out my window to Jung, the kid next door, to keep it down, he yells back: "We were here first! Why don't *you* move?" His nine-year-old face contorted by hate; hurt and fury rising in my own throat; I don't have to read the headlines on Iraq to know how wars start, how the battle lines are drawn.

I have driven from Koreatown to Death Valley, to Anza Borrego, to the East Mojave. I am pulled to the desert as if by a magnet; I'm forever scheming to escape there for a week, or two, or a month; I devour books about the desert, and yet I am uneasy with the nature writers who leave human beings out, who see us as a blight on the landscape. As a human being, and a Catholic, I see the cross everywhere: in actual deserts and, in the middle of one of the most densely populated sections of Los Angeles, in the desert of my own conflicted heart. Living in Koreatown has fortified my sense of apartness, allowed me to be in the city but not always of it, shaped me as a writer. But a writer has to be fully engaged: emotionally, spiritually, physically; has to mingle his or her body and blood with the rest of the world, the people in it, the page; has to find a way to cherish that world even as he or she struggles to endure it - Flannery O'Connor's phrase—which is perhaps the best definition of the cross I know. How can you be Catholic? people ask, and I want to ask back, but am afraid to, How can you write unless in some sense you have died and been resurrected and, in one way or another, are burning to tell people about it? How can you bear the sorrow of a world in which every last thing passes away without knowing that Christ is right up there on the cross with you? How can you be spiritual in LA? someone from back East once asked, and, as a car alarm blared, a leaf blower blasted, and I looked out my window at the children hanging out the windows of the six-story apartment building across the street and screaming, I thought, *How can you deal with this ceaselessly pulsing aorta of life with anything but spirituality?*

Sometimes I have coffee with my friend Joan, who waitresses at Langer's Deli, or my friend Larry, a janitor at Kaiser. Here is what feeds me: sitting on the corner of Wilshire and Serrano with traffic streaming by while Joan tells me about her troubles with the cook at work, or while Larry, who did time at every mental health facility⁷ from Camarillo to Norwalk before he stopped drinking, reminisces about his "nuthouse romances." What feeds me is the miracle of flesh-and-blood, of stories, of the daily struggles that "break, blow, burn" and make us new, as John Donne put it, that give us compassion for the struggles of others.

Inching out into Oxford Avenue on foot, headed to the library, I can barely make it across, there are so many cars barreling down from either direction: honking, cutting each other off, jostling for space. It's so easy to feel besieged, so easy to think *Why are there so many of them?* instead of realizing I'm one of "them" myself; that nobody else likes being crowded either. *How can a person live a life of love?* I ask myself as I reach the opposite curb: not love tacked on, added as an afterthought, but shot through every second; flaming out, "like shining from shook foil," as Gerard Manley Hopkins described the grandeur of God.

Winding my way home with my books, my vision temporarily transformed, I'm not seeing the refrigerators abandoned on the sidewalk, the triple-parked ice cream trucks, the overflowing trash cans. I'm seeing flashes of colorful Mexican tile, the 98-cent-store mural of waltzing Ajax cans and jitterbugging mops, my favorite flowers: the heliotrope on Ardmore, the wisteria near Harvard, the lemon on Mariposa. Or maybe it's not that I'm seeing one group of things instead of another but, for one fleeting moment, all simultaneously: the opposites held in balance a paradigm for the terrible tension and ambiguity of the human condition; the dreadful reality that we can never quite be sure which things we have done and which things we have failed to do, the difference between how we long for the world to be and how it must be a kind of crucifixion in the darkest, most excruciating depths of which we discover - the rear windows of the parked cars I'm walking by now covered with jacaranda blossoms - it's not that there's not enough beauty; it's that there's so much it can hardly be borne.

Monday morning, putting out the garbage as the sky turns pink above the salmon stucco facades, I bend my face to the gardenia in the courtyard, knowing that every shabby corner, every bird and flower and blade of grass, every honking horn and piece of graffiti, every pain and contradiction, deserves a song of praise. *O sacrament most holy, O sacrament divine . . .*, we sang at Mass yesterday. The kids are coming in droves now, making their way to Hobart Middle School - pushing, yelling, throwing their candy wrappers on the sidewalk - and that is a kind of hymn, too. We're all doing our part, their exuberant shouts mingling with the thoughts I'll shape into an essay, all drifting like incense, raised aloft and offered up to the smoggy air above Koreatown. Maybe that's exactly as it should be. Maybe I need their noise and they need my silence; maybe the song we make together - all of us - is the closest to love we ever get.

"What are we here for?" Annie Dillard asks in *The Writing Life*. "*Propter chorum*, the monks say: for the sake of the choir."

Heather King is the author of *Parched: A Memoir, Holy Desperation* and another handful of books. She looks at the intersection of art and faith on her blog "Desire Lines"