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## GANDARA IN SUBURBIA

**T**he bas-relief rests against the back of my piano. With its uneven base, it cannot balance upright. It's carved from shale, gray and rough, the back chipped at the corners, revealing the layers by which, in slow-moving water and across millennia, mud and quartz compacted into rock. Dirt lodges in the crevices around the carved figures, in the bend of their tiny arms and the sweep of their tiny garments. The figures—we'll call them bodhisattvas—are three. On left and right, the carver fashioned them with similar robes but different headdresses and discernibly different features, each carrying something in his right arm that has long since been chipped off, leaving the arm amputated just below the crooked elbow. A frieze of lotus petals fronts the platform on which they stand. They are both alert, watchful. The central figure—call him Buddha—sits in lotus position atop a tiered seat, the tiers marked by two layers of striated petals. His hands meet at his chest in Vajra mudra, the gesture of knowledge, with the left forefinger and thumb forming a circle and the right hand pressed against the heart. All three bodhisattvas are backed by flat halos. The Buddha appears in a state of bliss. The whole artifact measures about 4"x3", the size of a small postcard. Its thickest point falls just shy of an inch. It sits heavy in the palm, the weight of a dictionary.

I received this artifact on my penultimate day in Pakistan, the spring of 2012. I spent the day with Mr. Aslam Khan, a gentleman of Peshawar, in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa District adjacent to the Khyber Pass and the notorious tribal areas of Pakistan. I had come to Pakistan to do research on

the honor culture of the Pashtuns, a tribe centered in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and adjacent Afghanistan. Extremist Pashtuns form the core of the Taliban. Mr. Aslam (the address became comfortable after he began addressing me as Mrs. Lucy) had been the landlord of a journalist I know who spent time in Pakistan in the late twentieth century. Though he had not hosted my stay in Peshawar—I stayed with a university professor and her family—he was eager to do me service. Already he had given a dinner in my honor at his brother’s restaurant, where a private room was reserved for a party of perhaps thirty people, mostly his and my host’s extended families. Before the dinner began, he had presented me with three books on Pashtun culture that I had been unable to find in the West. During dinner, I had been seated among the women, most of whom spoke very little English and whose questions centered entirely on what children I had, what professions they were entering, and where we lived. My answers to these questions were wildly unsatisfactory: my two grown sons were scraping together livings as a tennis instructor and an actor; neither lived with me; in fact, no one lived with me except my husband (to whom, I neglected to say, I am not actually married). But servants came around with perhaps a dozen dishes, all of which I had to try. The day after the dinner, a courier arrived at my host’s house with another gift from Mr. Aslam, a large wool rug of high quality with an intricate design of deep purples, reds, greens, and golds, which I would have to somehow transport through Europe and back to America.

And yet, plainly, Mr. Aslam felt he had not done enough to demonstrate the honor my visit conveyed to him. When I mentioned that I regretted having been unable to visit Pakistan’s one World Heritage site, the ruins and museum at Taxila, he announced that he would pick me up with his driver and we would spend the day there. So here he arrives, early in the morning, with another gift, a pair of traditional Pashtun men’s sandals for one of my sons. His driver is indeed with him, but for the two-hour drive to the site, Mr. Aslam stays at the wheel, with me in the passenger seat and

the driver in the back. Mr. Aslam is short and extremely portly, giving him a Humpty-Dumpty look in his off-white kurta. His trim white beard and mustache contrast his nut-brown skin, darker than most Pashtuns, and the coffee streaks of eyebrow and balding hair. As with many of his body type, I find it difficult to guess his age.

He is eager, as we drive toward Islamabad, to discuss culture, particularly religion. He is very devout, curious about my religious views. He considers Muslims, Jews, and Christians all as People of the Book, alike in more ways than we differ—unlike, say, the Hindus, whom he considers to be pagans lacking religious law. For this reason, he believes marriage across the Abrahamic faiths should be not only allowed but encouraged. He has firm ideas, too, about issues like gay marriage and no-fault divorce. The Koran, he points out, condemns neither of these. Pakistan needs to advance.

In one sense, this conversation resembles many that I've had during my three-week stay in Pakistan. My hosts and their acquaintances wax urgent on these subjects. Apart from the question of drone strikes, about which they would like me please to do something, questions of religious culture are central to their concerns; to possess no religious feeling is incomprehensible. In another sense, the dialogue with Mr. Aslam differs because the long drive is uninterrupted, and he seems less self-consciously Pashtun than others. He's keenly interested in personal responsibility. He allows there are times he wishes himself free of responsibility for his three grown sons, including one who is married. And yet he fully expects them to care for him when he gets old; that's part of the bargain. As he describes his life, the burden of family seems to weigh on his sloped forehead and soft shoulders. It is family, I think, that has made him so heavy, family like a stone he carries with him. For us in the West, I admit when he asks, there are times of relative freedom from responsibility for other family members—in our twenties, for instance, and perhaps again in our fifties, when our children are grown and our parents have passed away. But just as these times do not exist for

him, so too does their isolation not exist. We watch the mountains rise up and fall away as we mull over this truth. Gradually, Mr. Aslam brings up the question of life after death. It is, he says, extremely important to him. It is that for which he puts up with all this headache. There must be such life, for how else can there be punishment or reward for the ways in which one has conducted one's life on earth? Do I not think so?

I think, I tell him, that we receive our punishments and our rewards in this life. Not necessarily in riches and comfort or poverty and pain, but in pangs of remorse or the free sentiment of an easy conscience. He glances sideways at me. I sound, even to myself, tremendously naïve. And for a moment, the history of this place—of Pakistan, of its fierce tribes, its bloody wars and oppressions at the hands of everyone from the British to the Taliban fanatics, its earthquakes and floods and droughts, its haughty warlords and scabbling beggars—rides in the car with us, defying logic.

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And then we are at Taxila. Still a town of stonecutters, Mr. Aslam explains as we round the switchback to the village, perched at the edge of a high plateau outside Islamabad. We thread through the market center, the goats and chickens and skinny boys, and on to the museum and the sacred sites.

How to bring you to this place? By the lights of affluent, well-traveled Americans, we have here another museum of ancient history—organized by era and location, carefully signed, the display cases rubbed spotless and brochures available in Urdu, Hindi, Pashto, Chinese, English. Your children would yawn. Your father, if he is like mine, would insist on stopping at every exhibit, however repetitive or inconsequential. You have been, no doubt, to too many of these clean, well-lit places.

But I have been in Lahore and Peshawar, where load shedding shuts down electricity half the day, where the museums are dark and moldy and inhabited only by ghosts, where once-genteel balconies sag and splinter under the weight of laundry and criss-crossed power lines, where the hot

air mixes dust and diesel, where eight-year-old children wear the faces of old men. To come upon this broad avenue lined with bougainvillea and neatly-trimmed hedges, to enter this air-conditioned hall, is to board a spaceship set incongruously down on a dry plain. I feel something akin to panic.

As the exhibits themselves explain, Taxila is among the earliest sites of Buddhist civilization, dating back to the Gandara period, 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. Its images of the Buddha are more Greek than Indian, with some Alexander the Great influence thrown in. The statues in the museum depict a young, muscular man in elegantly draped robes over six-pack abs, mustachioed, a peaceful face over military shoulders. Smaller cases hold jewels, tools, and toys excavated from the nearby sites. Mr. Aslam exhorts me to take pictures of all the exhibits, even though he has bought me a slick oversized catalog of the museum as yet another gift. Halfway through our tour we are greeted by the museum director, an acquaintance of Mr. Aslam, who insists we join him for tea before we move on.

It's remarkable, this story of the Buddha's origins here in the mountains of Pakistan, long before the Indians or the Chinese got hold of him. At the same time, I'm keenly aware that the visit is going well, according to Mr. Aslam's plan: his prestigious friend has made a proper fuss, and the exemplary character of the museum itself has shown this American guest that Pakistan can hold its head up among the cultures of the world if only it's given the means to do so. Mr. Aslam's relief is palpable. Even his brow unknots.

We drive on, to the archaeological site. Three major excavated cities spread out over thousands of acres, but Mr. Aslam is not an athletic man, and the heat of the day is rising. One young man with a badge lackadaisically guards the closest site, while another proposes himself as a tour guide. Mr. Aslam quickly negotiates a price. We view the foundations of ordinary houses, the stairs running down to what were sunken baths,

the worn and pitted figures guarding a temple, the sun dials and irrigation ditches, the globular stupas, the narrow avenues down which these ancient people drove their goats and hauled their grains. In one corner of the site, archaeologists have dug deeper down, and we can detect another layer below the surface foundations . . . and a layer below that . . . and below that, the ghost of another layer. In other words, there are perhaps ten thousand years of civilizations prior to the Gandara whose ruins remain buried on this plateau. To dig for the earlier remains would mean destroying the remains we have, and so for the most part archaeologists let them lie. Who quarried these earliest stones we can only guess. And it strikes me as we turn to leave the site that today there are almost no Buddhists in Pakistan, that we have been visiting a past split off, culturally and philosophically, from the people who harbor its remains.

At the edge of the site, three boys materialize out of what seems nowhere. The objects they bear in their arms—a stone head, chipped jewels, carved stone bowls—vaguely resemble the artifacts of the museum. Rapidly they engage Mr. Aslam in Urdu. He explains to me that these boys are selling what are surely false relics. I should remember, he says, that the people here are excellent stonecutters. But do I want a souvenir, anyway?

I have been deluged with gifts, these weeks. Already I have had to buy a duffel to cart them home, and I still don't know how I'll manage Mr. Aslam's rug. I don't know the protocol for responding to this offer, whether a polite refusal is expected or would be resented. The soft brown eyes of the boys swing from Mr. Aslam to me and back again. A small souvenir would be very nice, I say, but only if it's quite small and will not cost much. In other words, no life-sized Buddha heads.

Mr. Aslam negotiates with the boys in Urdu and passes them what looks like 5000 rupees, about forty dollars, more than he should spend. And the stone with its three figures is placed in my palm. "It's extraordinary," I say.

“It is a fake,” Mr. Aslam says, wiping sweat from his brow. “But you will remember Taxila.”

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The stone frieze is not the last of Mr. Aslam’s gifts. At 2:30 the following morning, the mention of his nephew, who has a high-level position at the Peshawar airport, gets us through the first set of security gates at the airport for my 4:00 a.m. flight. Sohrab, my professor friend’s grown son, is seeing me off, and he parks the car in a special lot, from which I can enter directly into the terminal’s internal security clearance. Sohrab lingers at the door of what resembles a cavernous, tunneled basement, while I answer questions about my visit and the goods I am carrying out of Pakistan. “You are alone?” the man on the other side of a long table wishes to know.

“No,” I say, and point to Sohrab in the doorway. “But I am taking the plane alone.”

He grins sardonically. Then, leaving my new rug in its tight roll, he begins unpacking my small suitcase and large duffel. Out come two smaller rugs, two hand-embroidered pillows, several shawls, baskets, handmade shoes, jewelry. Finally he arrives at the little stone frieze. He holds it up to the light of a swinging overhead lamp. “Where,” he asks, “did you obtain this?”

“At Taxila,” I say. Only then does alarm sound through my veins. “It’s a fake,” I add. “Boys were selling it. Stonecutters.”

“You paid how much for this?”

“I don’t know. My friend bought it for me.”

He glances at Sohrab in the doorway.

“Not him. Mr. Aslam Khan bought it. I told him not to spend any money. Just for a souvenir.”

The official leaves with my rock. I look back at Sohrab, who shrugs his shoulders. Suddenly, I know. The frieze is not a fake. That dirt in the crevices, the broken arms, the cut of the stone robes, the tiny faces—these were not carved by those boys, nor by their fathers. That dirt has been

packed into the stone for two thousand years. The boys came from the site, not from the road. With only one guard for a thousand acres, how could anyone stop a group of enterprising kids from digging into the dirt, from chiseling away what they could and washing away whatever would quit the stone?

I know, too, that I'm not giving my bodhisattvas up, not without a fight. The oily-haired official will only sell the relic on the black market. It will never return to the clean, bright museum at Taxila, never take its place in the pristine display case.

Two officials return. They ask again where I got this thing, what was paid for it, how I know it to be a fake. Aslam Khan, I say again, assured me. Aslam Khan paid a little for it, a token sum. A souvenir.

There are people behind me now, workers from the tribal areas flying to the Emirates to labor for a few weeks. They are shuffling their feet, grumbling. The officials glare at me, then toss the frieze into the duffel. Quickly I tuck in the shawls, the other gifts. I wave to Sohrab. I obey the official's order to *Get in woman line*.

Now it sits on my piano, my three bodhisattvas looking placidly out on these bizarre surroundings—my rocking chair, picture window, polished wood floor, the electric lights. Only Mr. Aslam's rug in the next room reminds them of home. I've considered donating the artifact to a museum here, but I fear it would appear tainted, goods stolen from a sacred site. Made to give my stone spirits up, I have no faith that they would ever find their way back to a land from which their influence has long since taken flight.

Since arriving here they have grown in power. What appeared to me, at Taxila, as the remnant of a lost civilization has come to life. The delicate etching of the necklaces about the two standing figures' necks. The particular coil of one headdress, the carefully delineated toes of the bare feet, the miniature earrings and graceful neck of the central Buddha, meditating



on knowledge. What instrument carved you, my little deities? What hand on the instrument, what vision in the eyes of the carver? I think of Mr. Aslam's certainty of life after death, and seem to find it carved in stone. We are People of the Book perhaps, but we are also People of Time, and it is across time that we touch most profoundly.

Sometimes I think of taking a toothbrush to my ancient frieze, or a bit of steel wool, to scrub away the last of the dirt and expose more of the delicate carving. But even the dirt, it seems to me now, has power. It calls me thief, it calls me caretaker. It calls me mortal, and reminds me whereto I shall return.