

The Door Unopened: Sheltering Loss in Becoming Another

An Auto-critical reading of Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*

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In a cemetery on Bloodworth Street, Raleigh, I am.

The "I": A narrator who's not me

"You know," said Port, and his voice sounded unreal, as voices are likely to do after a long pause in an utterly silent spot [in Boussil], "the sky here's very strange. I often have the sensation when I look at it that it's a solid thing up there, protecting us from what's behind." (95)¹

Amidst the vastness below and above them - the unending sandscape and the enveloping blue sky - Port Moresby had frightened Kit with these words. A moment later, "with great earnestness" (94) he had said to Kit that he thought they were afraid of the same thing and that is why unable to "get all the way into life" (ibid.) they were hanging on to the outside for what they were worth, "convinced [they're] going to fall off at the next bump" (ibid.). Kit had replied that if they were not in, they were more likely to fall off. Unconsoling, Port had retorted, he didn't know (ibid.). He had not known. But Kit had waited - for the consolation. She had realised that despite their feeling much the same way, rather, her feeling the way he felt, which Port perhaps knew only too well, their ends would differ. They did.

There was a war afoot at the time in America. Away from it, in their self-exiled journey adrift from the mundane belongingness and comforting embrace of the western civilisation, Kit and Port were travellers. They were travelling, at times apart, at times together, and yet there was an insistent dread that was to be part of Kit's existence, with Port. Bowles writes of Port's hope that the solitude, silences and emptiness that touched him would also touch Kit. And yet, this hope had

¹ All quotes in this paper have been cited from Paul Bowles. *The Sheltering Sky*. NY: Ecco, 2014. Print.

been futile. These gaping holes of infinity had only terrified her. But what was it that the silences offered her, I wonder?

Earlier in the train to Boussif with Tunner, Kit had constantly been reminded of the wreck that Porter had wished her. "If I could only be sure it would happen tonight,' she thought, 'I could relax. But the uncertainty. You never know, so you always wait'" (70). She had expected that if there was to be a disaster, a bottle of champagne would be the "magic object" (72) that would save her. Her stumbling upon the fourth class carriage amidst an innumerable number of men "squatting, sleeping, reclining, standing" (76), their careless gazes pushing past her, the "babble" of their voices, the many noises - a man crunching red locusts, the "rumbling of the train," the "rhythmical clacking of the wheels over the rails," the "steady sound of the rain on the tin roof of the car" (77) - had terrified her. Holding on to the "cold metal railing" (78), against the splashes of the rain from outside on the moving train, for Kit, time had stopped and she was living, as if, an unfinished "dream of terror" (78).

Why this fear to become alive once more, I ask myself? Dreading death would have been a more expected feeling. Why dread living?

Standing amidst the broken stones on graves forgotten, perhaps; the departed who cling on to breathing in their dreams, perhaps; seeing shrivelled petals of bouquets and wreathes of flowers now unrecognizable, I try and fathom the distance between life and death. To live with the acute dread of a knowledge that one has lost the other, forever, that the exile is not only between a land away from another, but between a life away from another, the latter is a loss irrecoverable. In Kit's dread and fear of darkness, I suddenly see the acute sense of that knowledge.

In the mud-walled hospital room in Sbâ, amidst the "famous silence of the Sahara" (196), following the sudden sobs of typhoid-afflicted Port and the sound of the wind outside - both of which Bowles describes as "impersonal" (201) - would come Port's agonizing words

that he was scared. He would confess that it was more than just being afraid: "All these years I've been living for you. I didn't know it, and now I do" (211). Kit would begin to think however, that "He's never lived for me. Never. Never" (ibid.). A while later, her head on Port's chest, Port "for a moment had the illusion of holding the world in his arms - a warm world all tropics, lashed by storm" (212). I note the author's description of the world that Port held in his arms as an illusion. Kit, he says, was mourning the loss of a "great part" of her whole life (211-12).

I suggest that solitude had come to Kit at last, with the knowledge that when "far away and all alone" (210) Port had realized that he had lived for her but he had never known it. With these words had come to Kit the truth that it was she who had spent her life for Port, and contrary to Port, she had known it but had never been able to cover the distance between herself and Port. The solitude that while he was living she had not wanted to experience, the darkness she had dreaded, with Port's death, Kit would gaze into it - from behind the sheltering sky it would make an appearance. While for Port, solitude was a conscious experience of embracing the infinite possibilities of the unknown, for Kit that solitude will be a torn chord stitched unevenly, one that loss bestows. What is loss, then?

It is what you have but is not there

It is what you touch but cannot feel

It is what you reach but of it never dream

It is what you are and cannot be

It is what you could but wouldn't see

It is what you wish but cannot tell

It is what you hide and cannot show It is in what is, and in what's gone

It is in what comes, and what will be

What you lose, in what you get

Is what is lost —

You, yourself, and something else.

Impossible to put into words - the latter, that.²

Loss, for Kit, is both her not being able to be to Port what he wanted, that knowledge that she was scared of knowing and despite that her inability to accept Port's absence, for the love, despite the distance existed and was true.

While for Port, the room in Sbâ in the last hours of his wakefulness was "an existence of exile from the world" (216), the solitude that Kit's losing Port while he lived and doubly with his death left her, would be her exile from the world. His last cries would "pierce the fine fabric of the sheltering sky" (229), but would never reach Kit. Upon returning into the room where Port lay dead, she would tumble upon "a new existence" (231), and also a realization that "no idea about death has anything common with the presence of death" (ibid.). I look around the silent cemetery and come across a locked grave. A square, stunted space with a wooden door that has a key hole. I wonder what is behind that door. What is locked away? The death, the life that preceded it, or perhaps the loss? Perhaps, through the loss is experiencing the pain of losing, and through that pain is living the memory of the one no more? Or perhaps, the door without the key is the distancing of the pain that the irrecoverable absence bestows? Making death a lie, I think is an exile of another kind. I am almost assured of it. The following instance from the novel, where Bowles writes of Kit's ceasing to exist, is that making death a lie since that is the only exile available to Kit, her only exile that brings her close, even if superficially, to Port, and her exile away from living.

[It] did it occur to her how she once had thought that if Port should die before she did. she would not really believe he was dead, but rather he had in some way gone back inside himself to stay there, and that he never would be conscious of her again: so that in reality it would be she who would have ceased to exist, at least to a great degree. She

² The two untitled poems quoted in this paper are self-composed.

would be the one who had entered partially into the realm of death, while he would go on, an anguish inside her, a door left unopened, a chance irretrievably lost. (231-32)

For the remainder, Kit would shelter the anguish of her loss by a conscious incomprehensibility of further pain, and a detachment from her former self. The door, much like the door that I see in the cemetery, would remain unopened. There will be no turning back for Kit. Her escapade from pain would begin, among others, with the encounter with a bunch of camel drivers. Under Belqassim's overpowering and carnal grasp, she would surprisingly perceive a friendliness in an unrecognizable world the author says. She would not be able to see the moon, however (267). Weighing upon her soon after, would be the eagle-faced another (267); she would sob, but the tears would be unheeded. She would keep looking towards Belqassim, who would gradually come to own her. Blinded by suppressed agony, her travels alone hereafter will be wordless in acceptance of her own oblivious being. In another instance, the thorns that would pierce her flesh while Belqassim makes love to her while the caravan rests, would be a cause of annoyance to Belqassim - only because it had "marred the whiteness of her body" (271). Just another woman in Belqassim's harem, repeatedly, night after night, Kit would be the bejewelled wastrel, worth only a night, an object to be derived pleasure from, fed "fatty food" (286) that she would get used to too, unquestioningly. She would even begin to forget what the items in her valise meant: the compact, the nail scissors, the jars of facial cream, a pair of tan silk pyjamas, the thousand franc notes. Part of that which she wished to forget, I suppose. For forgetfulness for her was the only way out of her loss, and thereby her own existence. Kit escapes again. And again this time, it is Amar who becomes the face to whom she implores to save her. Even says she loves him. She gets neither saved, nor loved in return. Just trampled under the "blue overall" (312). In fact, Kit refuses to return at all. She runs away from the car, from outside the Majestic, from Tunner's awaiting, to everything that will be without Port. The past will not be allowed to

continue. It is almost as if, while she was with Port, he was without her, wishing he could be with her. And now, she wants to continue without him, and yet remain with his presence but only inside of her.

What is Kit in the end, then? Much like the dead and the decomposed, the shreds of that which has perished in the graves, Worse still, because she was breathing.

I am just a facade
a trace of what was
just dust, contained
in a fist, constrained.

I am just a mirror
facing another,
turning to no one
fearing another.

I am that word
that leaves nothing behind,
like the breath on glass
falling, not staying.

I am the dream
that was once seen,
and now regret
makes a memory of it.

I am, I am
and still I am.
None, no one,
and still I am.

It is asphyxiating, this "self"-exile. Holding on to the identity of Catherine Moresby, much like holding on to the valise, means holding on to the memories of Port, rather of her being, rather non-being with Port. She must discontinue that. However, the sense of a certain indispensability of her being with Port in the world that he had carved for himself; in which he had a "hope" (93) for her, despite the cage that he had built around himself, that sheltering sky that he had spoken of, has to continue for Kit. Abandoning that would mean abandoning her being with Port, that "being" being akin to her own "self," her identity. Abandoning that, would imply abandoning Port. This non-being is perhaps the only way by which she can relive the solitude that Port had wanted her to experience. Just that, it is not as seamless. It is ruptured. They say that death ruptures ties to the living. The solemn, silent, immovable graves whisper deceptively of this rupture to me. For Kit, however, the rupture is through her living. Death is an easy way out. The helplessness, the loss, the continual experiencing of it is much more liveable perhaps. The being trampled, smudged off of any particularity, of existence within - in togetherness it was, now it is without. Voicing the emptiness of the barren facade I write about above is finally portrayed volubly in when Miss Ferry asks Mrs Moresby (Kit is "Mrs Moresby" by the end of the novel) if she is all clear with the customs, and Mrs Moresby says she has no luggage. Upon repeating, "You haven't?", Mrs Moresby says: "Everything's lost" (310).

This is *loss*. Locked behind the unopened door. The end.