

One Foot Here, One Foot There: Khem K. Aryal's *The In-Betweeners*

Khem K. Aryal. *The In-Betweeners*. Pittsburgh, PA: Braddock Avenue Press, 2023. Pp. 193. \$18.95. Softcover.

Khem Aryal's story "Shopping for Glasses" appeared in SCR 54.2.

One spring in the early 2000s, the wise and wonderful writer Charles Baxter made the long trip from Minnesota to South Carolina to visit my creative writing students. During the course of the class discussion, someone asked Baxter if he had any suggestions for creating conflict and tension in a story, and how to accomplish that feat early in the narrative. Baxter, I recall, did not hesitate as he launched into something he dubbed the “Nixon in China” theory, harkening back to Nixon’s historic, flop-sweat visit to Beijing in 1972. (We may have had to explain to most of the students who, exactly, Richard Nixon was.) According to the Nixon in China theory, creating the tension and conflict that launch a story is simple. Baxter said—and I’m paraphrasing here; he put it more eloquently, I’m sure—that the trick is to immediately place your main character in a situation where he or she may not belong, an environment where discomfort is not just possible, but instead, probable. Just like Nixon in China. (Google the photos. He is one uncomfortable politician during that China visit.) Accomplish that, Baxter told us, and you’re guaranteed conflict, and conflict guarantees a story.

As I read Khem K. Aryal’s remarkable, textured story collection, *The In-Betweeners*, Baxter’s words echoed inside my head. In these thirteen stories, the reader encounters a roster of protagonists (and antagonists) who are propelled through their narratives by the relative discomforts and tensions they experience as they straddle their former lives in native Nepal and their new existence in America. The stories are linked by their attempts to navigate and come to grips with the cultural, political, and spiritual topography of their

new country, while their often nostalgic connections (cultural, political, and spiritual) with Nepal remain intact. The characters in Aryal's collection are, as the title suggests, true in-betweeners, one foot planted in America and the other in South Asia, and this delicate straddling/balancing act creates the narrative tension that propels each story forward.

Of course, an inherent pitfall of writing such a thematically linked collection of stories is falling into a narrative redundancy—that is, allowing readers to assume they are simply receiving another helping of the same dish as each new story begins. This is never a problem for Aryal. Because he deftly creates such nuanced, distinctive, multifaceted characters, each story is a fresh, unique examination of the Nepalese experience in America. In “Laxman Sir in America,” an Amazon fulfillment center employee (who was a teacher in Nepal) bemoans his loss of respect and status, asking at one point, “Why did he come to America?” In “Shopping for Glasses,” Madan Koju's frustrating, often irrational search for a new pair of glasses becomes a metaphor for his American experience, as he desperately misses the customer service and attention he would have received at shops in Nepal. In the powerful “How Not to Come to America,” a woman joins her husband in the U.S. after a decade of separation, and her fears about his behavior during their years apart lead to an emotional breakdown in their driveway, where her husband comments, “You are creating a scene.... This is America. Neighbors are watching.”

In addition to his masterful characterizations, Aryal relies on the small, intimate moments of his characters' lives to illustrate his larger, in-between themes: a father having difficulty feeding his son encounters a pair of door-to-door evangelists, who ask if he wants to be saved (“Rescued”); a couple whose inability to conceive a child is mirrored by their battle between a dying orchid and the wife's “money plant” (“The Lucky Plant”); a father who learns crucial lessons from his son on a family road trip (“American Son”). By focusing on the true humanity of these powerful moments, Aryal imbues each story with an individuality that blunts any hint of redundancy.

Perhaps the most distinctive and surprising quality of *The In-Betweeners* is Aryal's use of humor. He laces many of his stories with nuanced, wry comic spikes. For instance, in the opening story, Laxman—the immigrant—considers a Trump supporter: “This young man named Leonard White wasn't only named White. He *was* white. So white. How could he not support Trump? he wondered.” In “Mrs. Sharma's Halloween” the titular protagonist—while visiting her Nepalese son and his family in Arkansas—is literally and comically haunted by the neighbors' Halloween decorations. In “Election, 2017” a husband announces, from his seat on the toilet, that he is returning to Nepal to run for political office. “I leave you,” [his wife] replied promptly in her Chinese accent, “before you get out of the bathroom.” While his characters' experiences in America are certainly and understandably a source of confusion and desperation and homesickness and fear,

Aryal's ability to temper these emotions with a nuanced sense of humor reminds readers that at times, confronting America can actually yield comic moments.

Ultimately, Aryal performs a fascinating, masterful literary alchemy with *The In-Betweeners*. He takes a group of characters and a subject matter that has the potential to be somewhat limiting and repetitive (i.e., Nepalese immigrants in America) and transforms their stories into a work of art that is expansive and accessible, much more than the mere sum of its narrative parts. In other words, Aryal has created an illuminating guidebook for *anyone* who finds themselves uncomfortably searching for solid footing between the place they left and the place they landed. It might be two countries. Or two neighborhoods. Or two rooms in the same house. Aryal knows all too well that at some point, no matter who we are, we'll all be anxious strangers in a strange land; we'll all feel like Nixon in China.