While conducting fieldwork in the late 1980s among Yolmo Sherpa, an ethnically Tibetan people who live in the Helambu region of northcentral Nepal, I participated in some twenty-odd healing ceremonies as the shamanic apprentice to a veteran “grandfather” healer called Meme (t. mme). Barefoot, illiterate, sporting ragged farm clothes and a scruffy beard beneath an angular face, the sixty-seven-year-old Meme possessed a wealth of sacred knowledge. In everyday conversation his uncouth speech and manners told of the low-status family from which he came. But when healing, this dignified bombo or “shaman” (t. bon po) could communicate with the gods, divine the mysteries of illness, joke at timely moments, and shamanize till dawn. Due to these talents, neighboring families frequently asked him to perform curing rites.

Throughout my stay, I accompanied Meme Bombo when he was called to heal. Meme’s house, an old but sturdy structure, with a drum hanging from the rafters and fleas treading the mud-washed floors, lay on the southern fringes of Chumdeli, a hillside hamlet surrounding a Lamaist temple and populated by farmers, some of whom claim to be Yolmo and others Tamang people (this being a social division that locally can be represented in ethnic terms), and those dres pa “mules” of mixed Tamang-Yolmo descent. Son of a Tamang mother and Yolmo father, Meme himself was of the latter lineage, but as he studied under a Yolmo shaman from the northwest, his craft fell along Yolmo lines.

On the afternoon of a healing, I would climb through the dense forest that separated Chumdeli from my home in the village of Gulphubanyang and walk down a zigzag trail through terraced fields of wheat and maize until I reached Meme’s farmstead. After sipping tea with his family, I would tag along as Meme ambled in the twilight shadow toward his patient’s house. Until early morning, when I usually fell asleep, I assisted Meme in the limited ways I could, helping him to “play the drum,” sacrifice chickens, and beseech the gods to enter our bodies. Footsore, smoke-eyed, I approached these evenings with a combined sense of apprehension, fatigue,
boredom, and wonder. During many of the ceremonies, I entered into a "trance state" that was entirely convincing to me, though undoubtedly distinct from what Yolmo shamans themselves experience when gods "fall" into their bodies. The trances took place when the shaman performed an oracular divination (mo): playing his drum methodically while facing the sacred altar (composed of twenty-five rice-dough gtor ma cakes representative of, and offerings to, various deities), Meme would soon begin to "shake" as a deity's "breath" entered his body to speak of hitherto unknown causes of the patient's malady.

My own trance paralleled the descent of Meme's gods into his body. Taking the role of shamanic initiate, I would sit in a semi lotus position to the right of my "guru" and attempt to follow the curing chants. In time, Meme would begin to feel the presence of the divine, his body oscillating in fits and tremors, and my body, following the rhythm of his actions, would similarly "shake." Tracked by the driving, insistent beat of the shaman's drum, my body would fill with energy. Music resonated within me, building to a crescendo, charging my body and the room with impacted meaning. Waves of tremors coursed through my limbs. Sparks flew, colors expanded, the room came alive with voices, fire, laughter, darkness.

To demonstrate an ability to host the gods in one's body is the entrance exam, of sorts, into Yolmo shamanism, and my apprenticeship with Meme formed the cornerstone of a research project (see Figure 1). The main thrust of this study focused on incidents of illness and healing among Yolmo villagers. Yolmo (sometimes locally pronounced "Yermu") is the traditional Tibetan name of the Helambu region, from which comes the name Yolmo wa for the people. (The historical and political account in the next section is based on the work of Clarke, some of which still remains to be published.)

The dominant groups are also known simply as Lama, and on the male side are descended from Tibetan priests. In the central upland area, many of these religious masters also used to own temples near Kyirong, an area to the northwest of present-day Tibet. In the seventeenth century, they had the right to land of the Yolmo temples confirmed in the name of Newar and then Gurkha kings, that is, by the Nepalese state.

Annual pilgrimage turned into migration, and some of the religious virtuosi settled at these temples to be joined in marriage by the offspring of the local "Tamang" elite of their tenants and congregation. These people were little different from the Tamang from whom in recent times "Lamas" have often taken care to distinguish themselves. In this way, in the eigh-
teenth and nineteenth centuries, villages grew up on the crests of the ridges that expressed their dominance as well as their beliefs through their temples and Buddhist religious practice. In secular terms, the priests had an economic role as landlords and a political one as representatives of the state. This is the particular cultural development that has given rise to the “Lama People,” the “Lama-Tamang,” and the “Lama-Sherpa,” as Yolmo wa can also be known. The main term of this conjunct is the Tibetan word “lama” (t. bla ma), which has the sense of “priest” or “higher-one”; this contrasts the elite from neighboring, low-status families, who eventually came to be known simply as Tamang.

The diffuse, interactive, and interdependent quality of Yolmo identity is characteristic of many groups in Nepal. In fact, Yolmo wa are one of several Tibeto-Burman–speaking peoples who inhabit the midhills of the Nepali Himalayas. The cultures of these distinct groups, which include (ranging roughly from west to east) Gurung, Tamang, Yolmo, Sherpa, and Limbu clans, are shaped by the two great traditions bordering them. To the north dwell the Tibetans, a devoutly Buddhist society now controlled by the Chinese government. To the south lie the Hindu populations of the Kathmandu Valley, the Terai basin, and the Indian plains. While Yolmo wa, like their Himalayan neighbors, evince religious institutions descendant from Tibet, Nepalese society has influenced their language, customs, and sociopolitical workings.

One way in which national politics has shaped Yolmo culture has been in the reworking of an ethnic identity. Although Yolmo wa now often identify themselves as “Sherpa” to outsiders, the term is a relatively new addition to their ethnic lexicon. Previously, they called themselves “Lama” to distinguish themselves ethnically from Tamang clans who neighbor Yolmo wa on the southern and western sides of the Helambu Valley. But with the increasing international renown of their cultural cousins (the Solu-Khumbu Sherpa of the Mount Everest region), Yolmo wa have aligned themselves with this prestigious group in the last three decades and now refer to themselves as “Sherpa” to outsiders. While Yolmo wa have begun to form political contacts and to intermarry with Sherpa groups to the east, in many ways they hold closer cultural affinities with neighboring Tamang families. Economic exchanges between Yolmo families, who live “above,” and Tamang families, who live “below,” are often asymmetrical; Tamang sharecrop lands owned by Yolmo wa and often work as day laborers for the wealthier “priests.”

Geographically, the Helambu Valley, as it is known in Nepali, consists
to Gosainkund Lakes

Thare Pati

Tarke Ghyang

Chimi

Shermatang

Nigal

Khutumsang

Gulphubanyang

Patibanyang

Sundarijal

to Kathmandu

one mile

Figure 2. Map of Helambu.

Figure 3. Map of Gulphubanyang region.
Part I: Loss

of two mountain ranges that ascend north from the Kathmandu Valley to the Himalayas, with foothills radiating east and west off these ranges. The northern crest of this horseshoe-like ring consists of two broad peaks that separate Yolmo from the Langtang region and Tibet and thus account for its name, for in religious texts Yol mo gangs ra denotes “place screened by snow mountains/glaciers.” Between the two limbs of the mountainous arch flows the Melamchi River. Brahmans and Chhetris, two Hindu castes, live at the lowest elevation of the valley, cultivating rice, fruits, and other tropical crops alongside the river. People locally known as Tamang reside higher up, above the Hindu population but below the wealthier “Lamas,” who themselves reside within fifty to sixty villages lining the forested crests of the hills between seven and ten thousand feet elevation.

Within these villages, commerce, land rentals, pastural grazing, and the farming of maize, potatoes, and other high-altitude crops provide the main sources of food and income, although recently tourism and “factory” employment in Kathmandu and India have brought additional material wealth. Until 1991, the national Panchayat system of Nepal officially set political agendas by regulating district elections, but village politics were often defined by local power structures of wealth, status, and kinship. As for kinship, as with other cultural practices, there has been a great deal of particular local variation, but one widely found local preference (also common elsewhere in the Nepal Himalaya region) is for a combination of patrilineal descent and residence, together with cross-cousin marriage.

Though devout practitioners of the Nyingmapa or “Ancient School” of Mahayana Buddhism, Yolmo villagers with whom I lived (of the southwestern side of the valley) also turn to local shamans in times of physical and spiritual distress.

While the oldest and most prestigious Yolmo villages cluster around temples along the northeastern rim of Helambu’s crest (e.g., Melamchighyang, Tarke Ghyang, Churyegyang), settlements have developed in this century along the western perimeter as new village-temples have been established by offshoots of Lamaist lineages from the north (see Figure 2). Several of these small villages (such as Chumdeli, where Meme lives) now populate the southwestern edge of Helambu, around seven thousand feet above sea level, in the vicinity of Gulphubanyang. The latter settlement is a burgeoning bazaar with a row of homes, tea shops, and small stores straddling the Nuwakot-Sindhu Palchock district line (Bagmati Zone) two days’ walk north of Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal.

From February 1988 to March 1989, I lived in Gulphubanyang, work-

ing with Yolmo wa there and in several neighboring hamlets. Perched atop a windy knoll, the chain of mudstone, tin-roofed houses hugs both sides of a trail (and, lately, trekking route) leading to northwestern Helambu and the Gosainkund Lakes. The second part of the village name, banyang, denotes a saddlelike ridge (Gulphu, where cattle are sheltered), and the name suits the place well, for the village sits atop a steep ridge set between two larger crests running to the east and west. To the north and south range forests offering lumber, firewood, and grazing fields; to the east and west, steeply terraced fields of wheat, millet, and corn line the eroding hillside until it drops into the basin below.

Developed in the middle of this century by two enterprising Gurung brothers, Gulphubanyang now houses Gurung, Yolmo, and Tamang shop-keepers, priests, and farmers (including some who have built second homes to reap the benefits of its market economy). The village is also home to a medical clinic, a trekking lodge, and a British-run development project staffed by college-educated Nepalis. An extensive network of footpaths link Gulphubanyang to a universe of neighboring hamlets, such as Chumdeli to a medical clinic, a trekking lodge, and a British-run development project staffed by college-educated Nepalis. An extensive network of footpaths link Gulphubanyang to a universe of neighboring hamlets, such as Chumdeli to the southeast (see Figure 3). Tamang and a few Gurung lineages (a distinct ethnic group which, in the Helambu region, practices Hinduism) live below and to the south; Yolmo settlements, including a Lamaist “temple” (dagom pa, “gonpa”) in the hamlet of Dhupchughyang a mile away, populate the wooded lands to the north.

Many of these outlying hamlets maintain strong economic, political, and kinship ties with Gulphubanyang. Several families, in turn, have built or rented houses in Kathmandu, where family members work or are engaged in business. A migration of residents throughout the year, but primarily during the trekking seasons, has resulted from the demands for labor in the tourist and other industries. This rapidly changing, multi-ethnic community, with strong ties to the central Nepalese government and a steady stream of tourists trickling through, continuously shapes the form and history of Yolmo life as it exists in this locale. For instance, in contrast to the original Lama villages on the ridge of central Helambu, where Clarke has identified a cultural history based on a corporate social life among households in close relation to village-temples, Yolmo villages on the southwestern slopes indicate more dispersed, loosely structured kinship networks; these networks are tied less to a central temple polity than to distinct, household-based economies. In turn, whereas the Lamaist tradition has progressively overlapped and usurped local shamanic practices in the highlands of eastern and central Helambu (as it has among Sherpa of the Solu-Khumbu region), Yolmo wa who reside on the western slopes continue to stress shamanic rites as a system of healing—the result, perhaps, of the limited influence of temple life and the prevalence of Tamang shamanism in the region.

It is within this complex local context, as it took form in the last decade, that Meme walked at dusk to local households to perform shamanic healings. In 1988, he was often accompanied by an American ethnographer intent on studying his craft. The nature of this apprenticeship took several forms. Along with attending Meme’s healings, I spoke with healers and patients in the days and weeks following a ceremony. With Meme and a few younger shamans, I inquired into the subtleties of their bidyā or “learning,” from divination and demonology to the exorcistic “throwing” of ghosts and witches. With patients, I asked them to tell of their experiences of illness and healing. Other villagers were queried on more general themes, such as notions of body, emotions, gender, and pain. Eventually, Karma, a young, gifted bachelor from a Lama family in eastern Helambu who taught English in a Kathmandu boarding school, moonlighted, during the latter part of my stay, as a translator and key informant. In all, by living with villagers primarily on their own terms, more bumbling initiate than intrusive, elite stranger, I felt that my body developed a partial, experiential understanding of their world, from the ways in which they held their bodies to how they felt, hurt, and healed.

One of the major domains of pain in Helambu is a kind of malaise that can be glossed as “soul loss.” While this illness can take several forms, villagers typically suffer from it when a sudden fright causes the ḍāla (“la”) or “spirit” to leave the body and wander about the countryside, prey to malevolent ghosts, demons, and witches. If the spirit is lost, the body feels “heavy” and lacks energy and “passion.” The afflicted person does not care to eat, talk, work, travel, or socialize. Thoughts become dull, unbalanced. One has trouble sleeping, witnesses ominous dreams, and is prone to further illnesses. If a person falls sick in this manner, his or her family searches for and attempts to “call” the lost life-force back into the body of his patient.

This book is an account of Yolmo souls: how and why they are lost, how healers return them to their owners, and why incidents of “soul loss” occur so frequently in certain parts of Helambu. I specifically wish to examine the play between cultural sensibilities and emotional distress, from
the cultural forces that mold, make sense of, and occasionally exacerbate feelings of loss, sorrow, and despair to the social institutions that assuage the pain and anxiety often bound within these sentiments. How do local ways of being, feeling, and knowing tie into experiences of illness and healing? Of chief concern here is the "aesthetic" nature of everyday life: the common graces and embodied values that govern how villagers go about their lives, walk down a hillside, or talk with neighbors; the forms and sensibilities that contribute to the sensory grounds of an aging body, a lost soul, or a healthy person. Since these ways of being are not free-floating but are driven by social dynamics that influence the very marrow of experience, their political underpinnings must be assessed. At the same time, the accent on the sensory leads me to go beyond a symbolic analysis, for I want to understand something of what it might feel like for Yolmo wa to grow old, to suffer grief, to lose and regain their souls. And finally, I ask how someone from a distant land (like myself) can come to comprehend such experiences. To what extent, and through what means, can we grasp the emotional and sensorial life of another person or people? How, in turn, can an author best arrange words on a page to pass this knowledge on to a reader?

* * *

My experiences of trance might help us to begin to answer the latter queries. When I returned to the United States fifteen months after arriving in Helambu, I learned that a handful of anthropologists have written of trance states similar to my own but interpreted them in a slightly different fashion. Maya Deren and Larry Peters experienced music-induced "possession" on several occasions (Deren in Haiti, Peters among Tamang of Nepal), and Michael Harner and Michael Taussig comment on drug-induced hallucinatory states encountered while participating in South American shamanic rituals. In reading these accounts, one gets the sense that the visionary world of the native can be that of the ethnographer: what the outsider experiences of trance reflects what local healers or participants experience, as if the ethnographer's imaginings produced the photographic equivalent of the natives' own histories. Deren, for instance, suggests that her identity as an artist privileges the nature of the insights she can make; her "acute sensitivity to form" ultimately enables the "they" (the Haitians) to become a "we."? Peters, on the other hand, develops an "experiential approach" to ethnographic fieldwork, delving into shamanic trances in the faith that "a more complete knowledge would result if I experienced what my informants said they did."18 Peters finds it difficult to go native during the trances; the difficulty appears to be chiefly a personal one—arising from his inability to shed his "cultural and intellectual biases"—rather than one occasioned by the nature of the situation. However, as with Deren, the "they" ultimately becomes a "we": Peters concludes, upon thinking for a moment like a Tamang, that "I stepped across cultural boundaries and was freed of my previous intellectual inflexibility."? Harner and Taussig give less introspective accounts of their trance experiences, but for them, too, the trance state, as a means toward understanding the indigenous worldview, seems unproblematic. Indeed, Taussig develops a theory of Peruvian healing (as working through a principle of "montage" akin to Brechtian notions of the theater) based on what he perceives of yage-induced hallucinations. As he writes, "Somewhere you have to take the bit between your teeth and depict yage nights in terms of your own experience." Harner, in turn, decides to learn shamanism "firsthand" after realizing the dragonish creatures he met upon consuming ayahuasca were "already familiar" to a Jivaro healer—"known to him from his own explorations of the same hidden world into which I had ventured."22

The trance states that I knew of, in contrast to these reports, suggest that the process of cultural conversion or translation is not so clear-cut. The hidden worlds were not the same. Though I would "shake" in time with Meme, suggesting a physiologic baseline to trance, it quickly became clear that what I experienced and demonstrated of trance behavior was far from identical to what my neighbors were familiar with. My ceremonial duties soon lent me the nickname of "grandfather shaman" (Meme Bombio), but, unlike that of the elderly Meme, the name was partly in jest. Unlike Yolmo shamans, who use crossed legs as a springboard on which their torsos bounce up and down, my body shook more like a piece of Jell-o, wavering from side to side. Children giggled at the strange contortions my body would make and adults chuckled at my reports of what I saw when I was "shaking" (though the sheer fact of my trance seemed to reaffirm for villagers the reality of their gods, and my ability to host them). "As it is, the quickest of us walk about well waddled in stupidity," quips George Eliot in the sentence following this book's epigraph, and I certainly waded in cultural ignorance in Nepal. During the first healings, my body felt like an already familiar" to a Jivaro healer—"known to him from his own explorations of the same hidden world into which I had ventured."22

In reality, of course, my culture had not preconditioned me for trance,
and I experienced my “shamanic” existence as an uncontrolled ganglion of nerves, a loose hodgepodge of unsystematized sensations. While divine words flowed from the shaman’s mouth in trance, I encountered a montage of storied images (wandering through a cave, bumping into transformative tigers, talking with my own rendition of the ri bombo, a local gnomish “forest shaman”). And when I shared with Meme the content of these trance visions, he quickly dismissed their relevance, suggesting that I only saw images of an epiphenomenal nature.

“Meme,” I asked him one day as we basked in mountain sunshine outside his home, “these visions I have, of caves, tigers, and elfin creatures, what do they mean?”

“Nothing,” he said with a flurry of bony fingers. “When you shake, the gods are gazing into your body to see if you are pure or not. But since you don’t know our language well, and do not know what the gods look like, you only see lightening flashes in the dark, as when a man is knocked on the head.”

My initial ritual incompetence and the cultural irrelevance of my “shamanic” visions lead me to question the ease with which anthropologists have assessed foreign realities based on what they have experienced of trance. I feel, for instance, that Taussig errs in basing his innovative analysis on what he experiences of drug-induced trance states, for the hallucinations of an American intellectual (shamanism in an age of mechanical reproduction) must be quite different from what a local healer or patient envisions. Similarly, Deren’s fearful encounters with a “white darkness” seem to speak more of her own personality than that of Haitians, Harner’s visions refer more to the Book of Revelation than to the local mythology, and Peters’s failure to go native undoubtedly owes itself to the cultural baggage he carried to Nepal. This is not to say that there is little to be learned from these reflexive accounts; they can offer valuable insights into the healing process. But we must bear in mind that subjective experiences of this sort are deeply patterned by the long-standing cultural context forming and informing one’s identity. I found that one cannot adopt cultures as readily as one puts on clothes.

Yolmo initiates themselves experience trance quite awkwardly at first. One night I watched a part-time apprentice host the gods within his body with a knee-jerk frenzy of movements, a range of syllabic fits and starts, with his torso chugging along like a backfiring diesel engine. But even this clumsy display had its rhyme and reason; there was a culturally patterned way to be a shamanic initiate, a proper, sensible way to confront the divine. Unlike Yolmo apprentices, then, who knew how to become a shaman even if they weren’t one yet and so did not risk laughter when they sat by the altar, I first had to learn something of the basic tenets of Yolmo experience, ways of using the body and interacting with others, that would then enable me to learn how to be a proper shaman. This learning how to learn, or “deutero-learning,” as Bateson puts it, lies for me at the heart of the ethnographic enterprise. I learned to enter into trance not solely by attending Meme’s séances, but by frequenting the teashops and porches of Gulphubanyang, walking with Meme along the trails leading between villages, and by sensing the sounds and smells of the terraced countryside. By busying myself with these activities, gleaning how to eat a bowl of rice with style or greet an elder with grace, I learned how to use my body in a way that was conducive to my more ritualized efforts.

All this suggests that my trances did not involve a template that recorded, like a photograph, what Yolmo shamans experience of trance. Instead, my memory of the trances should be taken as a sensory transcript of a conversation between cultures, with my experiences marking the crossover between American and Himalayan ways of being. The trances
thus reflected more my idiosyncratic attempts to conform to and make sense of Yolmo society than they did any Yolmo intimacies. At the same time, as my comprehension of Yolmo society gradually developed in the months after the initial trances, my experiences of trance, patterned by the context in which I found myself, slowly began to compare more to (and comment on) what the shamans seem to experience. Bateson has argued, in line with his theory of deuto- learning, that distinct “paradigms” of Balinese experience (from body image to kinesthetic principles) enable Balinese to learn how to undergo trance.26 Similarly, while my experiences never escaped the prism of my own cultural reality, I felt as if I became partly “socialized” for Yolmo trance, an acculturation which Meme gradually seemed to take note of; he more readily placed his drum in my hands. My understanding of cultural ideas of the body facilitated the approach and strength of trance states, for a local view of the body as a collection of marionette-like parts enabled the “shaking” to come on more powerfully. In turn, my sensitivity to cultural imagery channeled the symbolic character of my visionary experiences. In the first months, I experienced visions akin to what Mary Watkins calls “waking dreams”—in my case, an episodic montage of imaginative scenarios loosely bound together into a narrative, storybook frame. But during the last few healings, the visions became more controlled, centered, steadied: timeless meditations on the (culturally constituted) homologies of altar, body, and geography—as expressed in some field notes recorded on the night of an October healing, six months after arriving in Helambu:

The images arrive very focused, concentric: an awareness of a landscape outside, hills and green pastures. A sense that the gtor ma cakes represent spiritual forces from this geography. Hence a parallel between the landscape and the altar, and another (metaphoric) parallel between the altar and my body. A focused, relaxed meditation on the five colored directions: yellow, white, red, green, blue. A sense of the five colors flowing from the altar through my body, like a rainbow, from my buttocks up along my spine—flowing in rhythm with my breath. Metaphoric parallels pass quickly, simultaneous awareness.

But to me, the isomorphism that developed between my trances and Yolmo aesthetic forms does not suggest that I became, either in trance or everyday life, a Yolmo wa, or that I experienced what Yolmo experience. Rather, I became a strange hybrid, caught in a no-man’s-land between cultures, learning something of a visited way of life yet relying heavily on my own. But perhaps it is precisely in the clash between world-views, in the tension between symbolic systems (how reality is defined, the body held, or experience articulated), that some anthropological insights emerge. One learns of another way of being and feeling through contrast, noting the differences that make a difference. By participating in the everyday life of a society distinct from one’s own, an ethnographer confronts and slowly learns (often tacitly but always partially) patterns of behavior previously unfamiliar to his or her body. In my experience, it is through this behavioral reworking that the differences characterizing two forms of life become most apparent; novel ways of moving, talking, and interacting contribute to a visceral appreciation of the forces that occasion those actions. This book, then, is a meditation on Yolmo forms of life as I came to understand them, with the tools I had on hand: a mix of shamanic practice, embodied knowledge, and persistent note-taking. Through this meditation, I wish to advance a way of writing ethnography that includes the reader’s body as much as the author’s in the conversation at hand.

* * *

Reflecting on my trance experiences and the images that flowed from them, I am reminded of Marianne Moore’s definition of poetry’s subject matter. Poets, for Moore, need to be “literalists of the imagination,” presenting for inspection “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”27 Like Moore’s poetry, the nature of my trances seemed to be a paradoxical mix of symbolic fictions and familiar realities. The imaginary trance gardens, populated with fierce tigers, dark caves, and archetypal old men, were fertile and febrile. I played a Bergmanesque game of chess with Death in May (with black and white gtor ma cakes); flew eaglelike above the Himalayas in June (an account of which drew peals of laughter from the festive audience: “Tell us again, Meme Bombo, where you went to!”); and walked a parched wasteland in July. The latter vision quest, which occurred on the occasion of a healing for Mingma Lama, a frail old man who lost several of his “life supports” (nyg) after the death of two close friends, began as follows:

From the beginning, a sense of walking in a wasteland. A desert, parched, dry. A dead fish rotting in a dried-up river bed. A burnt tree, ash-covered. A bird hangs upside down on one limb; on closer inspection I see it is stuffed, fragile, held to the tree by cheap metal wires. The air is very hot, but no direct sunlight, only haze. A half moon seen, waning. I am alone, wandering.

Yet a sense that ahead in the distance there is a mountain; trees, flowers, water. It is as if I need to go to this mountain, a domain of life.
I now notice that in the wasteland there are underground pathways of energy. I am reminded of the aboriginal "songlines" of Australia. I understand that these pathways are of symbolic energy, of a special type of music (rhythms of vitality). These pathways are the antithesis of earthquakes, for they integrate rather than destroy the earth.

Despite the phantasmagoric nature of these visions, with their wastelands and personalized symbols, a few toads apparently revealed themselves. The first "real" toad was the imaginary garden itself. The trances, facilitated through driving, repetitive music, induced a mode of consciousness in which mythopoeic, image-based thought predominates, a dreamlike process linked to altered and "shamanic" states of consciousness in both Western and non-Western contexts. In this instance, thinking worked through analogy, metaphor, and metonym, a form of experience that often has therapeutic import. Western therapists employ similar techniques in what is called "guided imagery" or "active imagination." On reflection, many of the images did serve to represent, capture, and illuminate psychological dimensions of my life at the time, possibly engaging a therapeutic, "transcendental" function, as Jung put it.31 The wasteland, for instance, seems to have charted the burdens of fieldwork. In several caves, in turn, I happened on a skeleton devoured by a fierce tiger but then reassembled into a tiger or an old man.

In the front of the cave, there are scattered bones. In the back, a tiger transforms back and forth into a decrepit old man. This creature tells me the bones are mine, while numerous tigers, ghost-like, devour them. Just inside the cave, on the left side, a leopard's skin hangs from the wall. Bones lie in a pile below this. Next to the bones is an extinguished fire. Ashes.

The images focus on the scene of healing, as actively imagined by me: Sumnjok lying on her cot, transformed into various, isolated identities; a tiger in a distant cemetery supporting a mythic healer; and the "real" toad was the imaginary garden itself. The trances, facilitated through driving, repetitive music, induced a mode of consciousness in which mythopoeic, image-based thought predominates, a dreamlike process linked to altered and "shamanic" states of consciousness in both Western and non-Western contexts. In this instance, thinking worked through analogy, metaphor, and metonym, a form of experience that often has therapeutic import. Western therapists employ similar techniques in what is called "guided imagery" or "active imagination." On reflection, many of the images did serve to represent, capture, and illuminate psychological dimensions of my life at the time, possibly engaging a therapeutic, "transcendental" function, as Jung put it.31 The wasteland, for instance, seems to have charted the burdens of fieldwork. In several caves, in turn, I happened on a skeleton devoured by a fierce tiger but then reassembled into a tiger or an old man.

The first images involve the patient: she transforms into an outline of white stripes—or bars, as in a jail cell. She is hollow inside: save for a small white dove. I sense the dove is trapped inside her "cell," but there is no opening. A lock appears at the top of her head. This lock is to be opened by a gtor ma cake, thus letting the dove free. The dove would then flutter around the room, visiting the heads of all the family members, connecting them all with a vibrant thread.

Image of the woman clasping her hand over her mouth while the family members, looking on, hold hands over eyes.

Image of a tree (of life), rich and vibrant, beside a cemetery marked by tombstones. Leaves fall from the tree and land in the cemetery grounds. A shaman, dressed in full regalia, appears on a swing which extends down from a branch of this tree. As he swings, he scoops up leaves which have fallen on the cemetery grounds and affixes them back on the tree.

When turning to the altar, a sudden burst of energy, of light, explodes from the gtor ma, pushing my body back as a strong wind will do, making me shake fiercely. A bolt of energy experienced—of energy, of color, ecstasy and health, of a need to connect everyone together through "threads," of flowers expanding and emanating color, energy, and health.

The last pair of images alludes to an ethos and epistemology prevalent in Helambu. Briefly, and at the risk of simplifying the discussion to be developed below, the body, like a house, hides its contents from the eyes of others, and villagers generally find it difficult to know what another person is thinking or feeling. As neighbors often responded to my inquiries, "How
can we know what is in another’s heartmind [sone]? In turn, villagers typically strive to maintain an equilibrium in their social lives by controlling the expression of personal desires that may run against the social grain. They therefore feel it inappropriate to let others know what they are feeling, and villagers often find it necessary to control or “hide” sentiments of grief or anger from others. The net sum of this ethos is that, despite a culturally recognized need to “cleanse” one’s heart, those suffering distress often find it difficult to communicate their plight to others.

Although the “local rationality” generally fails to note the link between illness and emotional distress in the everyday life of Yolmo wa, emotional tensions often seem to relate to incidents of “soul loss,” for culturally shaped sentiments of grief, sadness, anxiety, and despair tend to lie at the causal root of this dysphoric illness. Shamanic healing, in turn, appears to offer an indirect medium through which this private distress is voiced, fashioned, and potentially transformed. The main evidence for this idea was found in several shamanic divinations I observed: deities speaking through Meme commented on and gave discursive form to the emotional distress of his patients. A young Yolmo bride whom I shall call Yeshi, for instance, lost her “spirit” (bla) in late spring and so lost her strength and volition to eat, work, and engage with others. While Yeshi’s family said they did not know why she fell ill, I found her to be uncommonly lifeless, perhaps due to the apparently untenable living situation she faced at that time. During an October healing, Meme divined that her illness was caused by “many tears falling from her eyes,” deep feelings of “confusion” and “anxiety,” and an inability to “hold” her heart—an etiology that lifted my own “divination” of Yeshi’s troubles two months after my arrival in Helambu, on the night of a May healing performed on her behalf.

As the shaman divines, so the anthropologist imagines: I experienced my own “divination” of Yeshi’s troubles two months after my arrival in Helambu, on the night of a May healing performed on her behalf.

Everything becomes very cold, frozen. The door is blown open, broken down. Snow shoots in, crashes down from the roof, collapsing the stairs in the weight of its descent. Everything—people, plants, altar—are frozen, red- over. A vacant wind blows. I realize the falling snow means we are on top of the Himalayas, but only the shamans know this. The laymen are oblivious to the snow.

A complementary battle occurs between the snow and the hearth fire, the struggle forming a circle of energy.

I get the message the healing “powers” transform people, removing their old skins, receiving new ones. Especially people’s eyes are made new, their perception renewed. Everything is renewed.

The hearth is cracked. An imbalance in the fire (between the male and female sides) cracks the hearth, the floor. Healing patches up the cracks, but does not repair the imbalance.

While this trance linked Yesi’s spiritlessness to familial conflicts, as imagined by the cracked hearth and warring fire and ice, subsequent “visions” of the Yolmo elder Mingma, engaged on the night of his July healing, hinted at his physical decline. After walking through my private wasteland, I returned to the scene of healing, where Mingma lay close to the fire.

I see the patient composed of fibers, yet these fibers are not integrated, making him weak and tired. A result of a long life. Through healing the fibers will be integrated, sown, woven together. I wonder how the shamanic altar will be used. The answer: to “turn over” energy, moving from weakness to strength.

I see the altar is a fire, radiating warmth and vitality. The altar sends out blue and red filaments. Combined with the drumming music, the strings of energy go to the patient, wrapping gently around him, integrating his “fibers,” giving him strength and vitality. Yet I am also aware he is slowly getting old, losing his strength, dying.

For Yeshi’s family, healing proposed a renewal of eyes, skin, and hearth; for Mingma, it required a reintegration of his waning “fibers.” Although I imagined Mingma to be strengthened by the healing process, I sensed that his illness related to the aging process and that he was slowly dying. In the meantime, a salubrious energy radiated from the shaman’s altar.

The “revelatory” quality of these visions intrigues me. I experienced the three trances relatively early during my fieldwork, at a time when I could articulate little of Yolmo villagers and their ways of healing. And yet a handful of vivid images presaged much of what I later learned in other ways and try to convey in these pages. The mute woman and blind family embody the Yolmo ethos, Mingma’s fibrous body portrays the aesthetics of illness and healing, healers see what laymen cannot, the imbalances in Yeshi’s hearth reflect culturally patterned tensions between men and women, and the irreparable nature of these imbalances suggests that healing is often more salve than solution. At the time, I understood little of the import of the images. Only after living in Helambu for over a year, attending further healing ceremonies, talking in depth with patients and healers, translating shamanic divinations, and, upon returning to the United States, dusting off my notes from those sleepy nights, did I learn of their cultural
In Helambu, the system is one of shut doors and closed mouths, and these constraints shaped the nature of my research. As I neither worked with a field assistant nor knew the languages well my first months in Helambu, I spent much of my time participating on a low-key level in everyday life. Sharing small talk and salt-butter tea with the likes of Meme and Mingma, I sat in local tea shops, attended healings and funerals, and developed a tacit sense of the mundane features of Yolmo lives. In casual, porchside chats with Nyima, a middle-aged woman with long, coal-black hair bound beneath a brilliantly colored scarf, I learned how to avoid leeches and the ways to dance at a funeral. But when I asked Nyima direct questions, such as how many life-forces she possessed or how she felt when she lost them, she claimed not to know. If I persisted, she would light up a cigarette with shaky hands and speak in an increasingly high-pitched tremor.

"Why ask me? I haven't learned this. Go ask a shaman or lama," she chided.

I heard these words many times in Helambu. Many of the secular population (particularly women) prefer not to advance their opinions on cultural beliefs, based on the notion that there is a right answer to which they are not privy. Nor do most villagers wish to divulge information, for they have a strong regard for privacy; it is considered rude to inquire about personal matters and unworthy to reveal one’s “heartmind” to others. There is also the fear that if others know too much, they may take advantage of this knowledge (through witchcraft, business affairs, etc.). I therefore found many of the usual inroads to anthropological understanding (life histories, clinical data, residence patterns, personal narratives) to be hindered by local constraints on social communication. I was restricted, much like Yolmo wa, to glimpses through my neighbors’ “windows” to interpret the shadowplay within.

How can an anthropologist transcend the limits to social knowledge and so gain insight into the “unknowable”? In my study of Yolmo souls, I have relied on an archaeology of meaning, making sense of Yolmo experiences through its artifacts, sifting through the images and sensations permitted to me, the dreams and ghosts that haunt local memories. Despite recent endeavors to study the “lived experience” of cultural selves, I found I could only poke into the wispy traces of meaning left, like footprints in the sand, in the wake of my neighbors’ actions. Yet perhaps we can best approach the subjective realities of others by attending to the imaginative forms that course through, and ultimately define, those realities.

If this archaeology offers any insights, they have been uncovered through both “rational” and “intuitive” means. Observations on Nyima’s anxiety the day after her uncle died, followed by the debilitating loss of her “spirit,” led me to question the link between illness and emotional distress; shamanic reflections on a mute woman hinted at the nature of this link. As the “divinatory” images suggest, much of my understanding of local dy-
namics was obtained through—and crystallized by way of—avenues outside of conscious, conceptual thought. An observation by Bateson on the epistemology of the self has helped me to frame the nature of this process. "The total self-corrective unit," Bateson wrote in 1971, "which processes information, or, as I say, 'thinks' and 'acts' and 'decides,' is a system whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or of what is popularly called the 'self' or 'consciousness.'" In other words, I find that the anthropologist's "self-system" can know more than his conscious self, and his imaginary gardens, like the shaman's revelations (walking dreams, nightly visions), can tap into and cultivate tacit knowledge. Like Meme and his patients, I turned to divination to find out why souls are lost, where they wander, and how best to recall them. By delving into the local system of knowledge, working within its constraints, I learned to learn (and rely on) the constraints and loopholes of that system.

* * *

The reader may well imagine that the shamanic visions, whatever their source, are at best a suggestive example of what and how I came to know of Yolmo lives. I would not feign to portray Yeshi and Mingma by drawing on the visions alone, nor would I attribute much significance to them if they did not correlate with other forms of knowledge. Yet I believe they reflect the learning processes involved when a person participates in a series of rituals, frequents a tea shop, listens to a story, and so begins to embody cultural practices. In my experience, much of this learning occurs tacitly, at the level of the body; the trance images, as I read them, crystallized embodied forms of knowledge. Meaning, patterned within the body, took form through images, which were then absorbed anew by the body. This was an ongoing process throughout my stay, for when a fieldworker begins to participate in the myriad of moments that make up the practice of everyday life, these interactions soon shape his or her understanding of local values, patterns of action, ways of being, moving, and feeling. Whenever I exchanged sips of tea, caught the gist of a joke, heard the guttural sounds of a lama's chant, or felt the loss of a villager, I was participating in my share of life in Helambu, and my body assimilated such experiences within its fund of meanings. It is out of that fund of knowledge that my understanding of Yolmo lives begins, and the trance imagery probably emerged. As I see it, the trances gave imaginal form to my body's conversation with the other bodies stepping about Helambu.

Perhaps a tangible image will help to clarify what I mean by embodied knowledge. In Nepal, I found that "knowing through the body" often centers on knowledge of the body, for how I came to hold my limbs in Helambu led to a tacit assessment of how villagers themselves experience somatic and social forms. Yolmo men, when smoking a cigarette in a half-plowed field or exchanging words along a sodden trail, customarily crouch close to the soil, feet flat on the ground, knees bent, head low, buttocks touching heels, hands close to the chest, with fingers cupping a cigarette. At times, when I moved to join a conversation or warm my hands by a fire, my limbs reflexively approximated the coiled position, though the soles of my feet never touched the earth and my knees elbowed out in awkward angles. Despite these handicaps, the position offered an orientation toward the sensory grounds of my experience distinct from what I was familiar with. My body soon took on the air of a dynamic whole, compact in space and energy, centered at the chest, and head close to heart. The mandala-like parts of my body, distinct in themselves, worked toward this center, with the embodied awareness achieved more earthly than astral.

Through time, experiencing the body in this manner (including the residual, intermingling effect it had on how I stepped through a village, climbed a hill, or approached others) influenced my understanding of Yolmo experiences; it hinted at new styles of behavior, ways of being and moving through space that I did not previously have access to. By using the body in different ways, I stumbled on (but never fully assimilated) practices distinct from my own. Touching head to heart merged thinking and feeling (two acts unsegregated in Yolmo society); a sense of the body as a vessel dynamically compact led me to see Yolmo forms as vital plenums of organ and icon; and my loose assemblage of bent knees and jointed bones contributed to the springboard technology that gradually brought some force and ease to my shamanic "shaking." In turn, as the workings of the body often reflect the physiology of a society, the latter view soon led to the realization that a Yolmo household or village seems put together much like a unified whole. Wielding the body in a particular manner in daily activities thus led to a visceral appreciation of how villagers themselves seem to engage in those activities.

The appreciation could have gone further. As a Yolmo shaman acquires his bidya or "learning" without the use of books, villagers were perplexed by my preference to record Meme's teachings in cassettes and notebooks, rather than to set them directly within my "heartmind." I
explained that, since we in the West had forgotten how to memorize, I would lose the specifics of what I learned unless I jotted them down on paper. This did not get me very far. “How can you play the drum if you have to refer to a book?” a group of young men scoffed one evening outside my cabin. When I joked that I planned to tack the chants onto the drum’s surface like a musical score, they laughed, but walked away unsatisfied. I would never be a “true shaman,” one novice healer said, shaking his head, unless I knew everything “by heart.” For quite some time I took this man’s response at face value: one must memorize the shaman’s songs in order to perform effectively. Yet now, months away from Helambu, I hear, with some regret, a subtler message: it is the music as much as the surface meaning of the shaman’s repertoire that one must engage within the flesh. By incorporating a mantra’s magic within his heart, throat, and limbs, a melody echoing others through its sinewy folds and assonant rhymes, an apprentice healer begins to incarnate a sensibility that goes beyond the linguistic. The play of the drum quickens into a kinesthesia of curing, a mumbled mantra summons the presence of the sacred, rhythms of healing grow more tactile than cerebral: if I had better realized this chemistry while in the field, I might have gone about my apprenticeship differently, danced to another tune, and so expanded my field of awareness. I footnote my oversight here because, for me, it reflects a tendency in contemporary anthropology to privilege the linguistic, the discursive, and the cognized over the visceral and the tacit. Largely neglected has been the realm of the senses, the sufferings of the flesh. We have lost an understanding of the body as an experiencing, soulful being, before and beyond its capacity to house icon and metaphor. A less cognate, more sensate treatment now seems needed.

Whatever its limits, the sensibility cultivated by my physiology in Nepal remained for the most part unarticulated while I was banging on a shaman’s drum. Only after I returned my body to a desk, began to use its anatomy in yet another way, and set fingers to keyboard did I begin to flesh out its links to the more tangible bits of data that filled my notebooks. Indeed, I find that a significant amount of what I learned in Helambu occurred through visceral, sensory means; this knowledge has deeply influenced later assessments of Yolmo lives, including the writing of this account. When I reviewed my field notes on returning to the United States, I was surprised to find they did not embody the more intangible dimensions of what I had learned—the tacit “habitus” of Yolmo actions—so much as my body had noted them, viscerally, as a sponge soaks up displaced water.
The book is an attempt to squeeze that sponge for the inner moisture. I find myself writing from a position neither within Yolmo sensibilities nor singularly detached from them, but with one foot outside and the other entangled within their webs. This interactive stance, with neither foot on solid ground, forms the essence of the present inquiry. My understanding of the leitmotifs of this work—homeless souls, sentient bodies, the specters of loss—has been shaped by Yolmo aesthetics and epistemology, as has been my grasp of these systems of value and knowledge. Windowed houses, restricted purviews, and shamanic revelations mark the limits of what I can know, and write, of Nyima, Yeshi, and Mingma.

The question remains, then, through what means can an ethnographer write about (express, communicate, re-present) tacit knowledge? How can we translate the complexities of everyday life into the fixity of a few words? For me, the sense that much of my understanding of life in Helambu lingers on “the hither side of words” influences how I write of Yolmo souls, and I attempt to work with and through a poetics of culture to better illuminate the gist of these unshapen understandings. For his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss developed a mythopoetic stance, expressed through the metaphor of musical leitmotivs, to write “the myth of mythology.” Here, I seek to develop an argument of images, constructed of ghosts, souls, and dreams, to approach the play between image, feeling, and experience. Since some ethnographic understandings came to me by way of images, I try to communicate this knowledge through images. Local metaphors, idioms, and poetics grace the narrative in order to give a feel for the cultural reality in question. My intent is to convey something of the give-and-take of Yolmo life such that the reader, when actively reading or “rewriting” this account, will more vividly sense the heavity of a spiritless body or the dark presence of a hungry ghost. “I hold,” T. S. Eliot wrote, “that the world is something more than the noise it makes; it is also the way it looks on a page.” If this is so, then I suppose the task is to pack the noise of the world into the words of a page so that a reader can hear it anew.

An imaginative inquiry seems especially suited for Yolmo realities, for local experiences seem to be grasped and expressed through images. Illiterate villagers like Meme and Nyima tend not to tell full-fledged stories much, nor, I believe, do they see life through the same narrative lens that my American colleagues do. For instance, while dreams in the West work by way of storied narratives (“I was walking down a road . . .”), Yolmo reveries involve a handful of simple snapshots (a ghostly graveyard, a burning house). Perhaps related to what Anthony Marsella deems an “imagistic mode” of representing reality common to several non-Western societies, what a resident of Helambu remembers and tells another of a dream are usually a few, select images known to bear prophetic meaning. Similarly, in conveying suffering to others, villagers tend not to tell sequential accounts of how they hurt or heal, but rather to “tell images” that portray their plights: a witch’s bloody assault, the “casting” of grief from the body. The prose of this book attempts to retain a bit of this image-based reality.

The main risk involved in such a narrative experiment is that it can stumble into what Geertz calls “ethnographic ventriloquism”: “the claim to speak not just about another form of life but speak from within it”—blindly “doing” the natives in different voices. The potential gain is to more richly describe the experiential fabric of another way of life, conveying through the magic of indirect speech (“show, don’t tell”) dimensions of cultural experience often neglected in ethnographic writing. Much of culture-as-practice occurs in the varied events, dialogues, and habitual exchanges of daily life; the building blocks of vivid prose necessarily rest on these events. This is the nonlinear complexity that scholarly writing, by its analytic nature, has such a hard time pulling together, but that storytelling, with its technology of open synthesis, can orchestrate so well.

What we need is a reading that hovers close to the body. My grasp of the shamanic fell short of incarnating the music of the body; it would be a comparable mistake to content ourselves with a symbolic analysis of Yolmo experience. By “symbolic analysis” I have in mind an approach that would treat Meme’s body like a suitcase of texts and symbols that he—the true actor—lugged around wherever he went. In contrast, I wish to propose, in following the German phenomenologist Helmuth Plessner, that Meme not only “has” a body, but “is” a body. And since the body that Meme “is” feels, knows, tastes, acts, and remembers, I find it necessary, if I wish to understand how this physiology heals or falls ill, to consider Yolmo experiences from the plane of the body: to consider a villager’s “ego” or consciousness not as somehow distinct from the body, but positioned within a larger sphere of life—that of sensory experience. A concern for “discourse,” “symbols,” and “practice” is in vogue of late in anthropology. This book wagers, in contrast, that we can best make sense of the pains of Meme’s clients by attending to the felt presence of those pains.

All this bids for a new tack toward ethnography, a style that seeks to touch on and work from within the plane of the body, a syntax that reaches
sting of a wound or the comforts of healing can be engaged through a
ethos (the dominant cultural styles of experiencing and expressing felt
opinion, to evince the felt immediacies that mark songs of grief, rhythms of
logic of signs, and a key mandate of future ethnographies will be, in my
mology (how one g;es
narrative blend of dialogue, texture, rhythm, and silence.

"mental structures," as Bourdieu purs it, through which that life itself is
apprehended. 6o We study Yolmo lives from the ground up, delving first
our their influence on moments of illness and healing. A major bur often
moves from illness to healing to explore Meme's craft, unraveling the ritual
of Yolmo wa, a study of those sensibilities might require a different method, a method that seeks to convey something
of the felt quality and "imaginative force" of Yolmo lives. W. S. Merwin uses
the latter phrase in suggesting that the translation of a poem inevitably fails
if one merely looks for direct word-for-word correspondences in a second
language.

A single primary denotation may be shared; but the constellation of second-
ary meanings, the moving rings of associations, the etymological echoes, the
sound and its own levels of association, do not have an equivalent because they
cannot. If we put two words of a language together and repeat the attempt, the
failure is still more obvious. Yet if we continue, we reach a point where some
sequence of the first language conveys a dynamic unit, a rudiment of form.
Some energy of the first language begins to be manifest, not only in single
words but in the charge of their relationship. The surprising thing is that at
this point the hope of translation does not fade altogether, but begins to
emerge. Not that these rudiments of form in the original language can be
matched—any more than individual words could be—with exact equivalents
in another. But the imaginative force they embody, and which single words
embody in context, may suggest convocations of words in another language
that will have a comparable thrust and sense.69

My handling of ethnography calls for a comparable craft. Rather than
graph a concept-for-concept translation onto the original context ("depres-
sion" for "soul loss," "the unconscious" for "divine knowledge"), we must
work within the cultural reality in question, sketching out the rudiments of
form that compose it. By the latter term, I loosely mean the basic, socially
derived images, schemas, and structures that help to animate cultural experi-
ence. In the translation of poetry, rudiments of form concern linguistic
structures, metaphoric valences, similes of sound; with an interpretation of
cultures, they involve patterns of relationships, aesthetic sensibilities,
rhythms of experience. Rudiments of form inform for a people how pain is
felt, space imagined, evil exorcised, and death achieved. Body and house as
permeable membranes, body and village as mosaic, and a cadence of loss and
fragmentation are a few of the cultural forms we shall encounter here.
Cognitive scientists hold that these forms register within the brain, but I
would like to imagine that they also course through the body and the play of children. Wherever their locus, the ethnographer must search for a language that illuminates their combined thrust and sense as they relate in the original context. An ethnographer’s convolutions of words, if woven together like the chords of a sonata, can offer an experientially rich sense of what it may be like to grow old in a distant village. This is the working hypothesis to be tested here: by grasping the charge of the relation between different cultural forms, between ways of feeling, hungry ghosts, and the subtle play of images, we can better realize the imaginative force, if not the specific territory and content, of Yolmo experience.

But I hasten to note that translation of this son remains forever uncertain. Like the “shamanic” visions, my rough map of Yolmo experience is hedged in by the limits of my purview, and so lies at best in a no-man’s-land, betwixt and between cultures. As this cannot be otherwise, I agree with Jackson and Stoller that anthropologists must cultivate, with pen as with thought, a certain “negative capability.”65 The term comes from Keats, who claimed that Shakespeare, in contrast to Coleridge, possessed the capacity of “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason.”66 With ethnography, such a philosophy applies to the recipient as well as the author of uncertainties. Every social situation brings with it (perhaps necessarily so) an air of flux and ambiguity, and it is the responsibility of ethnographers to carry this ambiguity over into the world of the reader such that he or she begins to embody (like the fieldworker) some of the forms and sensibilities common to a village. Indeed, students of narrative tell us it is the artfully undetermined story, latent with possibility and meaning, that is the most memorable.67 Perhaps it is with images, intractable, irreducible, palpable, that such engagement begins.

And so a way of knowing melds with a way of writing. A reader’s orientation toward an ethnography compares to the interactive stance of its author (both struggle to make sense of cultural complexities); the following pages try to bring the reader’s body into the ethnographic endeavor through the presence of closed doors, dark descents, and waning moons. Ethnographers often chorus that good writing makes for a better “read,” but they have typically overlooked the fact that how one writes about an alien way of life can contribute to a reader’s implicit understandings of that life. Sounding a score of words engages a way of being in the world. Again, it is the body, not simply the intellect, that I am most writing for and from. “If I read a book,” Emily Dickinson wrote, “and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.”68 An ethnography might not produce the seismic tremors that a poem can, but its consequences can activate nerve endings and touch the body in comparable ways. My body began to feel differently while it was walking around Helambu. Will the reader’s after stepping through this book?

In the end, we return to the question of empathy. To what extent can a person participate in another’s feelings or ideas? How can we best render this knowledge to others? Clifford Geertz claims that we can understand another way of life not through a process of empathy but “by seeking out and analyzing the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—in terms of which, in each place, people actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another.”69 Yet my sense is that empathy, which is at work, arises from a visceral engagement with symbolic form. If this is so, how can a storyteller’s words assist in the act of “vicarious introspection” (as Kohut defines the process)?70 Whatever the answers (and novelists certainly have their own), the ethnographic entails special constraints. Empathy rides on the faith that the grounds of experience between two people are similar, such that we can “know” what another is feeling based on what we ourselves would feel in that situation. But when the grounds between reader and “character” are significantly at odds, it is necessary to first spell out their contours. Unless we can achieve a basic understanding of how another person makes sense of the most elemental aspects of their being—how he or she experiences body, pain, or gender—any efforts toward empathy with that person will run aground, particularly when this involves cultural lands as distant as Helambu and the United States. To learn something of the lives of Meme, Nyima, and Yeshi, then, we must first consider how they construe the everyday, how their bodies make sense of their surroundings, and how they view their passage through the karmic cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Here, phenomenology reads as a narrative strategy.