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Liminality and In-betweenness in Kathleen Jamie's *Surfacing*

Abstract: The article looks at Kathleen Jamie's collection of essays entitled *Surfacing* (2019) and explores the issue of narrative in-betweenness and liminality. The focus in the first part of the article is on the liminal features of Jamie's essays, on the way the collection is designed, but it also discusses the importance of paratexts such as the book cover. It introduces the concept of spiral time, and liminal space-time so characteristic of Jamie's writing. The second part analyses an essay entitled "A Tibetan Dog" in which Jamie creatively investigates multimodal "threshold" connections between the present and the past, the realm of reality and the realm of dreams, and, last but not least, the link between intellectual knowledge and bodily wisdom.

Keywords: Kathleen Jamie, liminality, threshold, memory, dream, awakening

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest ukazanie rozmaitych form narracyjnej liminalności aktualizujących się w zbiorze esejów *Surfacing* (2019) autorstwa Kathleen Jamie. Uwaga badawcza w pierwszej części artykułu skupiona jest na aspekcie liminalności strukturalnej widocznej w budowie esejów Jamie, w konstrukcji książki jako całości, a także w elementach paratekstualnych, takich jak kompozycja okładki. Wprowadzony zostaje tu również motyw liminalnej czasoprzestrzeni oraz czasu spiralnego jako elementów poetyki immanentnej Jamie. Drugą część artykułu to analiza eseju „A Tibetan Dog”, w którym Jamie eksploruje mnogość multimodalnych przejść i „progów” między przeszłością a teraźniejszością, między doświadczeniowym tu-i-teraz a światem snu, co z kolei prowadzi do odkrycia zaskakujących połączeń między intelektualną wiedzą a mądrością ciała.

Słowa kluczowe: Kathleen Jamie, liminalność, próg, pamięć, sen, przebudzenie

To enter the real,
 how far
 must we feel beyond
 the world in which we already are.

It is all here
 but we are not.
 Charles Tomlinson, "Song" (1992, 47)

There is never a moment when we're not in transition –
 and believe it or not this is good news.
 Pema Chödrön (2022, 12)

The article will discuss an essay from Kathleen Jamie's *Surfacing* (2019) with an emphasis on narrative in-betweenness and transitoriness. I am interested in showing the narrative instances of in-betweenness – the memory of the (distant) past "entering" the here-and-now as a way of revisiting what we think we know/perceive, or what we are incapable of knowing/perceiving – that make the reader stop and reflect upon the constantly evolving message of the story.

In the essays written by Jamie, the current Scottish Makar and a highly acclaimed writer of both essays and poetry, liminality can be analysed on several levels, as Jamie initiates the game with her readers on the level of words and their meanings (semantics of "knowing" and "understanding"), in textual/narrative instances of oppositions of structure and anti-structure (Turner 1982, 33), and, last but not least, in intratextual references aimed at a dynamic reconfiguration of the aforementioned scenes/images associated with the threshold. In my analyses, I will focus on the ways in which Jamie juxtaposes her personal experiences from seemingly unrelated narrative strands, and how these newly connected storylines engage the reader in the process of entering the threshold, learning to read the story anew (which might lead the reader to a surprising realization or even a sort of "enlightenment"). In the second part of my article, I will focus on the essay entitled "A Tibetan Dog," as in my view it provides a whole spectrum of liminal traces both on the level of plot and narration. I will attempt to point to the ways in which Jamie's non-linear narration uses autobiographical motifs, and how by means of spiral space-time she incorporates a powerful message hidden "between the lines;" as I hope to demonstrate, the narrative structure is purposefully designed to make the reader witness Jamie's struggles and sudden "awakenings" during different stages of overcoming cancer.

The limen of "Surfacing"

The concept of the limen or threshold was first coined by the Dutch-German-French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep in his book *The Rites of Passage* (1909) to describe the second phase of the rite of passage in small-scale societies. The term was later developed by the British anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, 95, 107;

1982, 24–28, 42–45) to refer to all types of ritual in tribal and developed societies. As the Danish anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen puts it,

It was one of Turner's many merits to "liberate" van Gennep's framework from both the functionalist and structuralist straight-jackets, inserting van Gennep's book on ritual passages where it truly belongs: in a processual approach. [...] In his ethnographic accounts, Turner repeatedly identified parallels with non-tribal or "modern" societies, clearly sensing that what he argued for the Ndembu had relevance far beyond the specific ethnographic context, but without unfolding any systematic analysis or comparison (Thomassen 2009, 14).

In Turner's (1967, 93) own words, liminality refers to any "betwixt and between" situation. In his article on the uses and meanings of liminality, Thomassen notes that experiences of liminality can be related to different types of subject (single individuals, social groups, or whole societies) (Thomassen 2009, 16), but we can also speak of the temporal and spatial dimensions of liminality (each having three different areas of manifestation). These two dimensions will be of crucial importance in the analysis of Jamie's collection of essays, and I will now briefly mention only those which can be identified in the plot of the essay "A Tibetan Dog." As Thomassen explains, the temporal dimension can relate to moments (sudden events affecting one's life such as illness), or periods (weeks, months, years) (Thomassen 2009, 16–17), whereas the spatial dimension of liminality can relate to specific places, thresholds (specific objects, parts of the human body) (Thomassen 2009, 16), but also areas or zones (border areas between nations, monasteries) (Thomassen 2009, 16). In his article, Thomassen offers an insight that might provide a useful perspective of looking at Jamie's *Surfacing*, and particularly in the analysis of "A Tibetan Dog." He notes that Turner

realized that "liminality" served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience (2009, 14).

Interestingly enough, Thomassen's insight brings to mind Jamie's own comment concerning writing poetry. In an interview with Kirsty Scott, she says: "poetry is a connective tissue where my self meets the world, and rises out of that, that liminal place" (Scott 2005). In an interview with Attila Dósa, Jamie adds

I am interested in the world which is more-than-human, which is beyond the human [...] The role of the poet is not to be political but shamanic (it's the only word I can think of), mediating between various worlds and bringing messages back and forth between them (Dósa 2009, 142).

A number of scholars have employed the concept of liminality with reference to Jamie's poetry and nature/travel writing (in particular to *Sightlines* and *Findings*) where liminality is often interlinking with the notion of conceptual dwelling spaces and wilderness (Manfredi 2019, 100, 205; Gairn 2008, 177–178; Gairn 2015, 135–143; Falconer 2015, 157; Szuba 2019, 94; Lawrence 2015, 13). In her illuminating chapter on Jamie's poetry and essays (*Findings* and *Sightlines*), Monika Szuba elaborates on inbetweenness by addressing the issue of connectivity, transitoriness and impermanence, Merleau-Ponty's concept of chiasmic intertwining

between the self and the world, the notion of wilderness – which in Jamie’s writing is reversible, “placed both outside and inside” (Szuba 2019, 111) – and, last but not least, the issue of the mystery hidden in the body. It would seem that some of the issues she addresses with reference to Jamie’s earlier collections of essays will be echoed in my article on *Surfacing*.

Characterised by “ambiguity, effacement, paradox, inversions, blurring of distinctions, [...] topsy-turveydom” – the features characteristic of the limen (Lorek Jezińska 2003, 66) – Jamie’s *Surfacing* abounds in instances of in-betweenness (the phase between the preceding and the following phase). The title itself introduces the theme of the surface as a threshold, and each travel narrative foregrounds the theme of time, deep time or spiral time, often associated with the motif of loss in the era of the Anthropocene (Albrecht 2019; Macfarlane 2019; Hinton 2022). Some of the stories explore Jamie’s recent journeys to Alaska or Orkney; others, such as “A Tibetan Dog” or “Wind Horse” revisit her *Among Muslims: Meetings at the Frontiers of Pakistan in* (2002). Jamie skilfully captures the multifaceted links between places / landscapes and personal memories / mindscapes. The use of phrases such as “to surface,” “to resurface,” “to come to the surface,” “to be brought to the surface,” “to surface in one’s mind” often introduces an idea of finding those extraordinary threshold-moments in ordinary situations, of being open to receiving and embracing them without much effort. Pictures which open each essay (in longer pieces we find a number of pictures taken by Jamie herself or professional photographers) capture simple scenes, but, as I will try to demonstrate, even they might be analysed in terms of in-betweenness. The covers of two editions of *Surfacing* also foreground the issue of the threshold. The cover featuring a photo by Erika Larsen is rather minimalistic, down to earth as it were, evoking the sense of looking at objects that are brought to the surface of the Earth (a few stones, bones – some pieces of jewellery – fragments of ancient hunting tools), or water (a feather, leaf of tree, seaweed). It is no surprise that the arrangement of objects on the page makes one think of a display of objects found at an excavation site; some essays in the collection were inspired by Jamie’s experiences at the excavation sites she had visited. The second cover, featuring a photo by Wayde Carroll, introduces the idea of water (the pond?) reflecting things (the sky, the landscape). It is worth noting that we approach the scene at the level of leaves of grass; they occupy the foreground, the background is all sky, doubled as it were by its reflection in the water. Perhaps the dark elements in the picture are here for a reason, as in Jamie’s writing darkness – seen or felt literally, or perceived metaphorically as something that blocks the vision of the past – also functions as a medium of vision.

Jamie’s essay form and the aesthetics of liminality

In an interview with Kirsty Scott (2005), Jamie discusses the liminal form of her essays. She openly affirms the lack of clear-cut definitions that would help critics to label her writing and put it into a neat category:

I don't think there is a category. I have been asking around. Here's my book. Please tell me what this is? It's not nature writing, but it is; it's not autobiography, but it is; it's not travel writing, but it is. I think some Americans call this creative non-fiction, which is not very adequate either.

Even though this quote refers to Jamie's *Findings*, a collection of essays published in 2005, this quality of her writing being classifiable as examples of such numerous and manifold genres without a prevailing one is also present in *Surfacing*. Thus, it is worth noting that her works manifest features of liminality in their very form, even without the need for an in-depth analysis of the main motifs and content. More instances of thematic and formal in-betweenness will appear in my discussion of Jamie's "A Tibetan Dog."

Many critics agree that with *Surfacing* it is difficult to say whether we are exploring non-fiction, fiction, or poetic prose. Perhaps this peculiar in-betweenness of form serves an important function. In could be argued that Timothy Clark's definition of ecopoetry might be helpful in identifying the message of Jamie's essays. Clark defines ecopoetry as:

an aesthetic interested in formal experimentation and the conception of the poet or poem as forming a kind of intellectual or spiritual frontier, newly coupled with a sense of vulnerability and otherness of the natural world, distrust of a society dominated by materialism and instrumental reason, and sometimes giving a counteraffirmation of non-western modes of perception, thought or rhetorical practice (2011, 139).

Just by changing the word "poet" into "poetess-essayist" might offer a whole list of issues/themes that are "activated" in Jamie's *Surfacing*. I am particularly drawn to the conception of the author or essay "forming an intellectual or spiritual frontier," and I will come back to this issue in my discussion of "A Tibetan Dog." In Clark's definition, "[t]he poem is often conceived as a space of subjective redefinition and rediscovery through encounters with the non-human" (Clark 2011, 139). Once again, we need to enlarge the perspective and see Jamie's *Surfacing* as a combination of the non-fiction essay and poetry, with the "spaces of subjective redefinition and rediscovery" as one of the most important aspects of her writing. Even Jamie herself notices the poetic mode of her essays. In an interview for *Scottish Review of Books*, she admits: "they get called non-fiction, but they're more related to poetry than they are to fiction. They're not prose poems, but they're more affiliated to poetry." Subtle modes of poetic diction are easily detectable in *Surfacing*. In his review of the collection of essays, Tim Hannigan, an accomplished travel writer, aptly notes that her writing "has the meticulous precision of poetry" and he adds that "its fineness has an elusive, quicksilver quality" (Hannigan 2019). We will come back to the way Jamie orchestrates the laws of constant change and impermanence both on the level of plot and imagery when discussing "A Tibetan Dog."

The "poetic affiliation" might also be detected in the design of the book as a whole. All essays are linked, or better still, interwoven, by means of latent threads based on associative thinking. In his review of Jamie's *Surfacing*, Allan Massie (2019) notes that Jamie "is concerned with the worlds we have lost, barely remember, yet seek to recover, and the world we have made and are in danger of destroying." But he also stresses that some connections are not clearly seen in the first

reading: “Even the one essay that does not immediately seem to have a connection to the others – a marvellous picture of a journey to the edge of Tibet at the time of the Tiananmen Square repression in Beijing – does in fact belong” (Massie 2019). I agree with Massie once the reader notices one or two links – metaphors, repetitions, rhetorical questions, to give only a few examples – more and more gem-like luminosity appears. For Tim Hannigan (2019) “put together [...] the whole thing [*Surfacing*] shimmers”:

The more closely you look, the more detailed its patterning becomes, with common threads and images running back and forth through the text: a bear’s skull at the outset is recalled later by cattle skulls set into a prehistoric wall, and echoed again in a Tibetan monk’s bowl, made of a human cranium. Individual lines, containing individual ideas, come with the force of an unexpected blow, leaving the reader briefly giddy.

I will try to show how the multi-layered process of associative thinking works in my discussion of “A Tibetan Dog,” the story which in the first reading seems separate from other essays (Massie 2019); it would seem that it offers one of the most elaborate manifestations of textual and narrative liminality.

What needs to be stressed at this moment is the attitude of humility towards nature, openness to mystery, but also the sense of letting go of the ego control, so characteristic of Jamie’s writing. Nature and the wild are seen not as something external but both external and internal, or neither external nor internal – she clearly moves beyond duality. As Deborah Lilley notes,

Consideration of what is encompassed by the term “nature” recurs throughout her [Jamie’s] writing from different perspectives [...]. Her versions of the form are composed from ecological, social and historical viewpoints, challenging both the idealisation of nature and the perceived externality of nature that enables such idealisation (2013, 16).

Travelling-seeing, sites-sights, and the liminality of the present moment

In an essay titled “Petit Album Nomade,” Kenneth White, an accomplished writer-traveller, the founding father of the geopoetic movement, dwells on the philosophy of his transcendental travelogues and explains how his travels (*voyages*) are related to two words in French – *voie* (way) and *voir* (seeing) – which sound like homophones, and which in his opinion form a sort of cognitive blend:

In a series of books [...], I tried (these are indeed essays [attempts], an exploratory genre) to clear the space of that literature and to constitute a genealogy of a kind of travel narrative belonging to a new type, which can of course take several forms, assume several tones, according to the personality of the writers. In English, I called it waybook, in German *Wegbuch*, and in French, for lack of a similarly short term: *voyage-voyance*. In all these terms, in addition to the notion of travel, there is the notion of a path (the life line) and of seeing (perceiving another space, opening other dimensions). If this other space, other dimension, is not there, one does not escape the “universal reporting” that was stigmatized already by Mallarmé (1999, 180; trans. Justyna Fruzińska).

It would seem that Jamie is a keen practitioner of what White calls *voyage-voyance* (travelling-seeing – learning how to look in order to see). As I have argued elsewhere,

it is important to note that in White's vision the notion of the way (*voie*) is inextricably linked with the line of life (*ligne de vie*) and with seeing (perceiving that other space, opening other dimensions) (Kocot 2020, 55; Kocot 2019, 113). Jamie's philosophy of writing is similar in terms of no separation between living, exploring the world, and perceiving other spaces.

What needs to be emphasised at this point, however, is that in Jamie's writing the focus on the here and now is often juxtaposed with references to the (distant) past or deep time. This is obviously connected with her vision of time, with seeing the seeds of the present in the past, with acknowledging the potential of the future in the here and now. One might even venture saying that in some sense we always inhabit the space of in-between, and each moment might offer insights illuminating both our past and the future. As Camille Manfredi aptly notes, Jamie's liminal space-time of the "almost" provides an environment where the reaching out and writing and creating "towards" the natural world can occur (Manfredi 2019, 205). This leads us to the second difference between her writing and that of White – the subject can enter that liminal space "by losing all sense of their own centrality and by shifting perceptions from an egocentric to an ecocentric, *yet still ego-friendly*, perception of their milieu" (Manfredi 2019, 205). The idea of shifting perceptions seems central to Jamie's writing, and it is often connected with the concept of time as a spiral; she employs this concept in the narrative form in order to point to intriguing, and often dynamic, links between places/landscapes and personal memories ("Surfacing"), to revisit some cultural narratives from a postcolonial perspective ("Reflection"), or to foreground the importance of bodily wisdom ("A Tibetan Dog"). This last essay offers numerous insights into the nature of not knowing, of "almost" understanding, and of letting go of the craving to see the "big picture" (so characteristic of White's writing).

"A Tibetan Dog"

"The birds live at the edge of my life. That's okay. I like the sense that the margins of my life are semi-permeable," says Jamie in *Findings* (2005, 29). For Manfredi, who devotes the whole chapter of her book to eco-poetics of the liminal in Jamie's writing, such encounters with the nonhuman other

participate in an "oikopoetics" (Selvamony et al. 2007) which requires a spatial-ontological mapping of the point of contact between human and nonhumans – but also material things – as fellow dwellers and fellow-transients of the liminal space of the "neither...nor" and the "almost" (2019, 100).

It is worth noting how Manfredi emphasizes the notion of interbeing ("fellow dwellers") and the idea of transience ("fellow transients") within the already transient nature of the liminal space. This insight might provide a good prelude to what we may discover in "A Tibetan Dog" where the liminal or "third"-space meaning (Manfredi 2019, 54) often takes place when – to use Manfredi's terms – "displaced" and "dis-timed" (Manfredi 2019, 67). In Manfredi's view, Jamie introduces her readers to forms of interrelatedness "that call for a rethinking of the notion of

territoriality while also collapsing the dichotomy between roaming and dwelling and, concomitantly, between self and other, subject and object and the sacred and the profane” (Manfredi 2019, 100).

All these issues are clearly present in “A Tibetan Dog” where throughout the essay the readers explore a creative interplay of liminality, transience, and corporeality. But before we enter the narrative realm of the essay, let me come back briefly to Timothy Clark’s discussion of ecopoetry. As I have already mentioned, what he defines as ecopoetry can be easily applied in our discussion of Jamie’s non-fiction, particularly in terms of narrative techniques such as ellipsis. Clark argues that some texts “move beyond the conception of the poem as the dramatisation of individual consciousness to create a space of multiple voices or stances” (Clark 2011, 140), and he gives an example of Gary Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. The link with Snyder is important, because *Mountains* features a collection of interlinking texts written over a longer period of time (40 years) which enables the reader to see the (spiritual) development of the speaking persona over the years. Jamie’s *Surfacing* might be seen as similar not only in terms of dynamic intertextuality and intratextuality, but also in the technique of understatement (“ellipsis”). Both *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and *Surfacing* welcome “ecological” reading “in a loose sense of affirming interrelationship and possibilities of reading [...] in several directions simultaneously (rather than in the straight line of an unfolding narrative)” (Clark 2011, 140).

“A Tibetan Dog” opens with two photographs: the first one presents a notebook with a picture of Buddha Shakyamuni, the second shows young Jamie with a Tibetan novice monk – Jamie points her finger at something in the monk’s notebook, the monk looks at her with intense interest; we do not know who asks questions and who provides answers, perhaps we are looking at the scene of stimulating exchange of ideas. The theme knowing, and “almost” understanding is interwoven in the narrative with the unknown, the mystery of interbeing. The spiral space-time of the narrative invites the reader to re-read the story again and again, and each time one might notice subtle “threshold” moments linking the past and the present, reality and dream, mind and body. Interestingly, by unfolding subsequent layers of the narrative mystery, the reader becomes less and less capable of making clear distinctions between these pairs of opposites, and this is where Jamie’s exploration of liminality feels most confusing for some, and most enjoyable for others.

“Far away from here, in the province of Amdo in China, there lies a town called Xiahe” (Jamie 2019, 187) – this fairy-tale-like beginning offers a clear political message as we read on: “To the Tibetans, Amdo being a Tibetan province, the place is known as Labrang. It is the site of an important monastery” (Jamie 2019, 187). Near the end of the story we learn that the year is 1989. “The Wind Horse” provides more details concerning this time of unrest in Lhasa, student protests in Beijing and in other Chinese cities. “A Tibetan Dog” also speaks of a different kind of transition: from a limited sense of self, with clear boundaries “self-other” to a more fluid sense of self-awareness, with no clear distinctions between the world of dreaming and being awake, between the past and the present. Jamie emphasises the importance of travelling (also in time), as the whole process of linking

seemingly unrelated strands of narration is associated with her using the old travel notebook from 1989, and writing-through the notes to arrive at the message hidden in the body 25 years after the events in Labrang. This is how the story introduces the four-legged titular protagonist:

One evening many years ago, walking alone, I was about to cross that bridge from the Tibetan side when, emboldened by dusk, a little terrier came rushing out and nipped my calf. I didn't see it coming; the first I knew was the sensation: "nip" is the very word. I felt a quick pain, so spun round to see the creature already scarping back among the houses, even as I yelled. I think I threw a stone. The brute had rushed out specially to bite me, a foreigner. The tiny wound was dribbling blood, so back at the hotel I dabbed at it with iodine (Jamie 2019, 187–188).

Clearly angered by the event, Jamie, the storyteller immediately shares her story with her travel companion Sean and a young woman named Elena. They do not seem too bothered, but both say something that will reappear in the latter part of the story:

"They love dogs, the Tibetans," said Elena. "They say they are the reincarnations of lamas who ... how do you say?"

"Didn't make the grade?" said Sean.

"Lama or no, the damn thing bit me."

And then the incident was forgotten. Of course it was. I was not much older than my own children are now. I had my travelling adventure, came home, a quarter-century passed. Partners were met and children were born and grew. Friendships were forged and lost. Jobs, projects, homes, bereavements, the stuff of life – if we're spared. The undammed rush of life.

If we're spared (Jamie 2019, 188).

The space-time of the last paragraph appears to be linear, but as the story unfolds, we notice that it becomes more and more spiral, with subtle thresholds making it less and less difficult to describe in one-dimensional terms.

The next section of the essay takes us "forward" to not so distant past where we witness Jamie's struggle with cancer. We are now entering the realm of liminality of illness. In this part of the narrative the dog reappears, but even though its image is "vivid," it would be very difficult to say whether its presence is real; this is because the fine line separating the world of wakefulness and the world of dreams gets blurred.

In the dream I was walking along a busy street when suddenly I felt a hard pinch on my left calf. Twisting round, I saw a small dog in the act of biting my leg. The dog waited till it made eye contact with me and only then, when it was sure I had seen it clearly, did it unclamp its jaws, release me, turn and trot away.

What a strange dream! I woke with it clear in my mind, the bite, the dog's look. But something had changed in me. I woke relieved and strangely reassured that I wouldn't die of this cancer, not this time, not now. I was being nipped, and would be released (Jamie 2019, 189).

It is interesting to note that also the time frame of the here and now becomes "interwoven" with Jamie's past experiences in Tibet. The dog from Labrang and the dream dog are one: "And that dog! It was the same Tibetan mutt, utterly forgotten until now, twenty-five years later" (Jamie 2019, 189). The bodily sensation of

being nipped in the dream and 25 years before are also one: “The dream-nip was the very sensation I felt then, in the same place” (Jamie 2019, 189). Strangely enough, the dream dog’s message brings the much needed reassurance in the present situation and the promise of healing for the future. Jamie obviously tries to ridicule the dream-sensation (“How funny, to think my subconscious must have waited till I’d fallen asleep, then gone rummaging through a million long-lost memories to find an image it could craft into a message I would wake from and understand” [Jamie 2019, 189–190]). But at the same time she acknowledges the “tangible” reality of the dream, and the role of the lama-dog in Labrang:

Now that it’s all over, it pleases me to imagine that the lama-dog knew what it was doing back in 1989, that it was laying down an act of kindness, and that I’d regret the stone-throwing and cast a blessing after its memory instead. I’d thank it for becoming that dream-metaphor trawled up to reassure me in an hour of need.

The dog is long dead now and quite gone, unless it is indeed caught in the eternal wheel of rebirths, in which case I wish it a happy incarnation, next time round (Jamie 2019, 190).

To some extent, the realm of the dream is more “real” than reality, because it offers an experience of wakefulness and clear vision of the future. But it also raises the issue of the mystery of being, perhaps of the healing properties of one’s mind.

The experience of cleansing through a dream leads Jamie “back” to her notes on the long-forgotten events in Tibet. “[E]ventually I cleared my desk and cleared my mind as much as possible,” she writes, “the better to immerse myself and remember the town of Xiahe” (Jamie 2019, 191). The process of writing the story takes Jamie several weeks. Again and again she foregrounds the “feeling” aspect of re-entering this liminal space: “Absorbed, I was able to carry the ‘feel’ of those days through my present tasks, inhabiting two worlds at once, as writers often do” (Jamie 2019, 193), she writes.

When searching for her notes, Jamie finds an old notebook with the postcard (a *thanka*, Tibetan Buddhist painting) of the Buddha Shakyamuni. The notebook as such is important, as it provides a gateway into her past experiences; Jamie clearly stresses the liminal function of the notebook: “[a] reaching out to a future self, the future self of next week or half a lifetime (Jamie 2019, 192). But she does emphasise the importance of “not knowing”: “I was the utterly unimagined future person the notes had been made for, although I didn’t know it back then” (Jamie 2019, 192). Another aspect of “not knowing” is introduced in the context of the *thanka*: “[s]eeing the card again, I dimly remembered buying it at a street stall, not knowing what it meant, just liking the exoticism of the image” (Jamie 2019, 192).

Although Jamie does not dwell on the significance of the *thanka*, one can find a few latent cues that become much more “pronounced” years later. The *thanka* features one of the great miracles performed by the Buddha, known as The Miracle at Sravasti. The event is narrated in the *Dhammapadattakatha* (the Pali account) and in the *Pratiharya-sutra* (Sanskrit version). In her description of the card imagery, Jamie discusses mostly colours and the symbolic representation of the Buddha:

The card shows Shakyamuni, with blue hair and long earlobes, sitting enrobed on a stylised lotus flower, almost floating above many fiery demons. Amid calm yet sumptuous shades of blue and orange, he represents perfected wisdom, all-compassion (Jamie 2019, 193).

In the *thanka*, “sumptuous shades of blue and orange” stand for water and fire emitted simultaneously from the Buddha’s body (fire from the top half of his body and water from the bottom half of his body). Fire and water – the union of opposites – are shown as alternating and expanding to illuminate the cosmos, thus affirming the law of non-duality. In (Tibetan) Buddhism, perfected wisdom and compassion are the signs of attaining the state of buddhahood, but Jamie does not explore the symbolic details, because at the time of buying the card she had had no idea of the significance of that scene. And once again she foregrounds the issue of not knowing and questions rather than answers: “It was late winter as I wrote, the sky darkening the window in the afternoons. What emerged were questions, to which I still have no answer” (2019, 193). By comparing the imagery of the scene of writing and the one of “being nipped” in Labrang, we can easily notice that we have come full circle as it were: the darkening sky and the dog “emboldened by dusk” provide mirror images associated with the sphere of liminality, with entering the realm of not knowing or “almost understanding.”

Conclusion

It seems that for Jamie the act of asking questions and her non-attachment to answers is truly liberating. This might be treated as one more form of liminality in Jamie’s writing; it makes one open to what is happening without the fear of being vulnerable, as only by embracing the undesired unknown one can move to the next stage of development on the “life-way.” In “A Tibetan Dog,” and in *Surfacing* in general, asking difficult questions is definitely more important and more “productive” than finding answers; the process (if not processuality) of changing the perspective of looking at the events from Jamie’s life is possible precisely because there are no clear-cut categories, labels and meanings attached to these labels. It would seem that this way of perceiving the world is associated with Jamie’s way of travelling-seeing, with being open to what is happening without any preconceptions or mental projections, and with spiritual maturity of not wanting to reach any final conclusion. “A Tibetan Dog” ends with the motif of the Buddhist *thanka* symbolising “perfected wisdom, and all-compassion” (Jamie 2019, 187). Perhaps that is all we need to know, Jamie seems to be saying.

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