

Lost and Found

Leanna Wolfe

Wracked by my growing emotional dependence on a smart phone which generates the daily drivel of personal “news” and little blurts of dopamine spiked text messages, I sensed my own spiritual exhaustion and booked a flight to Borneo. All I knew was that it would be really far away, the few remaining orangutans of the world would be swinging through a dense jungle and the descendants of yesteryear’s headhunters might welcome me into their villages.

Initially it felt foolhardy to search for the “remote” in 21st century Borneo. My first stop, Kuala Lumpur, a giant of a city on peninsular Malaysia, was plugged in to the max. People watched movies on their digital pads while riding the subways and everyone was texting. Moreover, they were absolutely shameless about it all. Groups of friends would meet for coffee and text and post to Facebook rather than talk to each other. Once I flew to the island of Borneo (which encompasses more of Malaysia, the tiny state of Brunei and a large portion of Indonesia) I expected the thick jungle would obliterate any possibility of digitally-enabled global interface. Hardly. While gearing up my trekking chops at Mulu National Park which sports amazing caves replete with zillions of bats and thick jungle trails, I quickly discovered a wifi hot spot at the park café. Several times a day, I’d land there to post photos of my jungle and spelunking discoveries on Facebook. Within seconds (if the time zones were aligned with North America), I’d collect “likes” from my Facebook family. Being on a solo adventure, these “likes” did help to make my day.

Sensing that Mulu was largely a tourist destination...and that my goal had been “remote,” I made my way to Bario, the gateway to the Kelabit Highlands. The flight to Bario was on a very small plane – so delicate that both I and my baggage had to be weighed to assure a safe glide through the sky. Upon arrival at the Bario airstrip I was met by my host, Stephen, a full-blood Kelabit. His English was a bit halting and his home was rustic beautiful. It appeared to be handmade with long house style open hallways, adorned with his exquisitely creative paintings and sculpture. He lived between centuries, habiting the life of a wild

boar hunter, a jungle guide and an internationally exhibited artist. I told him I wanted to trek somewhere remote. His aunt was an anthropologist; he sensed my need to get lost and suggested I go to the village of Pa Lungan. Offering me a series of hand drawn maps to photograph onto my cell phone, he drove me to the stretch of road where Bario's pavement ends. Before me was a super muddy expanse—almost too muddy for a four-wheel drive truck. He handed me a walking stick and suggested it would take about three hours to get to the village. Once there I could ask for his friend David who could host me for the night. The mud was unbelievable—so thick it would grab my boots, making it nearly impossible to dislodge my footsteps. For a short while I happily followed the notations on Stephen's sweet maps, noting where the walking trail diverged from the muddy road. Soon I approached a stream crossing with strategically-placed planks of wood. I steadied a foot on a plank and my boot completely submerged into the cool pungent water. Surrendering to sloshy socks, I trudged through more boot-gripping mud. Next I found myself on a rickety handmade bridge—attempting to steady myself, I grabbed the rails. They literally crumbled in my palms, revealing the extreme hunger of jungle termites.

Eventually I became immune to water, mud and buzzy insects. My sole objective was to not break bones or strain muscles. The sun began to fall off the horizon as the battery on my phone weakened. I could no longer decipher Stephen's hand drawn maps. I noted an abandoned thatched hut and wondered if I should crawl inside and wait until morning to continue my trek. I'd brought no food and just limited water. Pa Lungan seemed to be far in the distance—so distant relative to my slow careful pace, that I began to sense that I would not get there by nightfall.

Trepidatiously, I trudged ahead. Monkeys bounced through the trees as a night time symphony of insects crescendoed. Then out of nowhere David appeared. He'd received a text message from Stephen and they'd both gotten worried about me. I felt like giving him the biggest hug on the planet, but keeping my cool, I simply thanked him for coming out to find me. He placed my small knapsack on his back and offered me his steady hand. Suddenly I shifted from a focused jungle-woman who would outwit the challenges of a mud-drenched

terrain and fierce sounding insects to a femme fatale. Surrendering to his superior judgment, he guided me across more rickety bridges and lots more mud until eventually (in the dark of night), we arrived at his home. He suggested I bathe (which involved throwing cold buckets of water on my bloody leech-bitten skin). I gingerly removed my mud-soaked boots, gaiters and jeans and then splashed my hot jungle-scared face with water. Inside, I was offered dinner which included the wild boar he'd just caught, vegetables he'd foraged in the jungle as well locally grown rice. Afterwards his large family watched an Indonesian drama on Satellite TV, listened to pop music stored on their pads and phones and discussed the finer points of email and texting. I faced that even remote Pa Lungan which is home to just twenty households, very much habits the 21st century. Every home has a backyard generator and satellite television. Ultimately David's family participates in a mixed economy which includes hunting, gathering jungle vegetables, farming rice, raising chickens and hosting and/or guiding trekkers.

Exhausted and a bit traumatized from my trek, I spent the next day wandering around the small village taking pictures and asking a playful series of anthropological questions. That evening I landed my all-time favorite conversation while seated around a barbecue spit where yet another wild boar was being seared. Between gulps of canned beer and chunks of wild boar a 52 year old man began to ask me questions. How old am I? Where is my husband? How many children do I have? Grandchildren? As he compared my answers to his, he was clearly winning with five children to my one step-daughter and nine grandchildren to my one grandson. Enjoying his glee (and the insight into his worldview) I refrained from asking him how many students he'd taught over the last 30 years, how many books and articles he'd published and how many google hits a search on his name produces!

From chatting with several of the women, I found out that women typically get between the village and the town of Bario by boat. Nursing several nasty leech bites, I promised myself that at all costs I would return the following day by boat. Certainly, one solo trek like that in a lifetime was plenty. Then morning came and David told me I ought to get on the trail early. It was the first day of the

rice harvest and no one with a boat would be traveling back to Bario. Another horrendous solo trek loomed into the immediate distance. Trying to be a good sport, I put on my still wet jeans, still wet socks and laced on my uselessly dry gaiters. I filled my water bottle, packed a lunch of wild boar fried rice wrapped in a banana leaf and requested that David guide me to the trailhead. I began to convince myself that it wouldn't be that bad. I was leaving in the early morning – there would be plenty of daylight. Moreover, I knew the trail. Certainly there would be no surprises.

Considering that it had rained hard the night before, the trail was extra muddy. To avoid getting my boots permanently lodged in the mud, I walked on the trail shoulders. After an especially muddy patch, I found myself on some decently dry paths. Eventually I faced that these dry paths were going nowhere. I squinted at a clearing in the distance and bushwhacked ahead. The clearing was in fact the river—brown and wide and without a single boat. Everyone was harvesting rice that day. For a short while I attempted to forge ahead and later reconnect with the main trail. It didn't work—I was truly nowhere. Stephen's hand drawn trail maps were useless and the map function on my cell phone required a strong wifi signal (which there wasn't).

In one moment I considered that I might write an essay about this adventure and in the next I realized that daydreaming aside, I had to get myself *back* to the main trail. I resigned myself to attempting to retrace my footsteps. I couldn't really remember my footsteps so I just headed away from the river and back through the jungle vines. The insects were buzzing furiously at me – in one moment I screamed at them and in the next I faced that it was useless. They didn't understand. They just wanted some blood and I was an excellent source. Blood suckers aside, my only recourse was to find my way back to the main trail. After four false starts wherein I believed I was on a well-trodden trail (which continued to be dry barely traversed hunters' paths), I arrived on a wide muddy trail sprinkled with carelessly tossed garbage. It was the main trail!

For a moment I considered returning to Pa Lungan, tracking down a rice farmer and expending whatever cash I had on a boat ride back to Bario. I then

gazed at the clearly marked main trail, faced that the day was in fact young, munched on a handful of the wild boar fried rice and trekked onto Bario. I basked in getting my boots soaked all the way through, lodging in mud so thick I could barely take another step and gingerly negotiating the rickety bridges. I knew that I would make it and I did.

As I hobbled along the final stretch, the super muddy road that connects to the pavement of Bario, a shiny four-wheel-drive truck pulled over. The driver asked where in the world I was from...and where I had trekked from that morning. He was astonished that I'd made the trek by myself, noting that women my age don't usually do such things. He then offered me a ride into Bario. I apologized for being so very muddy. He had no problem with the mud and ushered me into the front passenger seat. Suddenly I found myself spirited into 21st century Borneo; that utter fear of being gobbled by leeches and hopelessly lost in a jungle so remote and foreign quickly faded into the scenery as I once again accessed the Internet and posted an account of my adventure on Facebook.