
Book Review

Harley Rustad, *Lost in the Valley of Death: A Story of Obsession and Danger in the Himalayas* (New York: Harper, 2022), 304 pp., \$29.99 (cloth), ISBN: 9780062965967.

In the summer of 2016, while on a journey of self-proclaimed discovery, experienced survivalist and explorer Justin Alexander Shetler disappeared in the Parvati Valley of Northern India, never to be seen again. This landscape of sacred pilgrimage, a world-renowned region of punishing slopes, unforgiving terrain, and dangerous river rapids where the god Shiva himself meditated for three thousand years has long been characterized as the 'Valley of Death', and the 'backpacker Bermuda Triangle' of India (p. 3). Shetler's disappearance, while not the first nor even the most recent victim of the Parvati Valley, is by far the highest profile case, owing both to the mainstream news reception of his disappearance and his considerable social media following via his travel diary on Instagram.

Lost in the Valley of Death is journalist Harley Rustad's intimate profile of Shetler's life and the circumstances leading to his abrupt vanishing. The book is a marvel of research, meticulously crafted from hundreds of Rustad's personal interviews with Shetler's friends, family, colleagues, ex-girlfriends, as well as other backpackers and travelers he met along his well-documented journeys. Yet Rustad does not stop there, he even follows his subject into the Parvati Valley itself, with the epilogue of the book ending at the very cave Shetler uploaded his final Instagram post from, complete with the ominous caption 'If I'm not back by the date of his intended return, don't look for me', followed by a winking emoji (p. 177).

Rustad details Shetler's short yet remarkable life, crafting a vibrant landscape to fill out the void his absent protagonist left not only within the lives of his peers, but within the narrative of the book itself. Shetler is a tremendous cacophony of contradictions. He is shown as a remarkably sensitive, courageous, charismatic, and spirited young man, utterly in love with nature and adventure, dropping out of high school and immediately going on to graduate from two wilderness survival schools. Shetler's diaries and posts, as well as retellings of his conversations with his friends and family, repeatedly emphasize a deep yearning and hunger for what he continually characterizes as experiences belonging to a notion of 'authenticity'. He abhorred the possibility of being characterized as a flippant, New Age consumer of exotic cultures, and instead committed himself to immersion, study, and reparation. While living in Thailand with an adoptive family, he became fascinated with Buddhism's 'acceptance of suffering and pain as an innate part of life', which helped him come to terms with an accident he had suffered while driving that left him traumatized at the loss of the invincibility his

precocious youth had offered him (p. 32). When offered the chance to undergo a tourist's ordination at a monastery that catered to backpackers, who could then shave their heads and live as monks for as little as a few days, Shetler vehemently refused, opting instead to formally commit himself to the life of asceticism, memorizing 222 rules in Pali, becoming initiated, and living within the monastery, begging for daily alms (p. 33). Even after his departure from Thailand, he would frequently visit, sending large sums of his personal income to care for the community who had adopted him.

At the same time, Shetler continually displayed a profound tension between his quest for an abstract ideal of 'real' spirituality and transformation in nature through asceticism, cultural immersion, and great tests of mind and body, and his continual need to be witnessed and observed. Rustad catalogs the abrupt change of his social media portfolio, from depicting a wealthy, globe-trotting entrepreneur decorated with expensive watches and designer brands, partying in exclusive clubs in the financial capitals of the world, to an austere, naïve spiritual seeker perpetually in pursuit of a life of unrestrained travel and 'freedom'—freedom only his financial fortune could buy him, a fact which he was all too aware of and which brought him immense discomfort.

As sincere as his longings were, Rustad does not shy away from noting Shetler's considerable privilege, as well as his incorrigible naivete, especially towards poverty and indigenous cultures. His childhood idol was Hawkeye, played by Daniel Day Lewis in the film *The Last of the Mohicans*—the very embodiment of the trope of a white protagonist who came to shed the trappings of his privilege to embrace the 'natural world', represented by the indigenous society adopting him (p. 12). The longing to live outside of the very privileged, Western life that enabled him to travel so widely in order to penetrate notions of ineffable spiritual experience is an enduring motif throughout Shetler's life, shaping him from his childhood obsession with Tom Brown Jr. to his later insistence at traversing the Parvati Valley with the help of a Hindu holy man.

Rustad's treatment of Shetler's genuine love of nature and inquisitive hunger for enriching experiences, as well as his appreciation for and simultaneous fetishization of the 'spiritual Other', is exceptionally nimble. Never straying into the hagiographical possibilities of his high-profile social media following, nor being so critical as to reduce him to a mere consumer of foreign identities and locales despite his sincere studies, Rustad carefully presents Shetler as not only aware of his own contradictions, but deeply troubled and motivated to transcend them through increasingly dangerous expeditions. It is only in the final chapters that Rustad reveals the sexual abuse Shetler suffered at the hands of a caretaker as a child, and later by an employer in his teenage years, contextualizing his recurring fears of vulnerability and desire for divine sublimation—and self-annihilation in the fringes of wilderness— in pursuit of liberation from shame and vulnerability (pp. 185-86).

The story of Shetler's life, definitively presented by Rustad's expert treatment, has much to offer scholars of religion. In addition to carving out an important case study in the relationships between religion, tourism, capitalism, modern expressions of colonial travelogues and adventure autobiographies through social media, and Western consumption of notions of indigenous spirituality and Orientalism, this is also, ultimately, an examination of the relationship

between nature and spirituality, and how these broad, sweeping notions were understood in the experience of one tumultuous life. From his childhood training in survivalism, to his eventual demise within the holy landscapes where gods and humans alike found their awakenings, Rustad convincingly paints a portrait of Shetler as embodying the sociological tensions at the heart of the modern ecological crisis, played out through the landscapes of guilt, shame, spiritual yearning, and the Western gaze.

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