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Lost in Tokyo

David Missen

On Exile

People, there were so many people. I watched them, swelling, then breaking like waves across an open expanse of concrete; thousands of lives, tens-of-thousands, all with somewhere to be – the living, breathing, lifeblood of Tokyo.

It was midday and the charcoal scent of *takoyaki* (small balls of batter filled with diced octopus and pickled ginger) wafted over from hawkers stationed around the base of a huge, red and black *torii* gate. Beyond, hidden in a thicket of zelkova trees, was the Meiji-Jingu shrine. Through the sonorous humdrum, came the light twinkling of bells.

I peered again at the throng of people – many passing through the gate – when my gaze came to rest upon a group of four girls off to my right. Huddled together, they were dressed in elaborate costumes of silver and white robes, each adorned with a flowing yellow bow in her hair.

Thwong. A sudden pulse of energy shuddered through me, followed by the commencement of low drumming. The girls broke apart, prancing in a circle like the deer of Nara. This was Cosplay, wasn't it? A kind of street performance where fans dress as their favorite anime or computer-game characters, acting out skits for public amusement. I'd heard of Cosplay, but not seen it before, so decided to take a better look.

I probably should have stayed away.

Hoisting my backpack onto my shoulders, I ambled across the concrete like an exiled samurai, fumbling between countless people in my path. 'Sumimasen,' I apologized again and again, ducking a bow with every collision – I was becoming adept at the art of apology. One woman's glare had that unequivocal translation: *stupid clumsy foreigner.*

I arrived at the street scene in a flustered mess, just in time to witness two of the four girls collapse to the floor in a heap, their blue face paint mirroring the featureless sky above. The crowd began to cheer, drowning out the shrieking of war cries coming from the two girls still standing – both of whom began prancing again. *Thwong, thwong, boom, boom, thwong*. Each bang on the gong quickly dissolved into a synthesized hiss seeping from a pair of black speakers off to the edge of the crowd. The girls on the floor threw rolls of red fabric into the air: symbolic streams of blood. Then, as quickly as it all started, it finished. The foursome huddled together again, brandishing peace signs with their fingers and blowing kisses towards a barrage of flashing cameras.

I backed away, somewhat disturbed by what I'd seen. I couldn't place the characters, the show, the game. Was that entertainment, though? Glorified massacre! I felt as though I'd discovered some kind of alien activity, one which I didn't understand ... but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. After all, I'd come to Japan to escape the things I *did* understand, the choices which I'd made, and the pain I'd caused, because the truth had been unavoidable.

I caught the charcoal scent of *takoyaki* again and decided to follow it. I walked away, each step thumping on the concrete like the now silent gong. *Thwong, thwong, boom, boom, thwong*.

On Foraging for Food

I flicked through the pages of a menu, studying images of various dishes while trying to guess as to their ingredients. A grizzly-looking chef slouched against the counter and grunted – he'd have to wait a little longer for my order. His forearms were covered in fish scales and the stink of *miso* broth spewed out on his breath.

Eating in Japan had become an ordeal. There seemed to be a surprisingly low abundance of restaurants with English translation menus and selecting meals had therefore become a game of chance – Lady Luck having evaded me so far.

I couldn't live off noodle-soup and rice crackers for the next three months.

That day, I'd traipsed around Tokyo's unforgiving side-streets in forty-degree heat, working up a sumo-sized appetite in the process. Fortunately, the sushi bar I sat in was locally renowned for the size of its portions, and in particular, its signature dish: whole lobster.

What it wasn't renowned for was its English translation menus.

I drew the chef's attention, and using my fingers to indicate the quantity, pointed to the dishes I wanted. 'Five *futomaki*, seven *nigiri* and the lobster,' I said, in broken Japanese. I'd yet to learn the numbers beyond three (*san*). 'Arigato,' I added.

The chef looked confused, then shrugged, before dragging a chopping board close and nonchalantly kneading a pile of rice. I took a sip from my cup of complimentary *Sake* and gazed past him at a gigantic fish-tank which doubled as the back wall of the sushi bar. Amongst the numerous sea creatures – turtles, urchins, seahorses, etc. – was a particularly large carp with

orange and crimson fins; it looked less like a fish and more like the legendary phoenix, *Hou-ou*. It had little room to maneuver, and I empathized with its restricted environment.

The oppressive constraints of my life back home had been much the same, and like the carp, I had been floating aimlessly towards an undignified death. And that's why I fled to Japan ... one reason anyway.

'*Taberu*,' said the chef, sliding plate after plate of *futomaki* and *nigiri* across the counter; I knew that word, *taberu*, it meant 'eat'.

I looked at the dozen plates of food before me – realizing you ordered by the portion, not the individual item – then puffed out my cheeks. Well, I was hungry ...

'*Arigato*,' I said again, with as much sincerity as I could muster.

Once the chef was distracted, I began dissecting the parcels with my chopsticks. Rice mounds crumbled apart, slabs of raw fish looking like stranded whales on a pebbled beach. 'Yellow Submarine,' by *The Beatles*, filtered out through the speakers and I muttered along to the lyrics – I had to mutter for I didn't know the words, except for the title, of course. Two salarymen, who had clambered onto some stools beside me, began laughing and pointing. I smiled, then turned slightly askew, my back to them. God, how I'd wished I was on that submarine.

I didn't have too long to think about that though, for the grizzly-chef slammed a live lobster down on the counter before me, its antennas swirling in erratic circles as it strained to escape. I flinched, once again drawing the attention of the two salarymen. They pointed again; they laughed *again*. Without warning, the chef sliced the lobster in half, discarding its tail from view, before placing its torso upright. He then positioned his cleaver between its mouth. My jaw clenched as it let out an ear-piercing scream. Then, with one solid movement, the chef brought the cleaver down, splitting the lobster in two.

Placing one half into a bowl of steaming broth, he slid the dish across the counter, then shouted, '*taberu!*'

I looked down at the lobster, it's one remaining antenna hanging limp over the bowl's edge like a broken twig, the broth now murky with the juices of that mangled crustacean.

I sighed.

It seemed that knowing what I was ordering wasn't any better than being oblivious, so I pushed the bowl away, grabbed a menu, and returned to my game of chance ...

On Somewhere to Sleep

My hostel looked out onto the Shibuya Crossing: the famous black and white intersection at the dense heart of Tokyo. The crossings were an 'attraction' which I knew about before arriving in

Japan, and locating myself next to them seemed a very cool idea at the time, if not only for the convenience of its central location.

Two nights in and my mistake became apparent.

A country-boy from the rolling pastures of Wiltshire, I was comfortable with midnight owl-calls and fox-cries, not blaring horns, ticking signals and florescent neon lights; especially ones which pulsed through my room's thin curtains as though warning of an impending nightmare – but to have a nightmare, I'd have to sleep and that wasn't happening.

Whenever I felt myself drifting on the edge of dreams, faces from home appeared just behind my eyelids – sad, sullen faces, asking why.

- *You can't just upsticks and leave.*
- *Are you crazy, you don't know anyone there!*
- *How will you get by?*
- *How could you do this to me?*
- *Do you even care about me at all?*

Each night repeated: the same faces, the same voices, the same pulsing neon lights.

On Being Alone

I took a daytrip to Kamakura. From Shinjuku Station, I caught an early-morning bullet-train which would deposit me in the ancient capital in less than an hour. I dozed in my plush chair, with a matcha-green-tea, and watched the landscape as it whirred by outside: a soulless mix of concrete, steel and glass. However, it soon gave way to water-logged rice paddies, Japanese houses with ornate roofing, and Shinto-shrines enshrined in lush overgrowth. The early light played over the land, filling both it, and me, with a golden warmth. I alighted on arrival and headed for the first of many temples that day.

At Kenchō-ji – a huge temple complex of towering dark-wooden halls and pagodas – I became entangled with an American tourist group. The last thing I wanted was to make small talk with strangers, to explain why I was alone in Japan, but I wandered along with them, waiting for an opportunity to break away. When they all stopped to film a procession of monks in navy robes, emerging from a side building, I hanged back, then slipped down a narrow alleyway between two pagodas.

I stepped out into a small, secluded courtyard, facing onto a freshly graveled Zen Garden – complete with little red bridges, spirit shrines and a pond. I would have been alone had it not been for a woman in the far corner. She was resting with her forearms against the fence which bordered the garden and was staring longingly at concentric circles raked into the white gravel.

It was a hot day, a clear blue dome overhead, and the courtyard was exposed, the only shade being under the awning of a small veranda. I sat there and took a few minutes to rest. The bustle of Kenchō-ji's main thoroughways seemed a world away now, and the grating – though not unpleasant – sound of cicadas filled the air.

After some time, the woman approached, removed her wide-brimmed navy hat, then indicated – through gestures – that she'd like to shelter from the sun, too. Could she sit next to me? Moving my backpack, I nodded. I tried to remain indifferent, but I couldn't help noticing how white her skin was, and how it contrasted deeply with her black hair, cut just below her ears in a bob. In my peripheral vision, I studied her, placing her at around ten years older than me – forty, perhaps. She had a certain calmness in her eyes, and the way her flowery yellow dress flowed around her knees stirred something within me – something I long thought had died. She was staring at my camera, and the longer we sat in silence, the more anxious I became. I felt relentless urge to speak.

'It's very beautiful,' I said in English, swallowing the last word, and gesturing towards the Zen garden.

The woman looked at me and smiled, then said, 'yes, beautiful.' Those English words sounded so unusual with her Japanese intonation – somewhat alluring. Then she said, 'you American?'

'English.'

'Ah ... you like David Beckham?'

'No.'

'You right, David Beckham dickhead.'

I burst out laughing, not expecting such a comment. She joined me and we giggled over the oddest of connections. Our laughing soon petered out and we sat quietly for a while, just listening to the cicadas. Then she stood, smoothed down her dress, and replaced her hat, before turning and flashing me one last smile.

'Bye bye,' she said, stepping out into the sunlight. I watched her walk across the courtyard and disappear down the narrow alleyway from which I'd come half-an-hour earlier.

Given the sheer number of people in Kenchō-ji temple, in Kamakura – in Japan in general – and given that I was staying in Tokyo, I knew I'd never see that woman again. I didn't know her name, her interests, anything about her really, except that she wore a flowery yellow dress, a navy wide-brimmed hat, had the whitest skin I'd ever seen, and that she thought David Beckham was a dickhead.

And in return, she'd never know that she helped revive something in me, something for which I wouldn't become fully aware of for another week or so ...

On Finding Oneself

It was as if Bill Murray had been keeping the seat warm for me. I was in the Park Hyatt Tokyo – fifty-second floor – in the New York Bar and perched on the very stool the actor had used for countless scenes in *Lost in Translation*. And, for the first time in weeks, I felt myself beginning to relax. When I looked behind me, huge glass windows offered expansive views across the Tokyo skyline. On that night, it was surprisingly quiet, and visibility was perfect.

A pristinely dressed barman, in a black apron, approached and asked, ‘*nani ga yoroshii, desu ka?*’ My Japanese was coming along, and I caught a few off-words. He was asking what I wanted to drink – at least, I thought so.

‘Suntory whiskey,’ I replied. ‘*Arigato.*’

The barman smiled, his carefully groomed facial hair curving up with his lips. He nodded, then busied himself with the drink. It felt good to get some Japanese right, the words were beginning to sound natural on my tongue. I ignored the fact that I’d ordered the same as all Westerners; he’d probably have brought me that drink, even if I’d asked for a Tom Collins.

A soft violin rendition of ‘Only You’ by *Yazoo*, filtered through the room, complimenting the deep purple décor in a mysterious kind of way – as though the music was born from the memory of conversations held in that bar; that’s how I felt, as odd as it was. I hummed the tune under my breath, while looking around the room. Besides the barman and me, there was only one other couple, in evening dress, nestled in comfy chairs by the windows. They sipped cocktails, fingers interlocked, admiring the view. They looked happy. I hoped they were.

‘Enjoy your drink, sir,’ said the barman, in flawless English.

I Picked up the tumbler he’d placed before me, nodded back with a smile, then took a sip. The crisp nectar rolled over my tongue like a tiny tsunami. The very drink Bill Murray had ordered. Finally, I was having a good time ... *a Suntory ti-*. I shook my head chuckled to myself.

I slipped off the stool and ambled around the room, running my fingers along the smooth lid of a grand piano, before stopping short at the windows. The flickering lights of Tokyo flowed to the horizon like glitter in a black sea.

The ebb and flow of life.

Before my escape to Japan, the stability of my world had crumbled beneath me – I was cut adrift and suffocating. Everything had hit a roadblock, and I couldn’t reverse or navigate around it. My career was stale, passed over for promotion again and again. Family feuds festered and I was constantly caught in the middle: the damn peace-keeper. And as for my relationship ...

They were all at their natural conclusions. I had to go, I had to leave the pain behind, no matter who it hurt.

My life in England – as it were – had died.

But as I studied my glittery reflection in the glass, as I let the whisky warm my body, and as I listened to the soft violin version of ‘Only You,’ I felt a sense that it was the *right* decision – for everyone.

I’d been in Japan three weeks, and until that moment, I hadn’t really felt any different to before I’d arrived. My self-inflicted exile hadn’t soothed my pain, the *thwong, thwong, boom, boom, thwong*, that pounded through my head every time I thought of ‘home’ hadn’t subsided. Even the jaunty tune of ‘Yellow Submarine’ was a red herring; a submarine is still a submarine, submerged underwater, constricted, and sinking ever deeper. I *was* that gong at the Meiji-Jingu shrine; the symbolic massacre of the Cosplay girls; the screeching, dismembered lobster; the pulsing neon light. I had been all those things – those loud, negative things ...

... but I had to be them. They’d brought me to that moment, in a quiet bar, sipping a Suntory whiskey, and realizing that my exile had moved me on for the better – even if it had taken a while.

And who knows, perhaps there was someone else out there for me, in that glittering ocean: someone who might stir my soul ... again ...

Japan, for all her quirkiness, was beginning to rid me of my pain.

My life there was just beginning, and my grieving for what was left behind was like the *Sakura* – the cherry blossoms – it had been visible in abundance, briefly, before being blown away on a spring breeze.

I swallowed the remainder of my drink, then wandered back towards the bar. As I approached, I stopped, allowing the couple who had been sitting by the window to pass. They flashed me a courtesy bow, then left, and it was just me.

Only You.

I ordered another whiskey, then sat back on my stool and gazed again at the spectacular cityscape. Gongs, submarines and a violin rendition of an eighties classic: the soundtrack of my time in Japan. So, what would come next?

Nothing.

For the bar was silent, it was all mine. I was *Lost in Tokyo*.

And I was the happier for it.

David Missen is an English Language Lecturer in Bristol, England. He now lives (once again) in the countryside of Wiltshire, with his wife and two young daughters, where he writes, drinks

copious amounts of green tea, and reads (almost exclusively) Japanese literature and travel writing. He plans to return to Japan ... someday.

Redwing

Sarah Robin

We gather at dusk, all twenty-six of us. There's a buzz of excitement and anticipation in the air for the elaborate event we've waited all year for – and now it's finally time. "This year's migration to Scotland will commence in twenty minutes!" Old Roger yells, pacing the coastline with his scrawny old legs. He's the eldest of the flock and rather bossy if you ask me.

This is my first trip abroad and I'm *so* excited! I thought our Scandinavian coast was stunning, but they say the Scottish Highlands is something else; more raw, more rugged, more *green*. Not the fresh, light, picturesque green we have here in Norway; they have dark green grass, bold in color and it moves violently in the wind as if it has its own rough Scottish accent. Huge highland cows roam the vast landscape with their impressive pair of horns upon their heads. Bagpipes are played every now and again, their distinctive sound carrying for miles.

The wild berries there are said to be the sweetest and juiciest you can find in northern Europe, perfect for an early winter feast after our long journey. I must admit - I am a little nervous about the journey itself. Some of the older flock have tried to scare me with stories of birds hitting the deep waves of the North Sea and drowning in the perilous ice-cold water during rough weather. 500 miles is a mighty distance for a young redwing like me, but this is what we redwings do and I'm going to give it all I've got.

"Fifteen minutes to go!" Old Roger paces over to me, dodging a crisp packet tumbling towards him in the breeze. "You'll do mighty fine, boy" he barks authoritatively, seeing the fear in my eyes. "The first one's the hardest but by far the most rewarding" he reassures me before stomping over to a group of females fighting over an object they've found on the ground. "It's just another piece of rubbish the humans have left behind, just leave it - it's not good for us." I hear him yell as a milk bottle top rolls out from the frenzied mass of curious, pecking beaks.

I pace towards the cliff edge to check out the wind speed and quietly take in the views of my home before I leave for the winter, not to return until early April when spring has well and truly started to blossom. A plastic bag clumsily summersaults past me, interrupting my sentimental daydream. It eventually gets caught in a tree half a mile away. Damn humans.

"Ten minutes!" The flock starts to rush around now, the noise of them talking getting louder; like they're all individual parts of a great big engine getting fired up and ready to go. The excitable atmosphere makes my heart pound hard and I feel increasingly energised for the task that lies ahead. I take one last look around, the array of colours of various plastics shine almost fluorescently against the grey of the cliff rock; I wonder if there are scenes such as this where we're going.

“Five minutes!” My stomach overturns and adrenaline kicks in. This is it. I go to make my way over to the others when I feel something pull on my leg. I look down to see an elastic band wrapped around the top of my foot, grounding me to the hard, rocky surface of the cliff edge. I try and free myself by pecking the band, flapping my wings furiously to keep me from falling over.

“Into your positions!” No! Wait for me! I scrape my foot against the other in a frantic, frustrated effort to join the others before it’s too late. I fall awkwardly onto my wing, accidentally bending it backwards and breaking it. I shout for help but as I lie wounded, I see twenty-five pairs of wings soar above me into the night sky, their shadows pass over me from the bright white light of the moon.

Sarah Robin is a new writer from England who likes to focus on conveying emotion and being ‘in the moment’ within her work. Robin has had work published in anthologies and literary magazines as well as being a competition winner for both fiction and poetry. She is also the Secretary of the Lancashire Authors’ Association.

My Camino

Nico Mara

My friend Paddy announced that he was going to walk The Camino. ‘To find himself,’ he declared.

He was standing right in front of me, in O’Dwyer’s Pub. It was the same place that he was every Friday night for as long as anyone could remember. Everyone knew they could find him there, no need to go searching.

When I told him that he laughed at me and looked at me as if I was mad. He then went on to explain that he was going to Spain for a week, walking a hundred miles to get a certificate to tell the world that he had completed “The Camino de Santiago” and during that walk he was going to commune with nature and discover things about himself.

He thought I was mad? After walking a mile in the Spanish heat, without an Irish pub as his destination, Paddy was going to collapse crying like a baby at the side of the road.

Everyone in the pub that night was laughing at Paddy and his ‘mad notions’ as they called it but I understood the journey he was talking about embarking on. I didn’t feel it was necessary to travel thousands of miles and spend lots of money to get there, when the real trip he was going on was the journey within himself. After all, that’s what ‘The Camino’ translated as, ‘The Journey’.

I undertake that journey almost every day myself and I didn’t have to go on a plane to get there. I don’t get a certificate of completion at the end of it, but I do get peace of mind and answers, sometimes to questions I didn’t even know I had.

It is a short narrow cul-de-sac near my home. It is about 2km in length, with about six houses scattered along and grass growing in the center of the road in parts. It is a quiet road; the only traffic is generally residential. It is agricultural land and traffic jams and rush hour constitute the few weeks in the summer that make up silage season. There are fields on both sides where the curious cows walking beside me, keeping me company for as far as their field boundaries allow. As you pass the same field on your way back, the cattle often have lost interest and can be seen deep in the field or grazing languidly at peace with their world.

The soundtrack to your daily walk is the birdsong and the gentle rustle of the wind through the leaves. You become aware of the seasons, the cold frosty winter mornings give way to the bright spring mornings full of promise and new life. The fields come alive with wildflowers and the rabbit population soars.

It is a road of memories and wonder. I pass the tree under which my cousin and I built a secret den, hidden from the world until a neighbor walking past with her elderly mother called out a greeting. Both the neighbor and her mother have passed on since and with them a window to the not-so-distant past. I remember listening with disbelief when the neighbor accompanied me on one of my walks and pointed out an old passage made from years of walking through a field that she informed me was her daily route to school. I know where the old school had been located and when I exclaimed at the distance, she explained that I thought it was a long walk because I knew the way by the road, where I had to take into account turns and road junctions. She and her young friends were taking the direct route – a straight line through the fields.

Another neighbor informed me that when she was newly married and moved to the area, herself and her mother-in-law used walk up my bothereen to collect fresh eggs from the farmer at the conclusion of the cul-de-sac. The farmyard and fields are still used but the house itself, long abandoned sits there hidden by trees and flowers planted decades before and continue to bloom annually untended by human hands.

It is a road where the past and the present walk silently hand in hand. The abandoned buildings that once housed families and now animals give testament to lives lived long ago. The stone walls built by unknown hands, without modern tools hold firm through the decades, perhaps centuries.

These same walls possibly provided a vantage point in our more troubled past when neighbors fought against neighbors, family against family.

Some of my best ideas come while walking this route. My problems have been known to have their seriousness lessened and solutions to problems have been found on this short road. It offers a balm against the pressures of life.

It may not have the religious significance of 'The Camino'. It's obviously not as well known and is only used by us locals, who are lucky enough to live near it, but on this short road can be found peace and clarity of mind. It is my personal 'Camino' or because it is in Ireland, I can call it my 'Turas'.

Nico says, "I live in rural Ireland. I have previously had a couple of short stories printed in Readers Digest and local newspapers and magazines under a different name."

The Final Stage

Jessica Woodward

Earth, 2087

"Morning, folks...and welcome to the final stage...of your Plant-Powered Railroad Odyssey..."

The train driver sounded even more lethargic than yesterday. Florence wondered if his voice had been dulled by the speaker system or if he was actually bored by the journey already. Must be his fiftieth Odyssey or something, so fair enough, but the marshland outside was stunningly reedy and deliciously damp, and Florence personally couldn't imagine being bored by it ever.

Today was the crucial day for Florence, so she had breakfasted early. She'd gulped down her artisan coffee and wrapped half of her handcrafted croissant in a napkin for later. She'd reached the viewing carriage second only to the strange passenger in the Panama hat, who seemed to dwell there permanently. They wished each other a polite good morning and Florence settled into a seat on the left. Perfect. Uninterrupted views in the desired direction.

"In approximately ten minutes' time...we will pass the flamingo reservation...on our left..."

Yes! Yes! Yes!

"Passengers will not want to miss this once-in-a-lifetime view...of flocks of pink birds...majestically stalking the land..."

Florence's phone vibrated. She glanced down and saw a group alert from the space agency. *REMINDER: Everyone to be at the launch centre next Thursday. This is it, guys. Make sure your goodbyes are said, your one bag packed, your vitamins taken. You've done great work these past two years. There will be media attention, but we will handle it. All you need to do is be here, ready to take off to Pluto. Any final queries, give me a call. Thanks, Kurt.*

Florence swiped away the notification and tried to ignore the quickening of her heartbeat. Life felt so big at the moment and yet so frail, so small. The mission that lay ahead of her, for which she'd been selected out of thousands, would cement her name into human history, but it would also obliterate her from the Earth, from nature, from the things and people she loved, in one split-second burst of steam and biofuel fumes. A one-way ticket to Pluto. It felt real now. If she was completely honest with herself, it hadn't felt real before, not even at the appointments with psychologists or during those long, dull stints inside the Pluto Living Conditions Simulator. It had

just been a game she needed to win to feel good about herself. To feel impressive. To impress who?

Florence took her flamingo book out of her handbag. She'd owned this book since the age of six. It was covered in crayon hearts she'd drawn in those early years, later to be supplemented by serious biro notes for her degree. Her undergraduate dissertation on the lifecycle of the flamingo lay on the bedside table in her cabin. All her other flamingo books had been sold on eBay or given to charity shops, apart from a school prize that her parents had insisted on keeping as a memento. This little paperback right here on Florence's lap, *What Can I Learn About the Flamingo?*, was coming to Pluto in the one bag. She'd been determined to see some flamingos in real life, finally, before her departure.

"Into flamingos, huh?"

It was the strange passenger in the Panama hat.

Before Florence could reply, the driver's weary voice cut in. "Five minutes now to the flamingos..." Other passengers had begun to mill among the left-hand seats, looking for the best spots.

Sitting down next to her with a companionable grin, the hatted passenger tried again. "You're keen on flamingos?"

"More than keen," Florence admitted. "For the first thirteen years of my life they were all I thought about. I'm the ultimate flamingo nerd."

"You ever seen them for real before?"

"This is the first and only time."

"How does that feel?"

"It's the most exciting thing ever --" Florence stopped herself, remembering that next week's mission was of course more exciting.

"Now, as for me, I've always preferred cormorants. Let me tell you about the mating habits of the cormorant." And the passenger proceeded to tell at uncomfortably close range. Lolling forward in the seat, boots on the windowsill, almost completely blocking Florence's view, the passenger talked and breathed and leant closer and talked again until:

"One minute to the flamingos... Passengers should ensure they are seated in the viewing carriage in good time... We pass the reservation quickly..."

Florence shifted into the next seat, but the hatted passenger simply shifted with her. Once again, the boots rose onto the sill and the hat-brim loomed, eliminating everything outside except a wisp of cloud in the pale sky.

Florence felt quite sick with resentment. Did this passenger have no sense of others' wishes? She had told them how much she loved flamingos. She had said it as plain as could be. Why block--?

"Thirty seconds to go... Passengers wishing to take photos should have their phones switched on and ready..."

Florence pulled her phone out of her handbag, stood up and firmly went to sit elsewhere. She had lost her carefully chosen spot but at least she would see maybe half of the view, taking into account the grey curls of the old man in front and the wide straw hat of his wife. She tried to blink away the tears forming at the corners of her eyes. Mustn't be sentimental. It was only a colony of flamingos. Just a little treat to end her time on Earth.

"Hey, why'd you go? I was saying this is my fifth Odyssey and no cormorants yet, but knowing what I know about their habitat preferences, I'm willing to bet we'll see one or two tomorrow evening if the weather holds." The passenger was looming in front of her again and she could see their face closely now -- the open pores, the unkempt eyebrows, the nasal hairs. She could see the eager gleam in their green eyes. What she could not see any longer was the window.

"Please shut up!" Florence heard herself shouting, as if from a long distance away. "This is my only chance to see the flamingos! Please get out the way!" She battled forwards, not caring where she was going as long as there was clear glass at the end of it. Becoming dimly aware of the tutting and whispering of other passengers, whose heads were turning in her direction, she muttered, "So embarrassing, please stop, please stop," until the corner of the panama hat, which had been trying to follow her, ducked out of her peripheral vision.

Florence spotted a square foot of carpet by the window, lay down, and pressed her nose against the glass. She arched her back to avoid the bamboo-fibre sandals and linen plimsolls poking out from the front seats. She tried to ignore the faint whiff of sweaty feet.

"And here..they are...the flamingos..."

Yes, there they were. Pink, lanky, hook beaked. Stalking and lurching and teetering in the sunshine. She had made it. She was seeing them.

Relief flooded through her.

She took as many photos as she possibly could.

As the pink shapes were whisked away and the train glided on, she thought of the dry, grey dust of Pluto and told herself, *I will keep this marsh and this sunshine in my heart forever.*

A thick finger prodded her shoulder and a familiar voice spoke. "Tough for you that it's the only time you'll see them. Makes you really think about the wonders of Earth, doesn't it?"

Florence turned to acknowledge the hatted passenger. “Look, I’m so sorry I was rude, but it matters so much to me, and -- Kurt?!”

Next to the hatted passenger stood the head of the Pluto mission, whose text message she had received earlier. He was frowning, but not unkindly.

“Kurt, what are you doing here?” Florence spluttered. “I thought it was all go before launch day.”

“It is, and this is part of it. The final stage, which we don’t tell you about. I watched you with those flamingos. My colleague here from the Subtle Research Collective has been watching you throughout your holiday, and before that, when you went out for the last dinner with your family.”

Florence felt a nervous tingle she could not quite identify. The train began to shake a little as it crossed rockier terrain. The other passengers were starting to get up and stroll about.

“How did you feel, Florence, when you looked at those flamingos?”

“Well, I suppose I felt...happy. It was one of my happiest moments ever. It was something I’d always wanted.”

“And when you thought, the inconsiderate passenger was going to prevent you from seeing them?”

“Angry. Despairing.”

Kurt and his subtle colleague glanced significantly at one another. Kurt sat down next to Florence. “You are a living person, Florence. You love life. Earth still excites you.”

“Yes, but--”

“Do you want -- honestly, without thinking about the history books or your pride or anybody’s opinion of you -- do you want to spend the rest of your life analyzing dust samples and eating vitamin pills in a titanium cubicle? Do you want never to breathe real air again? Never to see grass? Never to see another plant or animal, let alone the people you love? Are you ready for that, in the name of scientific advancement?”

Florence’s cheeks were burning with shame. She had let herself down. She had let everybody down, just for those stupid flamingos, and she was going to bin that book on the way to the launch pad --

“This is not shameful, Florence. It’s about what’s right for you. Yes, we’re keen to send humans alongside the bots for a better all-round conditions analysis, but not humans who are *too* human, or they’ll flake before they even arrive, come on, Florence.”

Florence sighed. The nervous tingle was resolving itself into something sturdier, more hopeful. Deep down, she knew.

“We’ll email you some info about postgrad ornithology programmes. You have not passed the final stage. You’re staying right here on Earth.”

That flood of relief again.

Jessica Woodward is a rare books librarian at Magdalen College, Oxford. Her short stories have been published in several literary magazines and online outlets. She also writes plays, both for professional actors and for her own amateur group. She is an enthusiastic vegetable gardener.

Untitled

Henry John Jarvis

We were meandering south from Cancún, Mexico, Marta and myself, taking our time on the smell of an oily rag. Our loose plan was to travel by bus between places where we could work without visas, mainly for food or lodging. After a bewildering stay in Belize City, so blindingly vibrant, we arrived in sedentary Poptún, Guatemala, pretending to be carpenters by trade. We agreed to replace their outdoor furniture in exchange for a candlelight cabin in the moist forest of Petén-Veracruz, where fallen timber turns to rot and is gorged by termites, forever revealing the majestic ruins of Tikal to the fringes of the Selva Maya.

Flecked with leviathan caves, plunging cascades and horse-snake trails, the Finca Ixobel halfway along the road from Guatemala City to the peninsula Las Flores. The finca estate was owned by an American couple, who in the 1980s hacked and hewed across their wild property with machetes on horseback. Polaroids in the kitchen burst with the wild hedonism of yesterday’s traveller, but like Radiator Springs the finca at Poptún has fallen victim to bypass transport. The accepted route of the modern backpacker shoots by on the highway as they hightail it from the Mayan pyramids at Tikal round to Lake Atitlan and the city of Antigua before heading onwards to Nicaragua or Costa Rica, to be back in Europe for the start of term.

We mosied on to the sleepy Panamanian fishing village Santa Catalina, where folk legends of local surf fly down a peeling right, we turned old surfboards into benches and built a pizza oven at the behest of Julio the shoeless Italian, in exchange for a little outhouse. An alligator lived outside our place on the bank of the river, only metres from our front doorframe which had no door. After that, I wanted to go to Capurganá, in the Darién rainforest just across the border in Colombia, to see Rog, a friend of mine who owned a patch of land there.

There is no land travel between Panama and Colombia, owing to the impenetrable Darién Gap. This strip of dense forest and steep hills is naturally almost untraversable and is maintained roadless by smuggling gangs who transport drugs and people across the border from Colombia to

Panama. We took a flight from Panama City to Puerto Obaldía in the south of Panama, from which we took a 30 minute boat ride around the border to Capurganá in Colombia. In Capurganá we would stay with Rog and his wife Greydis, who had recently purchased some land there and were building a house. Then we would travel by boat along the north coast of Colombia by boat to Necoclí and then by a series of buses through the states of Antioquia, Cordoba, Sucre, Bolivar, Atlántico to Magdalena. In Santa Marta de Magdalena we would meet Jay, my old flatmate. The legendary light of Kansas City; inventor of the hurricane coffee.

The plane from Panama City to Puerto Obaldía was smaller than a minibus and we had to be weighed with our luggage. We unpacked our heaviest things in a toilet cubicle and went back to pick them up after we had checked in. On the plane itself I could have reached over the shoulder of the pilot and touched the controls. Descending the pilot dived at the jungle, at the moment he was about to hit the trees he banked on the berm of the hill face and dropped back towards the sea, piercing the cordillera between two peaks, revealing in the hollow a small port town with a landing strip. Nobody was really staying over in Puerto Obaldía except maybe the pilot, who arrived with supplies for the town. Everyone on the plane ate a plate of fish with rice and yuca at the local restaurant before ambling down to the jetty from which a lancha would motor us over to Colombia. The luggage that had just arrived from Colombia was being torn apart for contraband, but the police weren't too worried about things going the other way. Our bags were thrown under tarpaulin.

“Pasaporte? Dale.”

With our fellow air-passengers we motored out into the break. The lancha only had a 20hp outboard motor and fairly potted along the coast past Cueva de los Lagartos (Alligator Cave), Punta el Faro (Lighthouse Point) and Playa la Miel (Honey Beach), moving from Panama to Colombia around the peninsula of Cabo Tiburón (Cape Shark), coming down past the smaller town of Sapzurro before landing the cove beach, La Caleta in Capurganá.

The bustling port at Capurganá was the fantastical Caribbean in my mind. Boxes of fruits and wares pass up the pontoon and motorbikes laden with poultry and paper wobble down the promenade, between folk milling and donkey carts crawling. The buildings are painted different colours on the shorefront, with deep wooden balconies and corrugated rooves that slope gently back to front and overhang the balcony. Behind the façade of the beachfront buildings, tropical trees billow from the beach back to the tallest mountains on the faint horizon.

We went to immigration to have our passports stamped and bought an ice cold pola -the word for beer- from a chiringuito and waited for Rog to pick us up. Shortly after he was there, shirtless with rolled up trousers and crocs on his feet, with a tattoo of a tiger draped across his shoulders. We hugged and I introduced Marta. We had another pola and bought a few more to take up to his place.

Rog had lived in Santa Marta when I did, and he was English too, although he'd lost touch with the language. He had met his Colombian partner Greydis there and they had, by and by, bought a plot of land here in Capurganá. It was bold really, given that Capurganá is given over by the federal government to the paramilitary gangs formed by criminals in the shadow of the civil war,

who operate the trafficking routes to Panama. They were fair, Rog told me, but ran the town with an iron fist, readily assassinating anybody who threatened the integrity of the smuggling trade.

“The last person to be assassinated was only a couple of weeks gone,” Rog explained. “He was a young guy, walking a bunch of Omani people through the jungle to Panama. On the way he stole everything they had and left them there, naked I think. El Cocodrilo calls the shots. He had 2 men with guns walk from either side of town towards the middle and when they found the guy, tomando pola...” Rog pointed with 2 fingers and turned them to the sky.

We walked away from the beach along a colourful street which led onto a large plaza. The street was paved and baked with sunlight. The decorated shopfronts opened out onto tiled patios, raised up for when the heavy rains washed down the hills. The rooves were either corrugated steel or gardened azoteas. At the plaza everything became dusty. The ground was dusty, and the bandstand was dusty to. There was a dusty wooden beam for hitching horses and donkeys and behind it all a dusty runway. Most people seemed to use donkeys for carting and for transport and Rog explained that there were no cars, so it was motorbike or donkey.

We ducked through a gap in the airfield fence and walked up the runway. The runway doubled as a thoroughfare, adults walking up and down and children cycling around and around. Capurganá as a town is an interesting notion really, impossible as it is to reach it by land. It was relatively unknown until the 1970s. There were the Cuna people of the region, who mainly inhabit the famously breathtaking San Blas archipelago that sits off Capurganá’s coast, alongside an array of people wishing to escape the eyes of federal Colombia for safety from the war or something personal. In the 1970s the locals, led by the spirited Señora Navas, built the airfield which now bears the name Aeropuerto Narcisa Navas. This allowed eco-tourism to develop as an industry in a jungle town of paradisaical beauty without cars or electricity, but that sleepy Caribbean sun casts deep shade over the smuggler’s cove where society’s underbelly traffic drugs and people.

After the runway the town began to dwindle before we came across a township on our left.

“This is the Invasion,” Rog told me. “It is built by the paramilitares narcotraficantes. A lot of them would have been in FARC and the guerilla groups through the conflict and came here at the about 10 years ago to be traffickers. They have installed a transformer to siphon electricity off the town. El Cocodrilo lives there,” he pointed.

The township was about 30 houses packed into 4 small blocks. I could see the transformer, a metallic parasite sprouting ungainly cables. It was menacing, but also a beautiful thing. Women hung clothes to dry; children kicked a football back and forth.

The next thing we passed was the rubbish dump, a smouldering heap of cringing plastic and smoking cartons fumigating a clearing in the jungle. A donkey and cart collected the town’s rubbish on a daily round and cast it onto the infernal heap. On the site lived a horse, 3 condors and a donkey, each of whom grazed and picked at the freshest offloads for sustenance. Either side of the tip lived a man. On one side lived a black man, who ran a convenience store. On the other lived a white man who carved zany furniture. Neither man’s family lived at their business

location, but each man himself hardly left. They both seemed content in a pickled way, perpetually stoned on burning plastic.

“I try not to throw any rubbish in the bin,” Rog said. “It’s no good for the environment.” It certainly was an eyesore. Rog’s place was further still up the hill, through a shallow river we could not cross without wetting our feet. Rog said how in the rainy season they wouldn’t be able to get down to town.

Greydis met us at the house, with Bandi the beautiful Staffy pup, who kept Greydis right at her wit’s end. Greydis and Rog were living in a shack of sorts while the main house was built. The foundations to the proper house had been laid already and the pit was serving as a de-facto rubbish bin. In true Grand Designs style, they were at a standstill while funds replenished. In their current lodge they had a double mattress and enough space to potter around. Rog had built the roof with adjacent slants, although he had been mistaken in doing so, he was told afterwards by his ex-military neighbour, as it would not keep out the monsoon rains. While we were there, Rog, the army man and I felled trees with machetes to form the struts of the new roof.

Rog told me that their plot had been jungle when they bought it, and that he had hacked it out with a machete. We had a tent with us that we were going to stay in, but there were still stumps all over the floor, and anyway there were poisonous snakes and frogs, so we laid down some wooden planks on which to pitch our tent. I must say that sleeping on top of wooden boards is an awful experience, and we were only able to manage it because of the gin and wine that we bought with us. We went to bed blind drunk every night we were there apart from the last one, which was only decided to be the last one after we had to sleep a night sober.

The conditions were as rustic as is imaginable. There was no electricity when the generator wasn’t rumbling and there was no running water. The toilet was a wooden cubicle, in which there was a hole filled with sawdust. After going to the loo, the sawdust had to be emptied and buried elsewhere. The cooking situation was fine really, with a gas stove, as Rog was a chef by trade. The initial idea of the place had been to build a hostel, with a bar and a goat, although this idea had been replaced by a garden and restaurant.

Approaching a mile into the guts of the rainforest, high on the Serranía del Baudó, we were swathed in the greens and colours of the jungle flora. An enormous mango tree draped across the clearing and would shower the heavenly fruit in the new year. It was the season of breadfruit, like a conker in a coat of white flesh that tasted something akin to vanilla ice cream. Bananas and coffee berries flanked the pathway and further up the hill a patch of 40 pineapples were growing.

“It’s risky to be a piña farmer,” Rog told me. “They take an eon to ripen, and everyone can see them. Apparently, the week they’re ready someone will come and steal them in the night.” It made sense. I’ve thought about it a lot since.

We spent a blissful few days there. In the daytime we hiked over the border to Panama and Playa la Miel, or right up the hill to El Cielo, Heaven, an estate owned by the moll of an old gangster, who is away for a long time. She lets tourists wander round the natural posadas, waterfalls and ancient trees for a fee and a stop off at her restaurant. There is also Mirador El Paraiso, Paradise

Lookout, with its own stepping stones and pools and hammock on the hilltop. One day we stayed in to let Rog and Greydis go out. They have no way of locking up their valuables so as a rule they keep one person at the property at any one time.

Everything revolves around smuggling in Capurganá. The weed is sold in kilo bricks. Bands of people from the Middle East follow guides out into the jungle. One day we were swinging on the hammock minding our own business when a group led by El Cocodrilo walked straight across our clearing. Rog said something but it fell on deaf ears. He didn't say it a second time.

Capurganá was some kind of tainted paradise. No car had ever left its tyre track. Poisonous frogs nibble sweet berries. Palm trees sprout from fallen coconuts. Litter burns on a mound out of town. Waterfalls splash and trickle to the sandy cove. Pitiful souls hike to America.

On the boat ride out we sat and looked out to sea. There were 3 seats on our side and 3 on the other. A guy my age sat next to me.

“Oye tonto”, his friend called him idiot from the other side of the boat. “You are going to get soaked over there.”

The boy hopped over to the seat by his friend and we all realised it was true, but the boy had taken the last seat on that side. For almost 3 hours on the boat we took wave after wave in the face and down our backs. A young boy behind me chattered his teeth to try and shake the blue out of his cheeks. We covered and shivered and prayed for it to be over. On the other side they whooped and took photographs, bouncing on every wave and clapping their joyous bums on their seats.

In Necoclí we lay in the equatorial sun and broiled life back into the marrow of our bones, and then we found the dusty bus depot and bused to a miserable shopping centre, where we ate the Colombian staple of stewed protein, rice and fried plantain on plastic tables and chairs, with ice cold Aguila beer and fresh lemonade.

On the next leg we were held up for over an hour first in the queue that built up behind an accident. The accident happened in the mangrove swamps between Barranquilla and Cienaga, where poverty is inescapable and mosquitoes swarm mercilessly. People make a roadside trade selling peanuts and crisps to the passing traffic. The vehicle that crashed was a petrol tanker. It had come off the road and was lying in a ditch. A swarm of motorcycles swelled around the crash, from each of which jumped men holding buckets, bottles and any other receptacle imaginable.

“Here they come,” I whistled as the motorbikes roared in. I loved to watch the Costeño folk. “Woowee they won't let this one get away.”

Some of the men clambered up on top of the tanker. They pulled the lid off the tanker and dunked their vessels one by one, passing them down to the men below. Containers filled with petrol were being whisked away on motorbikes amid a carousel of men scuttling and jabbering.

“Ay no! Por favor no!” Marta pleaded as a boy had leapt into the tanker and disappeared inside. He was taking containers and passing them up filled.

“He’s going to die,” I thought aloud. “He’s been in there for 2 minutes already.”

“Loco dale!” Cried Marta. “No lo puedo creer”

The boy was hauled out probably 5 minutes later and down on the ground he couldn’t support his own weight. He was slumped over a motorbike and at once the whole gang of bikes sped away into the trees with their coke bottles full of fuel.

We filtered through and rumbled on to Santa Marta, that crazy heat caked town where the sea is warm as a slept in bath and placid as a duck. The slow road never fails to amaze. Traipsing the scenic route across Central America landed us at the door of Jay, who was waiting for us with his box of surprises. One last sleepless hurrah on the sacred coast of the Ikas, the Wiwas, the Kogis and the Kankuamos.

Henry says, “I mainly live in Sydney, Australia, with my girlfriend and our 2 cats, but I am back home in England staying with my family and putting into words some of my experiences from a few years ago. I love to speak Spanish and explore the life that surrounds that language.”

A Day in the Life of a Solo Traveler. Female. 35

Saar Dediu

My packet of cigarettes is empty, but I still have the lighter he gave me. I met Julien at Lisa’s Café Americain last night. Let me start from the beginning.

Wednesday, December 13th

I had been travelling solo for nearly two months and the heat was getting to me. Maybe it was more than that, but I focused on the heat because I wasn’t far into my Southeast Asia trip – the one I had been saving for since I turned 30 – and I simply could not accept the discomfort as anything else; it had to be the dry, deep, non-stop heat.

And yet, it felt ridiculous complaining about it having spent most of my life in London, where regardless of the season, the wet cold crinkles souls like cheap cotton. Also, after my five-countries-in-five-months adventure, I would have to return to Oslo, where winter is covered by tall snow. I thought I’d embrace the warmth but five years of savings to avoid another Scandinavian winter and I found myself in Laos drinking black coffee. Alone. Complaining.

Oh boy, had I settled comfortably into my frustrations.

I was in the common room of the hostel I booked for the price and not the amenities, and the Chinese couple I briefly met a few days before sat at one end of the long wooden table filling the space. They were young, in their twenties perhaps, and they were sat facing each other but on their respective phones, slowly eating breakfast. This bothered me. Then, at the other end of the table, scrolling on a bright screen as well, was the Australian girl who arrived the night before last and who's name I had already forgotten. She cared little for interacting anyway, so no bother there either. And behind the Aussie was the receptionist, a local girl with broken English, in the corner at her small, improvised desk counting the hours until her shift was over. She really wasn't bothered.

This had been Luang Prabang so far.

The only landlocked country in Southeast Asia, Laos is mostly mountainous terrain, and as soon as I landed, wild green peaks surrounded me. My expectations were high, I think. Perhaps higher than they should have been considering my mood this time of year. Luang Prabang was the royal capital and seat of government of the Kingdom of Laos until the Pathet Lao takeover in 1975. But the £5 a night hostel, including breakfast, didn't feel all that royal to me. I should've booked a room to myself for Christmas, I kept thinking as I struggled with the cold coffee. I could be alone and sulking over the holidays instead of having to perform for a fresh new audience every day until the end of the year.

No sooner had my thought concluded, that I met two new dormitory mates.

The room was directly off the common one, and my fears that it would be loud were incredibly well founded. Bunk beds against the grey walls, I wasn't keen on having to play friends, especially since given the proximity, I had the confused impression we had to; like in a school dorm. But the turnover had been quick, leaving little time for that. Luckily.

First, Mari walked into the room. A tall, skinny 24-year-old French girl who finished her Marketing degree and before any real work, came travelling, solo. Typical. I met many Marias on the road, all trying to find themselves. I thought about George, the English boy I met in Thailand last month, as Mari also wondered why she encountered on her journey so many solo backpackers; what all of us were searching for, and if we were all lost.

I nodded along to the conversation and remembered Moira, who previously occupied the bed. A woman in her fifties on a similar journey to Mari. Because yes, maybe we were all searching for meaning? Answers? Experiences?

Then Theresa walked into the room, a German girl my age but with half her head shaved. She's travelling with her boyfriend who got a bed in the boys' dormitory. They left their jobs to travel the world for a year using something called WorkAway, which allows you to work for accommodation. They left Berlin and travelled south, slowly making their way into Asia. Mad, isn't it? Writing down your destination on a piece of paper, sticking your thumb out, and waiting for someone to stop and take you there. They've been sleeping on people's couches, in hostels,

and buses on their way to places they've never seen, to work for people they've never met. I mean, talk about having faith in strangers.

I shared too, just like in group therapy. Hello, my name is Anna, and I took a break from the stable job, the nice apartment, the quiet flow of things to avoid having to visit my family for Christmas again this year, and questions like, "*Are you seeing anyone? Don't you have a friend to come with you to your cousin's wedding in the summer? Have you thought about where your life is going?*" My favorite is always the concerned look my second cousin on my uncle's side, twice removed, loves to exchange with my aunt each time I say I'm doing well.

Why does no one believe me?

I'm joking, of course; I kept it simple, like they had probably done too. Because as we unpack our little backpacks every time we look for something – say an answer – only to pack them back again minutes later, that's what floods the mind: keep it simple.

Anyway, a few more jokes and travel stories in, and we went our own way for the rest of the day. My only plan was a bar in the evening. And so it went, random streets, temples, zig zagging my way through town markets, drinking too much iced coffee to ever sleep again, until I finally made my way to Café Americain.

This place sits on the corner of the Soukkhaseum road, not far from the sunrise viewpoint, which side note, does not show the promised sight. It's unassuming in the way it calls attention, with its white exterior shutters, and the white doorframe that opens to a room for cocktails. However, it was the woman on a poster hung on the door, with a cigarette in her mouth playing the accordion that caught my eye. And I stepped inside.

The small, elongated room came out of the 1950s, the elegant bar, the bar stools, the pictures on the wall, the dim lighting; the smoke clouds as the hours passed. The overpriced drinks, the eager chatters.

I sat down at a tall table by the narrow entrance, but Lisa invited me to sit at the bar on the one empty seat still available. She made the drinks and ran the place, which was otherwise empty. Well, apart from the group of four who came in after me and sat on the sofa by the windows. Three people along the bar turned to smile as I accepted the invitation, and I took my assigned seat next to them.

The appeal was immediately clear and multi-lingual. This was where foreigners stopped on their way to places, and on their way back. To see Lisa who came from Hungary to Luang Prabang 24 years ago for love, which didn't last. But her love for the town did, and she knew everyone, and everyone knew her. She gave the warmest hugs I thought, once I got mine.

Next to me at the bar was Charles from Singapore, and on my right, Janiv and Prya who were on holiday from India. That's it, that's where we started from and quickly dove into everything about our jobs and the best travelling tips, and shared memories of our best holiday ever. We learned it was Charlie's birthday and that he had left his job recently for another one he was

more passionate about. That's common among employed travelers. The couple came for the food, and because Laos was the last country to tick on their Southeast Asia travel list. Common also.

I was all of these people. And none of them.

It wasn't long until I noticed the man drinking alone at the tall table by the bar. He was on his phone as I took another, better look, and the screen lit up his face just enough for me to see he was a regular. Surely. The way he leaned back in the chair, the gin and tonic in a cocktail bar, the annoyed air surrounding him. When he looked up, I smiled and asked him to join us.

"I'm too boring", he said before coming over. He said his name was Julien.

The bar was packed by now and Lisa was shaking cocktails, unable to break. But we were well entertained by Julien's stories. He had small eyes and salt and pepper hair. He mocked my shoes, the ones that didn't fit the black strappy dress I had on but were the only pair of sandals I brought along, then clarified he wasn't arrogant, just French. He used to work in finance in Bordeaux and moved in his early thirties to Thailand to run a resort. Twelve years later, we were listening closely to the man who now ran a famous party hostel.

I had promised myself I was done smoking, but I guess I lied. We shared a few cocktails and a few cigarettes as the bar slowly started to empty. And we stayed back with Lisa and Charles past closing, discussing European politics, people, and other stories. It was then that Julien showed me his phone with a typed message asking me to join him for a drink. Well, another drink somewhere else.

I was surprised, a bit intrigued, and I nodded yes. And so, after we left Lisa to close those dirty white blinds, I got on the back of Julien's scooter and off we went.

There are no rules in traffic here. All the cars, and all the bikes, and scooters, and bicycles and people on them carrying abnormally large loads of whatever, terrify me. But where I see chaos, people found order, and while Julien went the wrong way on a one-way street, within minutes, we reached our destination.

Lisa's café had a card game we all played. A simple game where you draw a card that comes with a message. Mine had a quote by Socrates that read, the years wrinkle our skin, but lack of enthusiasm wrinkles our soul. Naturally I took that as a sign, and as I listened to Julien, I wondered what had wrinkled him. Ten years my senior, he was completely open and honest about his life, and sitting next to him on the terrace of my hostel sipping the beer he got for us, it was the longest I went without talking.

Julien, enthusiastic about his work most days, was questioning the morality of it. A familiar dilemma for me.

He spent his days on a laptop or phone solving hostel problems. His day would usually start at eight in the morning with a call from the boss when Julien would report on the night before

issues involving drunk backpackers breaking things, like the three guys he kicked out that night, and trying to get other twenty-something kids to stop fucking in the pool. Threesomes in dormitories were also common.

His job, he told me, is to get people drunk and spending. “Is that moral,” he asked me? I had no answer, but I wanted my lightbulb to turn on. My travel read had been Don Quixote because the man fought windmills, I fight egos, and Julien fights his own battle. Then, I tell him I play Tetris in my world, while everyone else is playing chess, and I stole a smile. I wanted him to know I was listening, that I understood.

He went quiet for a bit before admitting he wanted to recruit me for his job, as he’d be moving soon to Sri Lanka to open a new branch of the wild hostel. I wasn’t interested in the job he loved to hate, but I did like that he wasn’t hitting on me. No complications was at the top of my do-not-do list for the trip. Yet, it was a strange recruitment strategy, I thought, especially when Julien started telling me about what’s coming tomorrow. Or the best one, since I was fully captivated by his words.

He’d be getting on a train to Vang’ Vien to meet with the local police and give them an envelope with about \$500 because one of his customers got caught smoking weed on hostel premises.

“Its how it works here,” he said. “You go to one of three bars in town with a drug menu, which isn’t supposed to exist, and you consume. The police in plain clothes are in the same bars waiting for someone, anyone to make the mistake of leaving the place with a half smoked joint. Then, they follow you back to the hostel, and if you go through the front door, they arrest you. Take your passport until you pay a \$200-\$300 fine and call me to pay twice that so they don’t close the place down.”

I listened closely as he talked about the times he dined with these same police men talking about wine, football, and chocolate while they all ordered off those menus.

“In Thailand, I would give the immigration director 1 kilogram of Belgium chocolate and an envelope with cash every time I overstayed my visa,” he told me, putting yet another cigarette out and topping up our glasses with a bit more Lao beer.

He said he was bored, which I think is French for tired of seeing kids tweaking on the streets from too many drugs. “When things get really bad, I have a number I call,” he said, showing me the picture of this apparently large Asian man. The Whatsapp picture showed a long straight face with bangs split down the middle of a shiny forehead, which made the guy look like a math teacher; a nerdy, fix-it math teacher, I guess.

The fixer is on a retainer and always answers his phone.

My new friend tells me he’s only going to be doing this for a few more years at best, then he’s done. That’s when I ask him the same question I’ve asked myself often. *If you could do anything, what would you do?* And without missing a beat, he says “move to South America to open a guest house in Chile.”

Lowering his head into his drink, Julien acknowledges he'd likely have to deal with the same things there, and in the brief ensuring silence I remember what his card back at Lisa's bar said. "Accept your life and make the best of it." Or something like that, because that was his lesson to learn so I didn't pay too much attention to it. But it did strike me that for a man complaining about the morality of his work, he wasn't planning to walk away. Julien couldn't let go, get out of the dirt. Wash him clean, and he wouldn't recognize himself. I know I wouldn't.

But that's just it, is it not? What you do matters. What you do tells the story of who you are.

Before he left, he asked me to go to his place for a joint, and maybe spend the night together, and I considered it, before smiling and nodding no.

Wednesday, December 27th

My last few days have been spent aimlessly walking around town, making plans, and breaking them. I walked past the lovely Indian couple who I met at Lisa's café, and I even saw Lisa carrying bags of ice into her bar as she prepared to open it. And I left Mari sleeping when I checked out of our shared dorm.

I thought about stopping with any of them for a few words including a goodbye, but it didn't quite feel natural. I mean, sometimes we just meet great people along the way and then, we leave them to it.

I have four hours to go in Laos and I'm sitting in a restaurant up the street from my hostel. The red curry was good, the watermelon shake, even better. My gosh, I've had so much food for the past few weeks, it pains me to worry. So, I won't.

I wonder if I'll ever come back here. Julien said Laos is like Thailand 20 years ago, and sitting alone in a restaurant, listening to English Christmas songs, I pray whatever happens, it keeps its soul.

I must get the bill now, the \$2.8 for my lunch, and get ready. It's time to go again.

Saar is pursuing her dream of being a writer. Based in Oslo, she is a freelance journalist by day, and currently working on her first novel.

Second Nature

Crystal Gernhardt

In the morning, she rose with the sun. Emerged from her sleeping sack, the filmy layers rustling about her body. She felt wholly refreshed. Her rest had been so deep that she couldn't remember falling asleep. And anything after that was a black abyss to her memory.

She stepped onto the firm dirt ground and walked slowly, taking her time and feeling the textures of grasses and roots against her feet.

In the small hut, she ate a simple meal to break her fast. Hearty whole grains and fresh fruit, eaten in slow, considerate mouthfuls. She was surrounded by a couple dozen others, murmuring in soft, subdued voices. The atmosphere was warm and calm. She was filled with gratitude to have her hunger satiated. Her body felt strengthened to meet the day.

The surrounding trees and textures of nature comforted her as she walked the short path back to gather her belongings. A simple, abbreviated number of things. We needed less, so much less, than we imagined.

After ensuring that all her things were strapped securely to her back, she began walking. Like the days that came before, all that needed to be done today was to walk. The beautiful simplicity of this felt like a cool drink quenching her thirst.

The trail wound like a circuitous snake, almost disappearing into the distance until it was as thin as a thread. One foot in front of the other, that's all she needed to do.

The solitude enclosed her like a peaceful cocoon and made her feel safe and swaddled, a feeling which contrasted curiously with the wide open space before her. She loved being surrounded by hills of a million shades of blue and green, layered upon each other like a watercolor painting. The green of the hillsides was a hue so tender, so fresh, it looked like it was newly grown, soft to the touch.

Any memories or reflexes triggered by pings and clicks were buried deep now. A foreign concept from the other end of the world, literally. Now she was on a different continent, as far south as you could get before heading into Antarctica. It was a thin sliver of a country, all along the border of the continent. She had been glad to discover that the vestiges of her high school Spanish were more accessible than she'd guessed. Being in the right environment allowed those seeds to rapidly incubate and break ground. Now they were little sprouts, delicate and shaky, but worth something. She imagined that if she stayed here for another few months, she could reach near fluency again.

She pushed these thoughts aside and instead tried to focus her attention on the present time and space. On her foot one in front of another. Her trusty boots that had covered so many miles in the last week. The boots had been kind to her, and she was eternally grateful, after seeing what could happen when a hiker's boots decided to turn on them. A few evenings ago she had met a man, coincidentally who hailed from a city just a few hundred miles away from her own. He had grimaced while explaining that his uneven gait was due to his new boots being poorly fitted, causing each step downhill to crush his toes until they were battered bloody.

When listening to his plight, she felt sympathy, but also wanted to say that it was common knowledge to not buy brand new boots before a long hike. Thankfully she had enough propriety to bite her tongue. No one liked being told what they should have done, especially unsolicited. Instead, she satisfied herself with the quiet sense of gratification that she had chosen more wisely. Her boots had served her well for over 3 years. They protected her ankles, shielded her feet from moisture, helped her balance on slippery surfaces like a mountain goat, and cushioned her soles just the right amount.

There was something about being outside of your typical environment, released from the daily routine that made the weeks blend together until they were indistinguishable. It was a relief to be rid of the stresses, the envies, the pressures that occupied her brain at home. It was necessary. She wished all people could experience it.

She felt at peace, disconnected from the world, because she was. She didn't have any internet connection, having opted not to pay for the weak and spotty Wi-Fi at the *refugios* each night. It was a strange comfort to not have the option of checking her phone, clicking buttons that led to endless scrolling. This meant she hadn't yet shared any of the hundreds of photos and videos she had taken of mountain peaks and lakes and glaciers. For now, these experiences were just for her. This was a new feeling too.

The last time she had traveled far from home to a new place was to Portugal. It was the first trip she had ever taken alone. Traveling alone was something she had often imagined, and it was satisfying to finally do it.

The intricately tiled exteriors of aged buildings and the round glistening yellow pastries begged to be savored. And captured and shared digitally. From the moment she had gotten on the plane, she began documenting everything, and didn't cease until she had arrived back home again. The aerial plane shots of endless fluffy clouds, the sunsets from majestic viewpoints with the whole city below, and of course, the food. The goblets of scarlet sangria with fresh cut fruit glistening like jewels, the delicately molded pastries of various shapes, the plates of sparsely and artfully arranged fish, potatoes, and vegetables.

She only took the photos and posted them because it was all so beautiful and she appreciated it so much. How else would she share her appreciation, and how else would her friends and family know about her experiences?

Sometimes she wondered if she was too addicted to the constant cataloging and sharing. She hadn't gone much more than one day without sharing something online. What would it feel like if she didn't? She could always find something worth sharing. A photo of flowers seen on her walk or of her coffee at breakfast. Perhaps the name of the application was a clue to its addictiveness. Instantaneous; an instance. A gram of self-worthiness.

And when she traveled, there was an overabundance to share. In Lisbon, she had realized that if she didn't share a beautiful video or photo, it didn't feel like that experience counted fully. Counted for what? She wasn't sure of the answer to that. But sharing a moment online and seeing that others had viewed and appreciated it made it feel more real, more solidified. That

memory became ensconced in time. And traveling alone meant there was so much more opportunity to record everything. She didn't have to worry about delaying someone else or provoking their annoyance or judgment.

On her second day in Porto, with just a few days in Portugal left, she decided it was worth trying to *not* post one day. Just to see what it felt like. She decided it was still okay to take photos. She just wouldn't post them.

Breakfast was fine. She went to a small bakery and had a latte, an orange juice, and a brioche toast with ricotta and lemon curd. The bakery was bright and airy with furnishings of pale wood. She took it in and admired it. She took a few photos. Already she sensed that she would have taken twice as many photos if she had the intention of posting them.

Then she headed to the famous Livreria Lello, an old bookstore with ornate carved wood and a winding symmetrical staircase with velveteen red steps. It was rumored to be an inspiration for settings in Harry Potter and was a wildly popular tourist attraction. When she arrived, it was absolutely packed inside, even though visiting was only possible through prepaid and timed entrance tickets. She walked in and looked around at the endless bookshelves and the craftsmanship of the intricate wood carvings.

At that moment, the crowd parted serendipitously, allowing her to take a 10-second video of the interior scene without anyone intruding in her direct line of view. She was able to sneak a few photos as well, before several people converged from beside and behind her, ruining the shot. What good luck! She instantly thought about how great of a post she could make, but then remembered that she had decided to not do that today.

After the bookstore, she went down the street to the Igreja do Carmo, a baroque church with a blue and white tiled exterior that she had seen countless times in photos, often featuring a woman in the foreground wearing a flowing dress and a bright smile. Near the church was a group of musicians performing on the street. They were performing one of her favorite songs, an upbeat tune prominently featuring orchestral strings. She smiled while taking a video of the performance.

Then at that moment she saw a group of students in black capes walking in front of the tiled Igreja do Carmo, their capes billowing in the wind. It looked like a scene straight from Harry Potter, if Harry Potter were set in Portugal. J.K. Rowling had lived in Portugal for years, and it was said that the wizarding cloaks in Harry Potter were inspired by the black capes of Portuguese students. The scene was picturesque, and she expertly managed to take a video and photo of the students passing in front of the blue and white baroque tiles.

Later sitting down to lunch in a cafe and reviewing her bounty of footage from the morning, she marveled at what she had captured. It was too good. She bit her lip, wondering if she needed to stick to her vow of not posting.

What was the point, really? Who was keeping track? If she wanted to post, she should. If she didn't post now, what would she do tomorrow? Post twice as much, or just skip today entirely? Neither felt right.

As she waited for her soup and sandwich to arrive, she went through and posted 4 videos and 6 photos from the morning. Her fingers and hands moved with a practiced efficiency, as if she were a stenographer at a court hearing. She sat back, feeling satisfied and disappointed at the same time.

When she realized that internet access in Patagonia would be scarce at best and perhaps even unavailable completely, her initial emotional response was anxiety. What if there was an emergency? Would her parents get worried that she wasn't able to check in?

But she knew that the more visceral and affecting worry was that she wouldn't be able to share her experiences in real time. She wouldn't have the ability to post her videos or photos online until after she returned to the city with internet access.

Now as she walked on the trail, her trekking poles punctuating each step, she scoffed at her past self. How could she not admit that she was truly addicted? Addicted to social media, to sharing any slightly interesting or photogenic moment of her life.

The last seven days had thrown her into the embrace of the wilderness. This might be the first time she had been truly with herself, present in the moment, in years. She was disconnected from her life online, but more connected than ever to herself.

What she had needed was a forcing mechanism. When she returned home, she vowed to continue going hiking in areas without cell or internet reception. She had previously only done short trips, but she would extend these to week-long trips, maybe even multi-week trips. It was good to be away from the temptation of posting.

She had seen the luscious Los Perros glacier, spilling forth like a giant fountain of icy blue, frozen in time. She had seen the magnificent Los Cuernos mountains, rocky behemoths with a unique two-toned coloration that was pleasing to the eye. She had seen green forests and turquoise seas. She had seen the unimaginably massive Grey Glacier, which stretched on and on into the horizon for eternity. The glacier was like the ocean or the night sky, with no end in sight. And of course, the iconic Torres del Paine, the namesake of the national park where she had spent the last week hiking. The Torres were three spiraling rocky towers jutting into the sky, reaching for the clouds. At the base of the towers was the most perfect, round clear lake. It looked like a scene from Middle Earth, with a mysticism that was palpable.

She had never hiked on trails with so few people. On average she saw one other person or small group every two hours. It made the entire experience more sacred and peaceful.

But now this was her very last day of hiking here. Tonight she would arrive back at the lodge near the entrance of the national park. And tomorrow morning, she would be back in the city, surrounded by civilization and soon on her way back home. The thought triggered a feeling of

sadness and regret, and a sensation of anxiety. Now she had gotten used to a new normal; surrounded by nature, enwrapped in solitude, without needless chatter or distraction. But she didn't have to think too much about what was coming. She needed to enjoy the rest of the day.

After eating her sack lunch of a hearty sandwich, apple, and chocolate bar while seated at a scenic viewpoint, she set off on the final few miles.

She had decided to leave her nice camera at home to avoid the extra weight in her pack, so everything was on her phone. She hadn't even gotten a chance to look at the footage she'd taken. Her routine had been filled with hiking, resting, eating, cleaning oneself, and preparing to start the cycle over again. The days had felt long because of the amount she was taking in every hour. There was no time lost due to scrolling, binge watching, or getting lost in screens. She had been on the hike for 7 days, but she could have been convinced that it was 7 weeks.

The air was warm and the terrain became more desert-like as she neared her destination. Small spiky bushes lined the path and hillside. Dry grasses that looked like papyrus waved in the wind.

She stripped off a few layers as she continued walking, the heat warming her skin. She marveled at how the climate could change over the course of a few hours of walking. The thought of frozen glaciers nearby was laughable.

With a start, she realized that she could see the tips of the Torres del Paine again, which meant that she was getting very close to tonight's lodging. Now it was really the final stretch. After tonight, there would be no more Patagonian mountains, no more ridiculously strong gusts of wind, and no more rainbows after every drizzle of rain.

She saw a strange glistening in the middle distance, like a mirage. What was it? She continued walking, and it eventually dawned on her that what she was seeing was rows and rows of cars. Vehicles of all colors and sizes, the sun rays bouncing off of the metal and glass, creating a garish glare. A parking lot. The sight was a foreign experience.

She drew nearer and the cars grew bigger. Soon they were right in front of her. It had been ages since she had walked on asphalt instead of on dirt and grass. A feeling of disappointment and discomfort flooded through her body. The ashy black surface of the parking lot was ugly in every sense. She felt disgusted. She wanted to get away.

She looked at the tires, rubber wrapped around metal. Rows and rows of it. She could smell the pungent asphalt, baking in the sun. Could she turn back? No, that was ridiculous, it didn't make any sense. Her room and board for tonight was booked. She swallowed down her nausea and continued walking toward the lodge, which was now visible.

The next day she was in her hotel room in Punta Arenas, one of the largest cities in Chilean Patagonia. She had internet access again, free-flowing Wi-Fi at a high speed. She had just arrived at the hotel after walking along the waterfront and getting a hot chocolate at a cafe. Sitting on her bed, she had a few empty hours until her dinner reservation.

She pulled out her phone and finally started looking through the photos and videos from the past 8 days in nature. 1,157 items in total.

By the time she had arrived at the hotel last night and connected to the Wi-Fi, she had accumulated over 300 emails and over 40 text messages. She responded to the few most urgent ones and sent messages letting her closest friends and family know that she had arrived safely.

She was sad to be done with the multi-day hike, though she did appreciate the soft pillows and fluffy duvet on the hotel bed. It had been an unforgettable experience. No one she knew had ever been to Patagonia. For the typical American, it was still off the beaten path. She felt like she was in on a special secret.

Leaning back against the pillows, she opened Instagram. She had already selected some of her favorite videos and photos. Had already started composing captions in her head. As she stared into the screen, her fingers moved rapidly as she started uploading and posting with remarkable efficiency.

Crystal Zhu Gernhardt is a lifelong lover of fiction, particularly anything speculative and thought-provoking. When she is not reading or writing, she enjoys traveling to new places or returning to familiar places to discover new things. She lives in Seattle where she enjoys the beautiful outdoors but doesn't enjoy the gray and rainy winter.

Featured Poems

1. Crossing by Glenis Moore
 2. Soul's Odyssey by Nur Aliyah Luq binti Mohd Ali Masyhum
 3. Wanderlust Chronicles by Rains Dy
 4. Travel by Kayla Garrett
 5. Every Summer I Turn the Bus into a Hotel Room by Maria Angelica Beran
 6. American Dreamer by Natasya Budiono
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Crossing

Glenis Moore

I hate the road crossing at Teversham:
the almost homicidal speeding cars
and that barrier specifically
designed so that you can't cycle across
without stopping. It can trap your back wheel
in the sights of a murderous Tesco
delivery van forcing you to half
vault and scramble, duly terrified, to
the central safety area as they
rush past. And then once over you must turn
quickly right or wind up in the waiting
trees that slap at your face as you teeter
onto the cycle path – a comic play
for the noisy roosting birds. It's a shame
that I hate that crossing so avidly

though as the Teversham route is a good
one for a tepid summer's day cycle
outing. I just wish that I could manage
it with a bit more grace and dignity.

Glenis has been writing poetry since the beginning of the first Covid lockdown. She does most of her writing at night as she suffers from severe insomnia. When she is not writing poetry, she makes beaded jewelry, reads, cycles and sometimes runs 10K races slowly. She lives with her partner and three cats in the flat lands of the Fens just outside Cambridge.

Soul's Odyssey

Nur Aliyah Luq binti Mohd Ali Masyhum

In lands unseen, where dreams take flight,
I wander through the silent night.
The stars above, a guiding light,
Lead me to lands of pure delight.

Through narrow alleys and cobblestone streets,
A symphony of aromas my senses greets.
Spices and flavors, diverse and sweet,
Each bite, a story of culinary feats.

In quaint cafes with tables adorned,
I savor dishes, from dusk till dawn.
A culinary journey, a feast to spawn,

Tales of flavors in languages unknown.

Amidst the melodies of street musicians,

I dance to rhythms of unique traditions.

Strings and drums, heartfelt renditions,

Blend with laughter and shared ambitions.

Cultural tapestries woven with care,

In the vibrant hues that fill the air.

Traditional dances, stories to share,

Connect me to the soul of each layer.

In festivals that light up the night,

A kaleidoscope of colors takes flight.

Traditions old, yet shining bright,

Binding us together in shared delight.

With locals as guides, friends anew,

I learn the stories, both old and true.

Funny anecdotes, laughter ensues,

Creating bonds that forever accrue.

But as my time draws to an end,

A bittersweet feeling starts to descend.

For amidst the laughter, I comprehend,

That soon, I'll bid farewell to my dear friends.

So let me roam, let me roam,

Through lands where wonders endlessly foam.

For in foreign places, I find my home,

In the embrace of cultures, forever to roam.

But as I pack and bid adieu,

I hold onto memories, both old and new.

With a heavy heart and eyes that dew,

I leave behind a piece of me too.

For in those lands, I found my place,

Amidst the laughter, love, and grace.

A bittersweet smile on my face,

As I depart, leaving a trace.

So let me roam, let me roam,

Through lands where wonders endlessly foam.

For in foreign places, I found my home,

But now it's time to bid farewell and roam.

The end.

Nur Aliyah Luq binti Mohd Ali Masyhum says, “Known as Aliyah or Luq among my loved ones. I am a proud Muslim and Malaysian living in the little town of Kunak, Sabah. Despite the fact that English is not my first language, as a 16-year-old high school student, I found comfort in composing essays and poems rather than studying mathematics. My goal is to write a lot of fiction, mostly romance, and make a living as a full-time lawyer or professor. Haha, I know—quite aspirational, huh?”

Wanderlust Chronicles

Rains Dy

In the heart's atlas, wanderlust unfolds,
Connecting threads of stories, tales untold.
Travel, the canvas where dreams arise,
Where new vistas meet familiar skies.
In foreign lands and spaces wide,
Creativity blooms with each stride.
New faces, customs, flavours blend,
Journeys that change, souls on mend.
Yet, dreams of travel, a potent potion,
Stirring both joy and deep emotion.
Abroad, where anxiety may unfold,
Adventure whispers, a story to be told.
Taste the foods, the music's tune,
Laugh or cry beneath a foreign moon.
In less than fifty lines, let your words paint,

Travel's essence, a poetic quaint.

A seasoned traveler and poetic soul, Rains Dy navigates the world with ink-stained passports and verses that dance like postcards from distant lands. With each line, they invite readers to taste exotic flavours, hear the music of foreign streets, and share laughter and tears with locals. The pen becomes a passport, and their verses, a journey through the heart of global experiences.

Travel

Kayla Garrett

Travel a word of many meaning

Taking boats across the sea or looking down at ground from an elevated height

Either way keep dreaming

A place of meeting

A safari in Africa or a relaxing evening in Maldives

Travel a word of many meaning

Is it independence your seeking

Feel the sun's warmth on your face and the cool breeze in your hair

Either way keep dreaming

It's hard reaching

Go after what you've been missing

Travel a word of many meaning

New places are intriguing
Cultures, languages, food and heritage
Either way keep dreaming

With eyes seeing
Be the person you were meant to be
Travel a word of many meaning
Either way keep dreaming

Kayla says, "I am a fiction writer whose been writing for over 5 years now."

Every Summer, I Turn the Bus into a Hotel Room

Maria Angelica Beran

Every summer, I stay inside the bus for
twenty-four hours as if it is a hotel room
where I confine myself just sitting, not
doing a thing but listen to the playlists
John Dave had curated.

Every summer, I starve myself for
twenty-four hours as if it is my devotion
for fasting; pretending it is a part of my
self-composed rituals but without
Jasmine candles and star inks.

Every summer, I reset my being for
twenty-four hours as if I'm being born
anew. I like to think that the long
road is what it takes to resurrect my soul,
taking away all its rage and sadness.

Every summer, I seize a trip for
twenty-four hours as if Bicol is sitting right
next to my neighborhood. & people seek
for reasons to justify the bearing, but they
wouldn't understand.

Every summer, I run to him, he who quiet
my anger and succor my lowness; he
whose name I always whisper to the stars;
my home for the season; my dearest, my
man, he's all of my reasons.

Angel is a medtech student of the Philippines who loves to join writing contests. She was awarded 1st place during the Cagayan Art and Creative Writing Awards 2023 for her short story "Dance of a Merman". She was among the ten writing fellows of the Cordillera Creative Writing Workshop held last October in Baguio City. Currently, she is the Literary Editor of The CSU Communicator, the official school publication of Cagayan State University.

American Dreamer

Natasya Budiono

Heart racing as the plane kisses the ground,
Innocent dreams in a foreign surround.
Excitement masking any fear.
A place where dreams reappear,
Worth every strain, like a sweet souvenir.
If I can make it here, I can make it anywhere
Mom, Dad, I made it here,
A melting pot of people, woven here.
Visions from my childhood dreams revives.
Nothing like the American vibes
A place of dream of movie scenes
Inspires me, like endless dreams.
Back home, I'd give anything to be,
In this land where all is free.
Working day and night, no sleep,
For the American Dream, I'd leap.

Natasya Budiono, a third-year Finance student at the University of Indonesia, discovered her passion for words at age 10 when her poem "Kotaku" graced the pages of the Indonesian national newspaper, Kompas. Recently awarded a government scholarship, she embarked on a transformative semester at Yale University. Amidst her financial studies, Natasya delved into the art of expression, taking four courses, including ones focused on writing.

Featured Essays

1. To Embrace the Culture by Karren Tenga

To Embrace the Culture

Karren Tenga

Travelling means being exposed to an environment you are not used to. It exposes you to an environment that may be different from what you've already become accustomed to. That's never been a bad thing until it brought about a change that has been taken negatively. Different places have different things they consider norms and as a youth, you quickly want to adapt to "fit in."

You want to embrace this new culture because this culture aligns more with your beliefs than your own. You end up growing in a foreign environment where you're constantly reminded that you don't belong. So, you watch enviously of how other people are able to embrace that very same culture that you so badly want to be a part of. Your parents bring you up in a place where showing love has been redefined. The definition of love is so different that you even start to wonder if your parents love you as much as they claim to. After all actions do speak louder than words.

You wonder why you aren't worthy of that kind of love, and it just eats you up inside. Then you start to wonder if this big move was really worth it, maybe it would be better if you'd never travelled to another country. It wouldn't make their parental methods right but at least you wouldn't have to feel so outcasted. Since where you're from the definition of love and discipline has yet to be redefined. There would be no one to envy because we're all collectively in the same boat.

It devours you entirely and you want to introduce change to your parents. You choose to fight so you can enjoy your youth like the peers you're surrounded by. In the midst of your battle, it hits you, you can't fight a narcissist. That's a battle you've never won and quite frankly feels like you can never win.

Karren says, "Most people know me as Karren but in my free time I'm Mbai. A teenage artist, a painter, a poet and a writer."