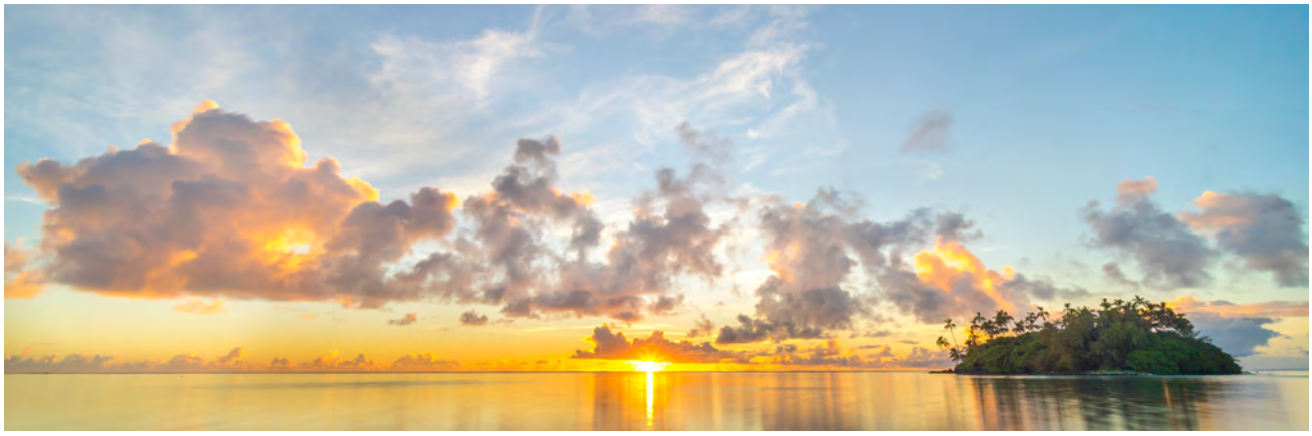
CARLETON COLLEGE 2021

TRAVEL WRITING CONTEST



WINNING SUBMISSIONS

Sixth Annual Global Experience
Travel Writing Contest

Twenty students submitted travel writing essays for this year's contest. They seized upon memorable incidents from their travel history – study abroad, domestic travels, even their discovery of Northfield.

Thank you to Bonnie Nadzam, this year's external judge, and Apoorba Misra, Brenda Hellen, and David Tompkins, this year's internal judges. Thanks also to the sponsors: Center for Global and Regional Studies, Cross-Cultural Studies, Dean of Students Office, Off-Campus Studies, and the Writing Center.

This year's winners:

Chloe Jones
Kamala GhaneaBassiri
Andriana Taratsas
KatieRose Kimball
Rachel Heilbronner

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FIRST PLACE

"A TOURIST IN MY OWN HOMELAND"

CHLOE JONES

As an only child for my first seven years of life, I had acquired a habit of wandering on my own. Like any curious child, I tended to slip from my mother's grasp and stray away to follow whatever piqued my interest. However, when the spell had broken and I turned back for my mother's hand, I would find myself alone.

Right now was no different. The only problem was that I was alone in every sense. This time I had wandered too far into the maze of a city; one filled with ghosts roaming about who had long since perished. On either side of me were buildings that intimidated and towered over my small body. On top of their golden roofs sat statues of mystical creatures whose gazes followed my every move. The roof's edges came to a curved point at the end that were recognizable architectural designs that I had seen on a lot of other older buildings so far. My gaze landed on red everywhere I looked, on the walls and pillars with paint peeling in places of weathering. Decorating each wall and roof were symbols created in fine detail that represented a long history of powerful imperial families that prospered through dynasties of ruling. From what my mother had told me before, this palace complex of tall, all-encompassing buildings was a symbol of Chinese culture and imperial power given its location in the capital.

I continued to wander in curiosity along the path of cracked stones under my feet. Surrounding me were empty red buildings filled with stuffed cushions attached to furniture that was no longer in use and aging artifacts covered in a layer of dust. The rooms were void of human life other than the inanimate remnants of their lifestyle during the imperial age. It was like looking through a window right into a time when imperial reign in China was at its highest prominence. From my imagination, people walked throughout the Forbidden City and going about their daily duties in long silk robes decorated with intricate embroidery. The wax figurines in the closed off rooms of the palace came to life behaving in the regal way that I had envisioned during the imperial dynasties.

After being a little spooked by the stillness of the displays in front of me, I then noticed the absence of my mother and grandmother. How had I ended up all alone on this path? A feeling of panic started to spread throughout my body weighing down on my chest. My heart started to beat a little faster, and my breathing became shallower. My head whipped left and right frantically looking for any visual sign of my mother or grandmother nearby. I looked for two stereotypical American tourists among a sea of dark-haired people with faces like mine. It didn't help that we had traveled to a part of the city and country as a whole that heavily attracted tourists. With our travel group, we were doing all of the typical tourist attractions as if this had been my first time visiting this new, foreign country. Ironically, this was the first time I was seeing China with my own eyes while remembering my time here. The last time I had stepped foot in this country, I was taking some of the first steps of my life. Now, my adoptive mom and grandma accompanied me to adopt my new baby sister just like my mom had done when I was one year old. When my initial attempts to locate my family had failed, I stuffed my fingers in my pocket feeling for that small, wrinkled scrap of paper; the only hope I had if I was truly lost. The laminated sheet had merely nine of sentences in Chinese stating my name, age, and how to contact my mom and the U.S. embassy. Other than that, I was a young girl who had no hope of navigating the vast city of Beijing.

With my level of panic rising, I continued glancing around looking for anything familiar but all I saw were the stagnant displays trapped between the red walls of the Forbidden Palace. Ones that were frozen in time, forever remaining in this preserved, museum-like state. My imagined world no longer felt magical but instead haunted when I realized I was alone. I tried not to think of the potential situation of me asking for help from the people surrounding me. The greatest issue was the language barrier between us that was only obvious to me. On the outside, my physical appearance caused me to blend in because I looked every bit a Chinese native from my olive skin to the distinguishable shape of my eyes. But inside I felt far away from the people walking past me. While my Chinese blood ran fully true, my mannerisms, my accent, and my upbringing matched the American clothes on my back. On the sidewalk between the buildings of the Forbidden City, I felt like an outsider looking in through a window at a culture that I should know but did not feel like I belonged to. Since landing in China, everything around me had felt foreign and each experience new. The food was nowhere close to what I ate at home, the buildings were designed differently, and most glaringly, the people here all looked like… me, another first in my life.

All around me were people who shared similar features with me such as my eyes and my almost black hair. But I had never felt more alone in the world. I had strayed too far from my family who has been by my side since I could remember, despite not having the same blood as me or outward appearance. However, I felt so disconnected from the country, people, and culture that I did share some semblance of blood with or at least looked like me.

The natives that walked past me reminded me of what I saw in the mirror, yet I was still separated from them by a strong language barrier and experience.

My lost feeling was literal in the physical sense as well as pertained to the growing awareness of my identity upon the first return to the place where my story began. Here being surrounded by so many reminders of Chinese culture and history, I could feel my detachment from my heritage as if it was a tangible in the air surrounding me. I had wandered from my American family in the country of my birth, especially in a place that greatly symbolized its history. My situation embodied my cultural uncertainty in a world where I was not sure which country I identified with: the one that I was currently being raised in with its language on my tongue or the one that I had no concrete memory of and had only known from the books and movies my mom introduced me to. Now I was a young girl lost in the very country she was born in surrounded by a language she did not understand, places she didn't recognize, and a culture that no longer felt like hers. But why was it so important to belong somewhere and to have a culture that defined you? Did my Chinese identity even feel like mine despite my lack of connection to many of its cultural beliefs and customs?

But I was only seven years old then gaining a new baby sister and barely grasping the concept of adoption, much less the complexity of my own personal identity and relationship to a country I no longer call home and haven't since I was thirteen months. My tongue could not form the words of a language that filled my ears with every step I took across the country of my birth. Soon enough though I would grow older, and my eyes would see what I used to glaze over. I would notice the differences in my upbringing compared to others in my neighborhood back in America. I would question the skin that I am in with the features that don't quite fit who I felt like in a country across the ocean that stereotypes my culture while being in a family unlike any other. While my mom may not always understand my circumstances and the way that I exist/move through this world, I knew that my sister would grow up similarly to me in America. I didn't know if she would experience the same lost feeling as me, but I suspect she would question her differences as I did. I did know that I would be there every step of the way to guide her. I couldn't wait to meet her. The past few days, I could hardly contain my excitement that my mom and I were welcoming a new addition to our family with my baby sister. She would be every inch of my family and feel every ounce of my love as if she were my own blood. We will share a story like so many other adopted Chinese girls around the world, but our story will still be infinitely ours, nonetheless.

My feet continued to carry me in search of my family, people I loved dearly, and now I know years later would support whoever I decided to be. After a search that probably only lasted a few minutes but felt much longer, relief washed over me when I spotted my mom's short blonde hair and her achingly familiarly grey and black stitched puffy coat. My pace quickened towards her… and my small hand found its way back into hers.

SECOND PLACE

"UNA CULTURA MESTIZA"

KAMALA GHANEABASSIRI

I carry a secret that others can't see, though it animates my life. Long before I was born, my parents encountered the name Kamala in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*. To them, it was serendipity, for it combined their names, Kambiz and Alma, and symbolized the different cultures their love brought together. My father was born in Iran to Muslim parents, who immigrated to the United States to escape the Iran-Iraq War. My mother was born in the United States to Mexican parents, who became Evangelical Christians and emigrated to work for the Church of the Nazarene in California. Coming from different worlds, my parents were never meant to meet, much less fall in love in East Los Angeles, and when they did, they defied all familial, cultural, and religious expectations. I carry their love in secret because my pale skin and brown locks conceal my diverse background.

In my parents' minds, I was whole, a confirmation from the universe that their love was true, despite their different backgrounds and my grandparents' objections. In reality, however, I am fragmented, not quite fit for any one culture or religion. The diversity encapsulated in my name and belied by my appearance challenges people's stereotypes and the common belief that such separate worlds were never supposed to coexist.

Growing up, I had difficulty embracing my parents' enlightened perspective of my existence, until I visited the Cordoba Mosque-Cathedral in Spain. The mosque was erected in the early tenth century over a Visigothic church and was later expanded to become one of the largest, most beautiful mosques in the world. In the sixteenth century, after the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain, the Catholic Church reclaimed it.

Walking through its gate and past the courtyard, I was greeted by seemingly countless columns topped with red and white horseshoe double arches. Beyond the repeating columns was a gorgeous *mihrab* decorated with golden Qur'anic calligraphy, indicating the direction of prayer. At the center of the structure, a gothic cathedral stretched towards the sky. Within it, there were pews and a pulpit, as well as images of Jesus Christ. I sensed a kinship between the jarring fusion of these two different places of worship and my parents' love. Both challenge stereotypes of Muslims and Christians and expose people to new ways of inhabiting the world. I felt at home.

My feeling of belonging did not last long. When I returned from Spain, I began volunteering at Kateri Park, an after-school program for children of refugee families. On my first day, two girls bombarded me with personal questions, one of which was, "What's your religion?" Given that they were Somali Muslims, I disclosed the Muslim part of me to them.

"You don't look Muslim," they said in shock. "Do you even know the prayer?"
I didn't know if I had to justify myself to these little girls. I smiled and recited the *Fatiha* prayer. They joined in, beaming.

My Baba taught my little brother and I the prayer to prepare us for when he dies. The prayer became a part of a morbid routine that filled the ten-minute drive from my house to high school. A school that glared at the two hijabi students who transferred one year. A school that called me a terrorist in the hallway during a bathroom break in Spanish. A school that taught the scene in *Kite Runner* where Amir, a Muslim, prayed on a hospital floor using biblical allegories. I felt a kinship with Muslims, and fervently defended Islam to my mostly White peers. But as I recite the prayer in Arabic today, I do not know what most of the words mean. My dad has translated them for me several times, but they never stuck. Instead, they bring me comfort without knowledge of their exact meaning. I recite them outside of their desired context of wudu and a prayer rug when I am driving in chaotic conditions or walking across a bridge. I carry my fear of heights and the obscure words of God with me. When I recited the prayer for those two Muslim girls, I know I made them feel connected to me while I didn't feel connected to them.

My hyphenated existence as an Iranian-Mexican-Muslim American helps me connect to others, but also deprives me of my own sense of belonging. I was never Mexican enough, Iranian enough, Muslim enough, American enough. Initially, the Cordoba-Mosque Cathedral did not appease my desire for belonging. It merely stood as another example of cultures colliding in a beautiful way. Nothing more than representation. It wasn't until I met Gloria Anzaldúa on a plastic bucket while working at the gas station across from my high school over winter break that I began seeing the Cordoba-Mosque Cathedral in a more enlightened way.

I had always been skeptical of language. I found it often changed to adapt with the times, but when applied to human experiences, more often than not, it impoverished the complexity and diversity present in the world. I saw umbrella terms as threats to my individuality, that forced me to think in terms of a collective identity instead of trying to explore how I could bring my own unique experiences and perspectives to every interaction. In her book

Borderlands, Anzaldúa wielded language against my previous assumptions. *Una cultura mestiza* was an umbrella term she coined that encapsulated the diversity I saw present in my worlds and embraced both my individuality and a collective belonging. Just as my parents had understood the power of naming me Kamala to symbolize the beautiful fusion of cultures their love brought together, Anzaldúa understood the power of naming the new culture she belonged to as a result of living on the borders of three cultures – white, Mexican, and Indian. She reminded me of the power of truly accounting for, recognizing, naming, and claiming your own space within a collective identity. She claimed exile and displacement as her new culture, and called its inhabitants *las mestizas*, a mixed or hybrid person. Her words reflected my reality, making me feel seen and understood in ways I hadn't thought I needed. She taught me that language provides the lumber, bricks and mortar needed to create belonging. The Cordoba-Mosque Cathedral thus became a symbol for the new space created from the collision of cultures. It was not just an Islamic or Christian space, but something entirely different, beautiful, and valid in its own way.

THIRD PLACE

"SNAPSHOTS"

ANDRIANA TARATSAS

Snapshot #1 - Boula II (August 17, 2017)

Boula II has ears that stick straight up, nearly as long as her face. Her tail is blurred, always in motion, even in the photograph. Her black eyes stare straight into the camera, her head tilted, the perfect model. She is standing on a patio in Pangrati, brown paws against white tile, her yaps, unheard, drowned out by the honking horns of Athens traffic.

Before Boula II was Boula I, her predecessor, "Boula," the generic name given to Greek dogs. I don't remember much of Boula I; nine years before, I had been too young to keep memories so long in my mind. I return at sixteen, and just as I am no longer seven, Boula I is no longer.

Newness abounds, a nearly new her for a nearly new me, so that Novelty is the name of this place that is part mine.

Snapshot #2 - Santorini, Post-Sunset (August 15, 2017)

Lights brighten the right side of the frame, low white walls standing against the black. To the left is only darkness, though in daylight you would see the trinity of sky and sea and the Santorini Sun.

The Santorini Sun is known for setting–word of mouth, scenes of films, millions of pictures have made it magical. But the most beautiful thing happens after the Santorini Sun slips beneath the sea for the night. Towns and villages and cities give the island light, keeping it lovely long after the setting of the Sun has ended. The island lives on, the sky doesn't fall, and the sea, unseen, doesn't dry up before the Santorini Sun can rise again.

Snapshot #3 - Tourist Haven (August 13, 2017)

Red-roofed houses are carved into a dusty green mountainside dotted with shrubs and dirt. In the background, more mountains, and then sky, lazy clouds lazing aimlessly, unrushed, taking a siesta.

When we go to Greece, we stop in Arachova. We shop and eat and shop and eat, surrounded by French and German and English, and sometimes Greek. We go for cheap slippers with pompoms on the top, the Greek key etched into the sides in tacky purples, pinks, and blues. They are purchased from kiosks catering to foreigners, selling tchotchkes and souvenirs, and they won't last long. We buy many pairs.

I'm a tourist and a not-tourist. I have my name, my blood, and my citizenship papers. I also have my pompom slippers.

Snapshot #4 - Family Trees (August 10, 2017)

Tall trees cast taller shadows on the field. It is sunset. Sheep are barely visible beneath the branches, their light wool darkened in the shade. We stop to take the picture while driving back from a family reunion in Milia, the village of my grandmother. She died shortly after the birth of my father, her son, existing long enough to give him life, though not to see him live.

Her village evokes memories of a woman unknown, kept alive by those of us seated around the dinner table–siblings and sons and nieces and nephews and me. Me, the walking breath and blood of She whose name I bear, whose features I wear.

These trees watched her grow.

Snapshot #5 - An Act of Faith (August 10, 2017)

Taken from a video shot while driving along the side of a mountain. Our grunts punctuate sharp turns, a low gray guardrail, likely decades-old, the only thing that protects us from veering over the edge, falling into the valley far (far, far) below. Every so often, we pass shrines erected by particularly precarious turns, all with white walls, blue ceilings, and glass doors protecting the contents–a candle, a cross, a photo. They memorialize the dead, those

once on the same road as us, with a different destination than us. Such a warning calls for silence.

And yet our voices carry on, talking and laughing and content. We know what could happen, and we choose to believe it won't.

It is an act of defiance. It is an act of faith.

Snapshot #6 - Eating the Right Way (August 9, 2017)

I'm sitting in an outdoor restaurant in Erateini. A smile on my face, a sunburn on my chest, the pale pink reddened against my navy top, the navy sky. My hands are raised, held away from my body, my fingers, purple polish chipped off the nails, covered in pasta sauce and shrimp shells. I look like a child who has been playing with her food, sweetly happy with the mischief she's made, showing it off to the camera.

In fact, any less of a mess would be the real problem. Shrimp isn't a dish meant to be eaten with dainty fingers in polite company. It's meant to be eaten by a sixteen-year-old girl in a Greek café late at night, so hungry she abandons her fork and pride and napkin, dirties her hands to fill her stomach. Does it with a smile on her face.

Snapshot #7 - View from Pelion (August 7, 2017)

A stone roof, four chimneys protruding from the tiles. It forms a triangle, the tip pointing the eye to the sea, one with the sky, dark blue bleeding into lighter blue. Inlets reach toward the center, long tendrils like fingers, or feet, walking on water.

I don't wonder why this land was the subject of myths. In the minds of the ancient, gods were the only explanation for how such a place could exist.

We made a religion out of nature. It is sacred.

HONORABLE MENTION

"HOME(SICK) WONDER"

KATIEROSE KIMBALL

One of the most stunning things about travel is when you pinpoint exactly what makes a landscape feel like home. I've lived my entire remembered childhood and teenage adolescence in Salt Lake Valley, and my family continues to live in the same house, even as I now spend half my year or more in Northfield, Minnesota. I have driven through most of the gridded streets of Salt Lake City, I have hiked up many of the Wasatch Mountain peaks to the west, I have stared at many a sunset over the Oquirrh Mountains to the east, and I have frequently crossed the height of Traverse Ridge to the south. The maps I have drawn of this valley are many and varied. I know how I am oriented to this valley, and, in some ways, that may mean I am disoriented to the rest of the world. Still, I keep finding myself drawing outlines of home into each new horizon I see (and hear and taste and smell and feel).

This spring, in the midst of the pandemic, my family made our own journey to encounter the horizons of Arizona for the first time. We packed pre-made meals into a cooler, downloaded podcasts onto our phones, loaded ourselves into the car, and set off.

Road trips are no new event to this family: my childhood is scattered with three-day weekends overcome with the rush down to Southern Utah. I know the drifting calm of hours on muted highways divided by bursts of 2- or 4- or 8-mile hikes through red rocks and juniper woods. Road trips are *routine*. I've learned to pack two pairs of shoes—one for quick gas station bathroom breaks and hops out of the car to read interpretive signs and one for hiking; I've perfected the ability to sleep with two jackets scrunched up against the jittering car window; I've honed the ability to read for hours at a time in a moving vehicle without getting carsick. My body knows the hour between Provo and Salt Lake City so well that I will invariably wake up as we turn onto our street whether I've been asleep for two minutes or two hours (and my heart always sighs familiarly).

The advent of all of my siblings and I into adulthood has only increased the reach of these trips. On our trip to two National Parks and three National Monuments over this spring break, the driving was shared between four adults with driver's licenses. We could switch whenever someone needed a nap or wanted to enjoy the clouds a little bit more. We could regulate each other's moods rather than having a singular adult responsible for the happiness of two or three children.

My initiation into adulthood, and thereby college, has also meant that I can't quite call Salt Lake City my home in the same way that I did before. Two years ago, any trip I took—by car or plane—was tracked in my mind as a spoke on a wheel out from the turning hub of the Salt Lake Valley. But I'm now spending so much time in Northfield, Minnesota that my imagination tracks trips out from this city as well. Two hubs now drive my life in a complicated dance that I still don't know the steps to.

I suppose it's fitting then that I've road tripped to college at the beginning of each year: driving through the badlands with all their rain-puffed dirt and endless fields of grain, looking out across lake after lake as they flash by between the conifers. These week-long trips let me drag a viscous feeling of home along with me towards the Upper Midwest. But (never mind how immediately I fell in love with the glaze of sunset on the Cannon River) in those first few months I felt exposed in a way that meant I never felt quite at home as I stumbled through the painful embarrassments of making new friends and the inherent dissonance of waking up every day in a place you don't know the shape of.

Eventually, I settled into a habit of walking out to the hill that slopes down to Lyman Lake. I would sit up against the low wall and stare out across towards the forested Arb and listen to the geese cackle. Nestled in that dip which hosted two pieces of a lake and the graduated steps of a river, I would breathe a little bit better.

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As we drove south in our brief ten-day jaunt to Arizona, I could feel myself pulling on a spoke out from the hub of Salt Lake Valley (but I could also feel a phantom limb reaching out towards Northfield).

We exclaimed over brilliant clouds rushing across the sky in the opposite direction to us as we traced the edge of the Rocky Mountains. We delighted in the frozen contortions of A'a lava around Sunset Crater (and I found my gaze drawn to the solitary San Francisco Mountain range). We found ourselves enchanted by the fallen specter of the Petrified Forest (and I felt my teeth clench as I looked out over the flat desert surrounding us for hundreds of miles).

When we drove into Saguaro National Park the next day, I felt more comfortable for no reason I could identify. I dismissed it in the face of all these cartoon cacti come to life in a thick forest of spines. I found myself easily

distracted with reading the interpretive signs about the different adaptations of each cacti and bush, the limits of their growth, their named history. Learning more about all the parts of this desert that were unfamiliar allowed me to lose my sense of self in information.

This investigation was interrupted by the rush of wind that came before a length of storm clouds across the sky. I laughed at the rain that sped across the landscape at midday and left behind a faded rainbow on the hillside. It felt fantastic to arrive in a place so known for its arid weather, for its heat, and encounter a gusting day where I had to wear a jacket I had gotten for the cold winters of Minnesota.

Later that day, we embarked on a hike up the side of the mountain in the eastern section of the park. As we ascended toward an abandoned mine, the desert before us painted itself purple in the light of the growing sunset at our backs. I remarked on the ribs of saguaros and the calls of birds as we worked our way to the summit. When we stopped for water, I turned to face the setting sun.

I looked out across the valley and saw something new: a forest of saguaro, prickly pear, chain-fruit cholla, mesquite; a forest of red-tailed hawks, mourning doves, Costa's hummingbird, crows.

I looked out across the valley and saw something I knew: a ribbon of sunset orange between the deep purple of the mountains and the dusted blue of the clouds; a stretch of undulating city overcome by a stretching shadow of mountains not so far away. My heart met my breath in my chest.

My upbringing was making itself felt, and I suddenly found that a longing I didn't even know existed was sated. The steepness of the mountains enclosed me like a blanket. The cloud-spotted sunset softened my gaze. I felt like a child nestling deeper into the covers and hiding a book as my father cracked the door open at 2am, letting the hallway light spilling in. It was that exact feeling of elation over a new plot development mixed with a heady exhaustion.

In the foothills across from twin mountains, I was at home.

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I'm struggling to reconcile this gasping need for the landscape I grew up in with my love of each new landscape I encounter.

It ultimately comes down to this abstract desire: I wish I could spread my place-based knowledge like ink across the page, each branch of ink shaping itself to the turn of city corners and edges of reaching mesas. I wish there were some way to feel this ink on my skin and let it mark me as these landscapes have marked my mind.

Maybe then, with that tattooed map on my skin, I could draw myself into the new landscape of Northfield. Then, I could finally identify my unfilled silhouette against the open sky that I find myself so lost against. And, if I could paint myself here, I know that my understanding of home will have that many more defined edges.

HONORABLE MENTION

"A WORLD AWAITING: MUSINGS ON WHY WE TRAVEL"

RACHEL HEILBRONNER

It was 108 degrees outside, and at 8:30 am I was already sweating through my new light blue kurtha. At seventeen, I had moved to India for a few months to work at the Christian Medical College Hospital. Weaving my way through back roads and hidden footpaths, I could feel the beads of perspiration dripping down my back, ruining what I had hoped would be a good first impression. Ten minutes after leaving my apartment, I was standing in front of the hospital, but I had not counted on having to cross a six-lane highway first. Without a crosswalk in sight, I stood frozen on the side of the road, waiting futilely for a break in the traffic. Around me, people casually stepped into the street, ignoring honks and near-misses as they made their way across. Feeling like a deer preparing to face the headlights, I was saved by a girl in a hot pink sari.

"Are you okay?" she asked in a sweet, lilting voice. At my panicked look, she smiled, hooking her arm into mine, and told me her name was Priya. She was a medical student specializing in traumatic brain injuries, and I can say with great certainty that she will be an incredible doctor: there is no quality quite so valuable in medicine as being able to put your patients at ease.

Indeed, there is an incommunicable relief when doing something that scares you in knowing that you are not alone, and every time a new international student arrived to work at the hospital, I'd take them across the road, arms linked together, in a silent thank you to Priya.

Of course, it wasn't until I moved to Copenhagen that I got hit by a truck. It was three years later, and by that point I guess I'd forgotten all the street smarts I learned in India, because when I was cycling home at 11 pm on a cold November evening, a drunk driver came flying down the road and tossed me off my bike into a wall. Not even hitting the brakes, the truck sped off, leaving me lying in the street.

For the record, I was totally fine, but that's not the point. The point is that immediately, several small groups of strangers had gathered around me, coming to my aid. My slightly mangled bike was pulled out of the road, and the two residents of the apartment whose wall I had been thrown into – young men with tousled hair, graphic t-shirts, and one not even wearing shoes – rushed out to help me to my feet, asking if I needed an ambulance.

It's easy to consider the irony of the fact that I was never in any real danger in a country known for its terrible driving and non-existent traffic laws, but when I moved to one of the safest places in the world, I was hit by a truck. But all I can really think about is how well I think Priya would get along with the rumpled boys from the apartment on Skindergade.

***

I am not the first writer to consider why one travels. It is the sort of question that has plagued me on trans-Atlantic flights and on sleepless nights back in my own bed, but it remains rather unoriginal and uninspired. Asking why people travel is to inherently place oneself at the center of the narrative, making one's own answer the only answer. However, it is a slightly different thing to consider why we travel instead of why *I* travel. The self-satisfaction still comes through, as the writer places himself in the center of the narrative, now not only speaking for himself but also for the whole world of travellers. But this broader question leaves room for interpretation, for consideration, for alternative points of view.

And so it is this question that I will consider: why do we travel? I freely admit that this piece is coloured by my own ideas and ideals. The conclusions are my own. But I am asking the question in hopes that you will see yourself in these pages and so that you will consider another point of view. The world is full of travellers, and full of cliches. Let yourself become only the former.

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I was twelve when I pulled Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods* off my parents' bookshelf. It wasn't his name – one of the most renowned in travel writing – that drew me in, but rather the paperback cover, featuring a forest that was reminiscent of the fantasy books I was fonder of at the time. Settling onto the floor beside the fireplace, crisscross-applesauce, I perused the first few pages.

It was boring, so I went back to *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

But a few years later, I returned to Bryson, this time fresh off a week-long yurt trip through Colorado's 10th

Mountain Division.[1] And this time, I was hooked. I tore through his months-long trip down the Appalachian Trail,[2] voraciously devouring even the most mundane of details. I simply couldn't get enough. I made a vow that one day, I'd follow in his footsteps. I haven't succeeded yet, but I haven't really failed, either. I've just had a few other trips to take first.

Now, of course, I know that Bryson's is perhaps one of the most widely known names in travel journalism. So when he wrote about why he travels in his introduction to the 2016 edition of *The Best American Travel Writing*, I figured it was time to listen up. Basically, his explanation of the themes of travel writing can be distilled into three central points. We travel because (1) travellin' ain't what it used to be, (2) the world just isn't as interesting as it once was, and (3) the art of travel writing is doomed. He wraps up the eight-page introduction with a deeply compelling anecdote about arriving at Japan's Shinjuku railway stations, and it seems to me that his basic conclusion is that he can't put his finger exactly on why he travels. But the moment on your trip that makes you realize why we travel is rather like pornography: you know it when you see it.[3]

Bryson introduced me to travel writing, but it was Thomas Swick who hit a chord for me in the anthology's 2014 edition: "Loving the unloved, you assume the feeling is mutual. You may be wrong, as travellers often are. But it doesn't change the nature of your affection, or your relationship with the people you get to talking to at the post office who invite you into their home, cook you dinner, and refill your glass and tell you stories of life under a dictatorship. At the end of the night, they insist on escorting you back to your hotel, where you exchange phone numbers and email addresses. At that moment the place stops being just the site of your vacation, it becomes the home of your friends. It takes on a significance, and enters your heart."

How can you read that and not want to travel?

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I was extraordinarily lucky to grow up in a family that spent its money on trips. Only a few months after I was born, we hurtled across Europe from our home in England to the southern tip of Greece to spend a week on Kefalonia. Since then, we've been from Montepulciano to Minneapolis, from Puerto Vallarta to Paris, from San José to San Sebastián. Our bucket list is long, and it's a source of constant conflict. My dad would sooner die than go back to Russia, and my mum can't bear it if she doesn't get to see Carthage. If the travel bug is genetic, I've got it.

But at the same time, the concept of home is a bit challenging for me. I grew up in London but moved to the U.S. at a young age, and I spent my childhood longing for a place I didn't really remember. Judith Viorst's charming book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, voiced my struggle: Alexander has, as the title suggests, the worst day ever, and maintains that things would be so much better if only he lived in Australia.

I was not really that cute of a kid - I had long, tangled brown hair, unflattering glasses that gave me a rather owlish look that was not helped by the presence of a big nose and the fact that I always had said nose stuck in a book. I felt misunderstood by my peers, and I couldn't shake the feeling that things would be better had we only stayed in England. Add to that the fact that I loved books about English schoolgirls getting into hijinks at their posh private schools, and you can see why I felt so much for Alexander. But I had wonderfully supportive parents who encouraged all my weirdness, and on the rougher days, my mother would remind me of what Alexander's mum had told him: "Some days are like that, even in Australia."

I, of course, am not the only perpetual traveller to struggle with the concept of home. The hero's journey is a thread linking centuries' worth of the search for meaning and belonging, and one such commentary that has stuck with me is Azareen Van Der Vliet Oloomi's piece "Reading *The Odyssey* Far From Home." In it, she writes,

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1 This is absolutely and entirely beside the point, but I strongly encourage you to Google the 10th Mountain Division. The basic gist is that they fought the Nazis on skis, founded modern skiing as we know it, and were total badasses.

2 Be very aware: though you will hear it almost uniformly pronounced as "App-uh-lay-shuh," the locals are clear. The mountain range, and the trail, are pronounced "App-uh-latch-uh." As in, "Don't mess up the pronunciation or I'll throw an apple atcha."

3 This comes from the fascinating 1964 court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. Nico Jacobellis had been charged and fined for possessing and showing an obscene film at his movie theatre. However, he continued to appeal the case until he reached the U.S. Supreme Court, where the lower courts' decisions were overturned on the basis that the First Amendment forbids censorship and that even obscenity is Constitutionally protected. Justice Potter Stewart, in his concurrence, wrote about hard-core pornography: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description, and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that."

"Given the disorienting cartography of my life, there isn't a singular *home* for me to return to. I am from nowhere, or, perhaps, I am from a constellation of places whose habits and social codes violently contradict one another, leaving me empty handed. That emptiness, though excruciatingly painful, has also allowed me to cultivate emotional and psychological dexterity, to embrace digression, and to comfortably linger on the shores of foreign cities on my impossible search for a place to call home."

For me, home is watching my mother roast a whole chicken in our warm, light-wood kitchen. She is wearing an off-white apron with splashes of different red wines across it, each one neatly labelled. My father is sitting on a stool nearby, plucking a Neil Young song on his guitar, glasses slipping down his nose as he squints in concentration. But I have lived in so many places and stumbled into the lives of so many people that I cannot shake the feeling of cosmopolitanism; surely I cannot be restricted to just one home. There's a Chinese legend that a red thread of fate connects two soulmates. The string can get knotted up or stretched out or all tangled, but it can never break. No matter what, this person is your destiny, and you're going to find them whether you like it or not.

I'm studying biochemistry, so the STEM part of my brain makes it challenging for me to buy into things like religion and fate. But I'm getting a degree in history, so I also can't deny the lengths that people will go to for what they believe in. Look at Perseus and Andromeda, or Cleopatra and Marc Antony, or Tristan and Isolde, or Marie and Pierre Curie, or Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King.[4] They crossed mountains and seas and called on the gods and started wars and lived and died for the people and the things they loved. I see the world as a million interesting red threads, and I'm pulled in all different directions by them: to my parents and my brother, to my best friend of fifteen years, to the group of surfers I paddled out with every morning in France, to my backpacking buddies in the Rocky Mountains, to my host family in the northern suburbs of Copenhagen. My home is in a million places around the world. There are pieces of me in Tamil Nadu and Tel Aviv and Crete and Copenhagen and everywhere I've been and everywhere I have yet to go. I am a mosaic of all of the people I've known and loved, and the me that is a traveller is a constantly evolving being.

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So, why do we travel? It makes me a little ill to say it, but we travel because of a Danish TV2 commercial. The producers bring different groups of people into a room, announcing them with titles like "those who live in the countryside" (cue a group of people in workwear) and "those who have never seen a cow" (a group of young people with edgy haircuts and graphic tees enters). Each group stands in a designated box marked by tape on the floor, neatly categorizing them. Then, a presenter reads out a number of statements and asks that anyone who identifies with them step forward to the front of the room. The questions range from the easy – "Who in this room was the class clown?" – to the funny – "Who has had sex in the last week?" – to the heart-wrenching – "Who has bullied someone else?"

At one point, the presenter asks anyone who is bisexual to step forward. After a pause, a young man with shoulder-length blond hair and glasses steps out of the crowd, meandering to the front of the room as his flannel flaps behind him. He stands alone, and there is a breathtaking silence as he stares out at his countrymen. But as he walks back to his assigned square, his fellow participants applaud his bravery, and I am left wiping away tears.

The commercial ends with the whole group standing together as the presenter announces, "And then there's all of us who just love Denmark. So maybe, there's more that brings us together than we think. TV2 Denmark: all that we share.

This marketing team deserves a raise.

TV2 Denmark has got me hook, line, and sinker, because I genuinely believe that we travel because we want to know that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We want to be in a café in Marrakech and have a stranger sit down across from us, saying hello and introducing themselves. We want to hold a baby in our arms as its mother finishes knitting a scarf she's making for us in Patagonia. We want to be pulled into a dance, spinning and whirling with the rest of the crowd as everyone's hearts beat together to the music. We want to order a beer in a hid-

4 If you ask me, the greatest love story ever told is recounted in Sarah Ruhl's remarkable volume *The Clean House and Other Plays*: "There once was a very great American surgeon named Halsted. He was married to a nurse. He loved her – immeasurably. One day Halsted noticed that his wife's hands were chapped and red when she came back from surgery. And so he invented rubber gloves. For her. It is one of the greatest love stories in medicine. The difference between inspired medicine and uninspired medicine is love."

den bar in Berlin and turn around and see our soulmate sitting there, waiting for us.

We travel for connection. We travel to find that we are not so different from the Amazonian tribespeople or the little Russian ladies waiting at train stations or the stylish Italians expertly navigating their Vespas down cobblestone streets, dark hair and scarves flying behind them. We travel to find out that Priya and the boys from Copenhagen are cut from the same cloth. This search for connection opens us up to all kinds of pitfalls. We run the risk of turning the people we want to meet into zoo animals, waiting for them to perform their tribal dances for us and purchasing handicrafts at a fraction of what they would cost us in a boutique at home. But I maintain that this genuine hunt for interaction, for meeting people who are not so different from us or from each other after all, is at the true heart of travelling. The world is wide and wonderful, and it's out there waiting to be discovered. Your people are out there. Go find them.