

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY
AMERICANS SEE THEMSELVES FROM ABROAD
A Continuing Conversation

As responsible citizens of the United States, we are very interested in the relations our country is fostering with other countries and also with their citizens, who are as representative and non-representative of their cultures and governments as we are of our own. We have a deepening concern with how we as Americans understand ourselves in resonant, inextricable relationship with the world around us—an inter-connectedness we, personally, rejoice in because it invites us powerfully back to the need to see and serve our common, mysterious, redeeming humanity. It concerns us gravely that on our travels we have become more and more aware of how rarely the people we meet believe that we as a country can see the ‘we’ in ‘them’, the ‘us’ in ‘you’.

For *Through A Glass Darkly* we invited writers who have traveled or lived abroad to share the experience of finding themselves to be, for others, the embodiment of a culture they may have always considered an ill-fitting second skin. Many of us have never felt as American—or less American—than we have when we have traveled or lived for any period of time in other countries.

We have posted these essays on our website and invite you to join in the conversation if you already have written something about your own developing self-awareness as an American when traveling abroad or if you are inspired by something you read here to share your own experiences. We encourage you to contact us and the individual authors whose experiences speak to you.

Heather Tosteson and Charles D. Brockett, *Editors*

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I

SOLITUDE

We often don't notice the extent of our embeddedness until we travel. No longer tamped by habit, our senses quicken, the world becomes startlingly vivid, odorous, evocative. Our inner life begins to attach to new images—of solitude and belonging. We see ourselves as if for the first time—and are surprised by what we see. We discover a new groundedness we didn't acknowledge before. Seeing others, a girl alone in a cemetery, the worn face of a prostitute, we see a loneliness in ourselves we may have evaded too—and seeing it in this new country, this new face, we may come into new relationship with it in ourselves. Traveling abroad we are traveling in a new inner landscape as well. We return obscurely changed. We may find ourselves more at home in our own life and our own social world. We may never have noticed the depth of our social embeddedness until we pulled ourselves out and lived on our frail aerial roots, deprived even of the daily hello and good-bye and how are you doing? we so readily ignored before. So much noise at home, but abroad, those brief interchanges, even in memory, feel like caresses: bienvenido, adios, guten tag. We share them now, these little seemingly pointless phrases, with clerks at the post-office or drugstore, a woman in a sari or hijab at the bus stop, and feel the air move between us. Just enough. A light spring breeze. Belonging.

Paula Sergi

The Articulate Sound of Solitude

In order to arrive at what you are not
 You must go through the way in which you are not.
 And what you do not know is the only thing you know.
 EAST COKER
 (No. 2 of 'Four Quartets')
 T.S. Eliot

I love the suitcase with its clever compartments, little zippers to separate socks from underwear. Travel-sized shampoos. How exotic the windows of car or train flashing back a scene that changes every moment. I like the constant surprise; every day brings something new. Even in Wisconsin the landscape shifts from scrub trees to pine, from brown soil to copper to red. I love highway cafes with salty soup and cottage cheese for salad. Love to be lost for a morning, not knowing exactly which stop to get off at in a city. Love waking to a new view, someone else's ceiling cracks.

To be transplanted and free—that's what travel represents, and so I apply for a three month writing residency in Germany, even though I speak no German. To be willing to live in a foreign country where you don't speak the language implies a comfort with incomprehension and I am well prepared in this regard. There are many things in life I have never understood, despite reasonable efforts. I struggle with most technology (computers, phone systems, digital clocks and radios); with assembly (toys, gadgets, appliances); with taking things apart (opening packages, cereal boxes, etc). For all of my meeting the stated requirements on the residency application, my secret weapon is that I am comfortable with not knowing what's going on. There's too much emphasis placed on being totally with it; and, if people were honest, more would admit to being in the same state of mind as I describe.

I have stumbled around the back country of Denali National Park, the Olympic Rain Forest, and the Cascades with only a backpack and hope. Having survived month-long backpacking treks in all kinds of weather, I knew I'd be able to make coffee, sleep and write in my journal without understanding where I was in relation to the rest of the world. Without knowing the language, I'd have to rely on my other senses. As in the wilderness, keen observation is the key to survival.

My first night in Wiesbaden, from my bedroom window, I see the faded façade of a church and cream-colored houses on a hill spilling towards me like a fairy tale. Time deepens from yellow to orange, the sun transforming it all—clouds, hillside, church, woman sitting on a porch—to saffron. Even the leaves of the poplar spin golden like coins. Only the wind and the hum of a motorbike.

Who imagines Germany this way? Until now I thought only in terms of grey: stone buildings; pebbled streets; crumbling statues. No one said it would be easy to be a foreigner for months here alone. But no one said it would be saffron.

At first I try to blend in, to dress like the locals and act like the locals. To purchase food and hand the clerk money without saying anything. And, yes, I get away without speaking. It helps me "fit in" for a while. On the bus and the train, not understanding conversations around me creates a convenient bubble; I can't react to the sounds people make. Laughter, yes, but there's not a lot of that in Germany. Cell phones impose another layer of unnecessary noise. I also ignore that.

After being alone in my apartment for days with only my journal, I think I'll be happy to overhear a conversation—in any language. But not understanding the language, I'm content to watch the scenery going by. Without trying to speak, I assume that no one knows I'm a foreigner.

You don't have to speak the language when taking a walk in Germany. Without language, my plan is to walk fast and avoid looking lost. In the unlikely event that someone will address me, I'll nod my head back and forth or try to say "Ich spreche nicht Deutsch." Then I'll be free to pretend that I know where I am, with no comprehension of what those around me want.

But I soon realize the dangers and the foolishness of this brand of

“fitting in.” Lost dogs are easy to spot. They walk quickly, propelled from scent to scent. They have that unsettled look. And pretending to know your way is like pretending to know what’s going on in conversation, or with technology—it can only lead to embarrassment.

And I find that I want to greet people as I walk. I try out my two greetings: “Hallo” and “Guten Tag,” or the less formal “Tag.” I had thought that the younger people would respond to “Hallo.” But they startle, as if a Bach tune had just come on over their i pods. Older folks do better. They’re used to being alone, and like me, are thinking about absent friends and family as they walk. They understand the tone of loneliness in a person’s voice, and proffer sincerity to my attempt at hello. It’s a nod to our common humanness.

So I resolve to let my façade fall away. No matter what I wear, I’ll never move the way they do, or avert my eyes in the same way. I’ll always have my American smile to announce myself, cluing them that an intruder is in their midst.

My first 3 weeks in Germany whenever the phone rings, which is almost every hour for a couple of days, I eagerly answer, thinking it’s a real person wanting to talk with me. Each time, the same cheerful lady asks me something in cheerful German, and then gives me time to reply. I have tried to tell her “Ich spreche nicht Deutsch,” but she doesn’t seem to care. She hangs up, and then tries me again later.

It makes me anxious that someone is trying so hard to tell me something. I think maybe it’s a warning about a tropical storm or a tornado. Perhaps I’ve won some bratwurst or Berlitz lessons. I try to record the phone number, with my German phrase book in hand, but she’s too quick for me. I can’t understand what number I should be calling. But then, neither can I understand why I should be calling it.

One day my phone suddenly fails to work, and it hits me. My telephone friend has been warning me about shutting off the connection. The digital message on the phone comes up “suche” something. Because of high school French, I suspect the word has to do with something sweet, as in “sucre.” I imagine the German phone system has been playing a joke on me and, at the point of disconnect, is saying “Sweet!” All of the employees of the company are gathering for a group high five, knowing they got me good.

Then I think perhaps the letters “suche” represented the German form of the word “suck,” as in “this phone line sucks.” But maybe not. I ask a native speaker about the word, and he said it means “search.” I think the context has to do with the slang expression “search me!”—as in “you got me” or “it’s anybody’s guess what’s going on here,” with an accompanying shoulder shrug gesture to indicate incomprehension.

Does it matter that my phone is shut off? I’m in the silent business of writing. I’m here for observation. I’m not looking for a major discovery or treatise, though I do find the absence of dachshunds to be a curious phenomenon. I’m content to see how people move across the square; I like that there is a square, and that people are out, walking in the streets at what seems to be all hours. Any time that I venture out— for a stamp or some fruit or just a walk, it’s buzzing with people of all ages.

This is different from my town, where there is almost no public transportation, and no main pedestrian area; where we’re separated by generation: housing complexes for the elderly; workout clubs for the fit; dance clubs for the young. Even the grocery store buses the elderly in only on Wednesdays.

At the Wiesbaden wine fest, I sit alone, people watching from my seat on the steps of a corner building. I no longer try to blend in and I am aware of my solo status. I observe other singletons: the drunk staring into the food booth; an older guy, pressing for a place at the wine stand.

Evenings, even at eight PM, the light is slightly rosy. The people in the large white house to my left sit on their deck with a candle. It’s hard to stay indoors on a night like this. I walk to the park two blocks from my apartment and sit for an hour reading critical essays by Larry Levis. When I look up from my book, I’m surprised to see boys playing soccer on the lawn, ornamental buildings as backdrops. I forget for a moment where I am.

It’s growing dark, but I’m not tired. I walk to the park on Wilhelm Strasse. Couples and groups of three are also walking, admiring the fountains and sculptures. I debate merging with them. Would they notice if I tagged along? Without addressing one another, we window shop. Nothing seems to separate me from the other late night strollers.

Come dark, at ten PM, it's time to go in, but I keep the windows open. Outside car bleats, long stabs of horn announcing something- *move or come*. A baby cries. Someone coughs; someone whines to her mother; someone scrapes a metal rake over concrete, finishing up their yard work. Promenades of women click by in shoes with pointy toes and tiny heels.

A man across the street sings in his third story apartment. Because I am a stranger here, everything seems both ancient and fresh; the tilt of old cobbled walks under foot; new streets set with square stones in patterns I don't recognize; the latest fashions displayed in antique store fronts. I'm in Europe, not some small Midwest American town; thus I imagine his song is a romantic Wagnerian opera. Had Wagner been inspired by the local Roman bath, by the quality of light fading to darkness one late summer evening in Wiesbaden?

In my neighbor's voice I hear the language of the heart, a heart strung out on love, on song. I lean over the windowsill for better sound. I see him, standing in his room without a shirt. It's a warm night.

Then I detect another voice. His wife, perhaps, preparing their dinner? They dine so late here in Europe, where the pace of every day is relaxed. Only here, I imagine, are such delights possible.

I continue to listen and hear another voice, like a grace note. Is it coming from the television, whose blue light is faintly visible? Though the words do not come through, the beat is unmistakable. Finally I recognize the refrain. *I'll be there, I'll be there, Just call my name, and I'll be there.* (*Just look over your shoulder, baby.*) Jacko and his brothers croon.

Back home, months after my Germany experience, I make myself an espresso because we're out of regular coffee. When the caffeine tingle rushes to my skin, the buzz surfacing in my hands and face, I'm suddenly the stranger in Wiesbaden, wondering how I'll spend this empty weekend. I imagine another long walk in a park just to pass the time.

I move for my trusty American cell phone, and call the young woman from India I heard about last week. She's here with her new husband who's here with his new job, long hours. She's never been to America before. I invite her to lunch.

Teresa Peipins

Amsterdam, An Awareness of Aging

At what point did I become the eccentric older woman traveller? I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror in an Amsterdam shop which confirmed what I didn't want to see. I was wearing a big belted secondhand winter coat. It was a Calvin Klein in my size which excited me no end when I found it, but didn't change the fact it was neither fashionable nor very attractive. I was in a pair of Lands End walking shoes, the very idea of which would usually make me cringe but they couldn't have been more comfortable. My hat was vaguely reminiscent of something my aunt might have knit, a lumpy black wool creation. But the dead giveaway that I'd changed was I was wearing my glasses.

For years I would never have dreamt of going out in public in glasses. I'd always worn my contacts, morning to night however late that turned out to be. Obviously I'd opted totally for comfort letting my eyes rest from the drying effects of contacts requiring my putting drops in my eyes periodically or else suffering the contacts sticking to my eyeballs. Another telltale sign of aging.

And for this new, or rather older me, Amsterdam wasn't the right city. Though I love the smell of hash, a coffee shop with its offering of only coffee or pot didn't quite fit my lifestyle. I wouldn't be able to manage more than a couple of tokes. The smoke hanging in the air gave me a flash of nostalgia, dorm parties with Cream on the turntable and everyone so high they no longer spoke.

Since I'd visited Amsterdam over twenty years ago, the Red Light district didn't thrill or impress. It gave me a sense of hard working women which showed on their faces. Yet the contrast of the prostitutes with the matronly figures at the rail information desk and the stiff white collars in the

paintings of the Dutch masters makes for a curious juxtaposition.

I must have gotten bigger since my last trip since I just didn't fit in the tiny staircases in the doll sized houses. But natives were even bigger than I am. How did they manage? I yearned for space and not to bang into chairs in a café or knock something over with my bag.

The herding about of tourists from one museum to the next is the largest industry in Amsterdam. There is little chance to intermingle with natives anymore. Tourists are given a section of a space to befoul while everyone else steers clear. I live in a tourist town myself, Barcelona, so I'm familiar with the disdain one feels towards tourists who have made life more complicated and city streets too crowded. In fact, in Barcelona I rarely venture downtown anymore.

Water was so controlled in Amsterdam I never found its presence overwhelming like with the aqua alta in Venice. Here it served as a picturesque backdrop contained by feats of engineering over the centuries. It wouldn't dare intrude. I even have faith the Dutch will create another miracle like the one that saved the city centuries ago when global warming threatens. After all, land is reclaimed on a regular basis and even the train station sits on an artificial island.

Food left me puzzled. A visit to a supermarket (a chain called hamster, why, I have no idea) revealed a wealth of fresh fruit and vegetables. Cheese and bread were excellent and apples, the best I had in years. But something happened to the ingredients on their way to the restaurant table. Portions were hearty but nothing was delicious, not even ethnic food and prices were very high. A falafel sandwich was one of my better meals in the city.

Despite the onslaught of tourism, people were pleasant. There was a comforting figure on the train, eating his whole wheat sandwiches and drinking from a thermos of coffee. The desk clerk in our cheap hotel told me he wanted to talk. Children skated on a city pond a la Hans Brinker. A taxi driver drove up to ask if we needed to get somewhere as we were waiting for a tram at 6 AM, enabling us to catch our train as the tram never showed up.

Fat sheep barely moved on the patches of grass between canals in the countryside. There was so much solidity in a land built on water. Substance and comfort were what I walked away with, the very qualities I have found in myself over the years.

Mark Brazaitis

The Girl Alone

The girls who lived next door to me in Santa Cruz Verapaz, Guatemala, didn't know her name. Olivia said she didn't have a name, although Elvira said her name was some kind of flower, Rosa or Orquidea or Girasol. They weren't sure where she lived, although Marta thought she came from the village of Chitul and Olga guessed the village of Río Frío. They called her "the girl who wants to be alone" because when they saw her she was always by herself, and when on a day they were feeling brave and asked her if she wanted to play, she'd shaken her head.

When I asked them to describe her, they gave only general words: black hair, brown skin, dark eyes. But when I asked them to compare her to themselves, they said she had Olivia's eyes—large, bright, and round—and Elvira's hair—thin, long and black—and Marta's crooked, bright teeth and Olga's sweet laugh. The girl who wants to be alone laughed, and this puzzled the girls who lived next door to me because they wondered why she laughed.

People in Santa Cruz asked me frequently if I was lonely in my five-room house, and I always said no, although this wasn't always true, especially after Grace and I broke up. Olivia told me once she couldn't imagine spending even an afternoon alone in her house. The emptiness and silence, she said, would make her sad and afraid. As a North American, I had a different perspective on being alone. I came from a culture where "having your own space" is a crucial component of mental health. From the time I was born, I had my own room, and during my teens, it offered a haven from my parents' fights. I would shut the door, turn on music or open a book, and I was safe because I was alone.

I was curious about the girl Olivia and her sisters described, and one day we decided we would go look for her where they always saw her, in the *calvario* on top of the hill across from my house. The *calvario* was one of my

favorite places. From its steps, a person could see the entire town. Santa Cruz was set in the middle of mountains, with trees shooting up between the two hundred or so houses, offering wings of shade. The *calvario's* twin aluminum doors were usually closed and locked, but sometimes they were open and I would go inside and sit in front of the altar, decorated with flowers in old milk cans.

We trudged up the hill three consecutive afternoons without seeing the girl who wants to be alone. But on the fourth day, from the bottom of the hill, Olivia spotted her in the belfry, her head resting against the curve of the bell. She was like they described her, except she seemed older than any of them. Like them, she was *indígena*, and she wore a worn blue *corte* and a faded, red *güipil*. The girls raced up the hill, yelling as if in a cavalry charge. Rosa or Orquidea or Girasol must have seen them, because she quickly left the belfry.

We entered the *calvario* and found it dark and even gloomy, despite the broad windows on both the east and west walls. At the altar were dozens of flowers and an assortment of burned candles, and the place smelled of roses and wax. We looked around for several minutes before Olivia spotted her hiding between birds of paradise. Olga laughed, and Elvira and Marta shouted: "There she is! There's the girl who wants to be alone!"

Realizing how rude our intrusion was, I told the girls to be quiet. "Let's go outside," I said, and we left the *calvario* to sit on the steps. As the girls talked, I thought about the girl inside. I wondered whether she really wanted to be alone or if she was only shy. Pointing back to the *calvario*, I said to Olivia, "Ask her if she wants to play."

A few moments later, Olivia returned. "She doesn't want to play."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

I wondered why a girl all alone in a temple with no toys wouldn't want to play. I couldn't resist: I told Olivia to ask the girl why she wanted to be alone.

Olivia came back with her reply: "She says she doesn't want to be alone and she never is alone." Olivia shrugged. "She says she's with the flowers and the bell."

We agreed she was a strange girl, and after playing our games, we went home.

Sitting alone at dusk in my courtyard, I thought again about the girl who wants to be alone. I wondered about the things she was with, the flowers and the bell, and whether she imagined them talking to her like friends. Or

were the flowers and the bell enough in themselves to make her feel she wasn't alone, the flowers fragrant and brilliant orange and blue and the bell firm and thick and smooth?

As night came, I began to see faces emerge from the mold on the walls and I heard voices in the dripping faucet of my *pila*. But it was the rose bush in my garden I chose as my evening's companion. Tall, many-branched and blooming, it was as fixed as a friend and as sweet smelling as a lover.

Peggy Landsman

No Place Like Home

purple flowers
 I don't know the name of
 hug
 the blue tile roof
 of this beautiful house
 I'll never see enough of

the blowhard breeze
 bullies
 brittle leaves
 across the street—
 they land belly up

it starts to sprinkle;
 I catch a drop in my eye
 I blink—
 it'll rain

I open my new umbrella—
 “*kasa*” in Japanese

I smile
 drench myself in thoughts
 of that house in Spain...
 that long ago afternoon
 the rain came down so
 hard
 on the red tile roof
 I couldn't keep myself from singing

back home in California
 there's a drought

now

here in Mukonoso
 the blue tiles
 bathe

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