

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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IV
SCARCITY

We are so rich a country that the statistics are meaningless. Abundance and scarcity as much of the world experience them are completely out of scale. Our scale. We can't truly imagine our material alternatives until we experience them. A world where we bribe to find a ballpoint pen, where a six-pack of beer costs a week's salary for a government employee. We can't imagine, either, what people give up to come here for that promise of surreal wealth—professional careers, family networks—and what they find in return. When we experience these reversals—living in Hungary, visiting Cuba, doing hard labor in New York City—we begin to make the important distinctions between scarcity of goods and scarcity of imagination, scarcity of heart. We begin to wonder what abundance truly is and where we have been graced to find it.

Peggy Landsman

Cold War (Debrecen, Hungary; 1988)

My friend Èva brought me back a T-shirt from Budapest last week. On the front of it is a cartoon of an old Hungarian horseman dressed in folk costume astride his mount. Instead of working the reins, however, his hands are poised over the keyboard of a laptop computer. I myself do *not* have a computer. I do not even have a typewriter. You could say I'm becoming mildly obsessed by the difficulty of having to get by without one.

When I sit down to write at a typewriter, it's like magic. The words come so quickly, I don't have time to think and I don't need to. My fingers fly over the keys. The words appear clearly on the page. I sit back and relax. My only task is to take out each perfect page and insert another, the next virgin destined for instant ecstasy. The writing process is pure pleasure.

When I'm reduced to writing with a pen, however, I limp across the barren stretches of blank paper painfully aware of each dragging step. My hand cramps. I can't seem to find a pen that is a pleasure to hold and, at the same time, generous in the mileage department. Believe me, nothing is more vexing to a prolific Muse than to have to cool her heels while her chosen medium goes in search of another pen because the one they've been so diligently working away with suddenly runs out of ink.

You may not be aware, but Hungary—where I've been living for the past six months—is homeland of the *biro*, the original ballpoint pen. Bet you credited an American with that invention, didn't you?

Hungarians also invented the elevator and telephone. It's a mystery how it happened, but the Hungarians, the most inventive people in the world, are also the most unsung. That's probably why a Hungarian created the most important literary prize in America—the Pulitzer.

Every time a famous writer is referred to as “that Pulitzer Prize-winning so and so,” Magyars everywhere bask in reflected glory. If they are at all like my friends, they won't be content to bask in silence, either. They will joke and talk about all manner of things. Eventually they'll tell you about good old Imre.

Imre gave his name to the Americas. I no longer remember the details of the explanation, but it seems “Amerigo” is Italian for “Imre.” The Americas were named for Amerigo Vespucci who was named Amerigo by wise Italian parents who knew how great was Imre.

We'll always come full circle if we start somewhere in Hungary. Come to think of it, Hungarians were probably the first to circumnavigate the globe.

This brings me back to where I was originally headed. It's a hard road for a potential Pulitzer Prize-winner when she has to write longhand without a plentiful supply of reliable pens. The first *biros* may have been wonderful, but the Hungarian pens I've been making acquaintance with are notoriously unreliable. They skip like crazy.

I've had to enter into a rather shady deal with some Russian soldiers in order to buy some excellent Chinese pens.

The Russians live in barracks behind a fence across the street. Most Hungarians won't give them the time of day, but I want to practice my Russian. I was never *forced* to learn it, as the Hungarians were. I harbor no resentment toward the language of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy.

These pens, I've been assured, will get one hundred pages to the cartridge. I have plenty of paper. I should feel better, but I don't.

My handwriting is becoming more and more illegible. I'm afraid when I try to transcribe these notes in the future, I might make some dreadful mistakes. Imagine if I forget what I've learned here and type up something like: “The *Romanians* invented the pen, the telephone, and the elevator. Franz Liszt was a *Romanian*. So was Pulitzer.”

I have to laugh when I remember how anti-technology I used to be. In the

late sixties and early seventies, I learned skills like basket weaving and hand-building with clay. Doing everything by hand was a point of honor. I never learned to type until 1984.

And now, how I do miss my typewriter! What I wouldn't give for my old electronic Adler, its memory of fifty characters, its automatic correction.

Yes, there certainly is a lot to recommend technology, but I'll leave that discussion for another time. Right now I've got to excavate my refrigerator—which, by the way, like so many others in Hungary, is from Russia.

My Russian refrigerator is dark. It owes no debt to Thomas Alva Edison. No light bulb hogs up any of its insufficient space. My Russian refrigerator is small. Of course, I've never actually *seen* how far back into the darkness its interior extends. And I've never measured it.

In some ways, though, you could say my Russian refrigerator is heroic. It saves me from myself. It saves me from the dangers of keeping eggs on hand for breakfast—or buttery late-night snacks. It helps me in my battle against cholesterol.

There is no egg tray in this food storage center, no safe place to shelter the vulnerable little ovoids.

But before I get too far ahead of myself, before I plunge you into the darkness of confusion that frequently follows my undisciplined rambling, let me explain: Hungarian eggs, at least the ones I've become acquainted with here in Debrecen, do not know the security of cardboard cartons. They are sold loose, individually, and must make their way from the store as best they can in a simple paper bag.

Helpful neighbors have told me to cushion the eggs on the milk.

Hungarian milk comes in little square plastic bladders. These bladders are to be found in the grocery stores—unrefrigerated—squeezed into boxes like passengers in crowded, third-class compartments on Yugoslavian trains. Sometimes they burst, the way bladders do if they are too tightly squeezed for too long a time. (I once sat for *thirteen* hours on a Yugoslavian train without relieving myself. I couldn't face the facilities. But that was in 1981—seven

years ago.)

I imagine if I were an egg, I would love to be set on top of one of these Hungarian milk pockets. I would feel safe and cozy. Inside the dark refrigerator, my life would be almost as peaceful as it must have been in the nest.

But, surely, I romanticize. Excuse me.

The truth is there are beer bottles, fruit juice bottles, all manner of glass jars that present a danger to the eggs. They are all involved in a constant battle over *Lebensraum*.

Space is tight between the shelves in this humble appliance. (Where did the notion originate that everything the Russians do is done on a Texas-size scale?) The bottles cannot stand up. They must lie down.

To understand this Russian refrigerator, it is helpful to think of a Russian circus.

Picture the acrobats—those wonderful exponents of physical culture—balancing on each other's backs and shoulders, creating a temporary pyramid to delight the eye of the most jaded on-looker. Now, on top of the bottles, pile the cheese, the sausage, whatever comestibles you happen to have. On top of this, place the milk; finally, with tenderness, the eggs.

All is well and good. Until you need to add or remove a bottle. You slide one in or out; you upset the delicate balance. The formation was always precarious. The cheese or something else, maybe a pickle, falls out. Suddenly, everything is shifting position. The eggs must attempt to log-roll on top of the now stirred-up surface of the milk. They inevitably fail to maintain their balance. And should you ever wish to help yourself to the milk, you'd better first consider the eggs.

So much for the balancing act going on inside. The real challenge for me is getting the door to shut. It hangs slightly open—like a tent flap—caressing each casual breeze.

Fortunately, I've found a nice long, thin, flexible piece of wood. (Picture the circus master's whip.) I wedge one end of it in the space where the door

handle fails to come flush against the refrigerator door. The other end, I stick between the loose molding and the doorway of the alcove the refrigerator sits in all by itself. I've had to isolate the refrigerator; there's not enough room for it in the kitchen. The larger Hungarian-made appliances fit snugly enough as it is.

This arrangement keeps it closed, but it also makes me think twice before paying a visit to the lonely old outsider. It takes a bit of time to get everything just right and sometimes the stick springs back when I least expect it. I could lose an eye.

But with my one good eye, I'll look on the bright side. I've always been in need of knocking off a pound or two. Staring into a dark refrigerator in the middle of the night when I can't sleep and I know there are no eggs anyway does not inspire the snack artist in me.

But how I do go on. I never meant to get sidetracked describing my ambivalence toward this basically innocuous hunk of Russian metal. I have to find the bottle of vodka I promised to chill for Volya, one of my friendly pen dealers. He's on guard duty tonight.

If I play my cards right, who knows what rapport we might develop. Maybe he'll discover a typewriter I could have in exchange for some dental floss, or Dove or Ivory soap—any useful thing from America.

Who knows, maybe we could cultivate a genuine friendship based on something other than economic intrigue and material gain. Wouldn't that be something. Imagine the ramifications. I might even win a Pulitzer if I write about it.

Carolyn Harris

A Tale of Two Towns

It was February. Top tourist season in Veradera, Cuba, a small hoping to be larger, tourist town. Earlier that day, we'd hitched a ride to Veradera from where we'd moored My Carnie, a Pacific SeaCraft Dana 24. In Cuba, a country where transportation in rural areas is little or none, you'd better be prepared to hitchhike—and be happy to ride third person on a motorcycle or jump in the bed of a smoke belching sugar cane truck. Dave and I had been invited to a new friend's home for dinner. We had a few hours before trying to figure out how to catch the public bus to Cardenas, so we sprawled on the white sand by the fancy and not so fancy hotels. I flipped through the Verasub, the Jolly Roger Catamaran Cruise and the Shopping Nightlife tourist brochures written in Spanish, English, French, German, and a couple more languages I couldn't figure out, then watched local children and a few Europeans playing in the Cuban sea.

On days we weren't anchored at Cayo Blanco, a small group of islands with Che Gueverra T shirts flapping a welcome in the wind to the daily influx of sun worshipers seeking volleyball, snorkeling and a bad rock band, we'd catch a ride into Veradera. We'd find a quiet outdoor café and sip Hatuey, a Cuban beer, serenaded by a guitarist mangling Mexican music or singing the praises of Che Gueverra, and watch the fancy bell bedecked horses and carriages carrying photo snapping tourists along the street.

The commercial bus station we'd spied on a previous trip to town was nearby. When we tried to buy a ticket to Cardenas, we were politely told, "forget that idea, our buses only go to Havana or some other city. Try the bus around the corner." A concrete tunnel with Cubans inside blocked our way. A young Cuban watching down the street for the bus told us, "Get in line in the tunnel. We know when you came." We hadn't thought to go around and go in the other end.

Knowing very little about cars, I asked Dave, "What's that?" pointing to one parked across the street. Most of the cars looked like refugees from a

junk yard, but this one was really strange. “It’s three different Ford years,” he told me.

When the bus coughed down the street in a cloud of smoke, the stranger told us to find our place in the skinny tunnel. I clutched my bottle of Napa Valley wine to my chest like a baby while people squeezed aside and pointed to our place. Fortunately for us, there are no overweight people in Cuba. The other passengers had passes, but we could pay fifteen pesos. If we didn’t have pesos, we could pay five cents.

We passed through the outskirts of Cardenas, a crumbling commercial port town, found our stop and walked into the downtown area. We needed to replace a small bulb in the running lights we’d burned out crossing the Gulf Stream.

There were no cars on the street. Occasionally, a skinny, sad-looking horse plodded by pulling a slat-sided cart of old people who sat on the cart floor toe to toe as they banged along the cobblestones. Two young Cubans sprinted behind, keeping an eye on their friends or parents. I felt I’d been dropped into a black and white scene of Europe two hundred years ago. A young boy squeezed up to me begging money for candy but before I could reply my “muy mal por dientes” an older woman stepped from her door, whacked him on the rear with a broom and told him to get out of there.

The darkened stores appeared closed, but people wandered in and out, so we tried the first one. Most of the shelves were bare. One shelf held a few tins of canned meat I’d be reluctant to eat. The others held a hodge podge of anything from three cans of peas to hardware supplies. It looked like the final days of a going out of business sale in a store that didn’t know which business it was in to start with. We asked about a bulb and were directed up the street. This store was similar. Still no bulb.

While I tried to convince the owner of the next store how badly we needed running lights when we were out with the big boats again, he took us back out on the street. He talked to a cab driver. After rummaging through his glove box, the driver found a bulb and gave it to us shaking his head when we offered money.

A young man in green shorts pushing a bicycle was going our way. He offered to show us the street we needed. When we came to his home, he invited us in. I thought it was the storage shed when he pushed the bike inside, but this was home. He moved a pile of wire so we could sit on upturned buckets. “I’ve spent many years building my home,” he said as he brewed some wicked Cuban coffee. He poured an inch into two chipped glasses and handed them to us. “When I get more money I buy more cement.” He was curious why

Americans didn’t come to Cuba and surprised we weren’t Germans because so many stay in the big hotels in Veradera. Understandably, northerners love to get out of the cold winters and spread out their white bodies on the whiter Veradera beaches. He also wondered what we were doing in Cardenas, “Tourists don’t come here.” We explained we were “free tourists”, the Cuban classification for tourists not on a tour. “All I want is your friendship,” he told us as we departed—a phrase I heard often as I gradually got used to that strong sipping coffee.

As we wandered down the block looking for our street number, children played around us. People waved from their homes, wooden shutters flung open for the warm evening breeze. Ramon and Julia, our new friends, both worked so we didn’t want to arrive too early, but we didn’t know where else to go. We knocked on the door and Julia’s red-haired mother, Lily, let us in. She instructed us to sit on the bed next to the kitchen table, handed us a small newspaper about the Youthful Heroes: Fidel, Che, and some others I didn’t recognize, then disappeared back in her bedroom.

We’d offered to bring part of the dinner, but were told in Cuba that would be an insult. Only one woman prepares the meal. That night it would be Ramon’s wife. Even his mother-in-law and wife did not share the kitchen. Kitchen sharing could lead to big problems with Cuban women. Ramon did reluctantly allow us to bring some White Zinfandel from the Napa Valley which we told him was very famous for its wines. We didn’t tell him we usually bought it for \$3.99 a bottle.

They’d invited us for Tuesday dinner. When I’d suggested Monday would be better as we needed to sail east while the weather held, he’d apologized and said, “We have no food in the house on Monday.”

Julia sliced tomatoes and fried potatoes and barracuda in a deep fryer while Ramon showed off their propane refrigerator, a gift from a friend in the United States, and their new two burner hot plate. Julia whispered to Ramon. He stepped into the small side yard and fiddled with a pump until water filled a small cistern. He dropped a chlorine tablet in the fresh water and said, “Don’t worry about our water.” Ramon showed us around the two bedroom house which Lily owned. Their bathroom had a tub and a toilet without a seat. I was checking for toilet seats as the only ones we’d seen so far were in the fancy hotels.

At dinner, I was given the seat of honor. A chair with a wicker bottom. The other three chairs had only frames with a hole in the center where the wicker had long since disappeared. Dayna, their young daughter, joined us and Julia served three plates of food. Ramon poured us each a glass of water

then put the precious Napa Valley wine in the refrigerator for dessert—to share with a surprise especially for us. We waited for everyone to sit down so we could begin. Julia finally laughed and said, “You need to eat first so we can use your plates.”

I was reluctant to eat barracuda. It seemed to be the official welcoming committee in Cuban waters. They're up to six feet long and very intimidating with piercing black eyes and toothy sneers. This barracuda tasted good.

All fish belong to the Cuban government. This one had been obtained on the black market from the Captain of a commercial vessel in the Port of Cardenas. Later that evening, that Captain and two others showed up with our surprise, a six pack of Cristal one of their better tasting beers. A six pack costs about one week's Cuban salary. It was really an honor.

Ramon, a top official with La Guarda Frontera, similar to our Coast Guard, makes US\$14.25 per month. Julia works full time at the post office. Lily provides the house they otherwise couldn't afford. Ramon showed us the government issued bread. Cubans are each entitled to one roll per day He poked his finger into the spongy roll. It bounced back into shape.

That night, we wandered through the dreary streets with Ramon. The town was dark except for dim lighting inside the run-down, paint-peeling homes. Shutters and doors were opened to encourage the slight breeze. People lay on blankets or pillows beyond the open doorways. Honey pots lined the curbs for the nightly pickup by the horse drawn slop wagon. Ramon spoke quietly to the driver of a work bus parked under a tree. The driver nodded. We would ride with the hotel night workers to the hotel nearest our mooring. Back in Veradera, we stood to follow the last worker off the bus, wondering why we hadn't remembered a flashlight. The driver motioned us to wait, then drove us down the dark road to our boat.

We met Ramon and Julia the next evening at a small restaurant he had picked for us in Veradera. “This is only the second time in my life I've eaten in a restaurant and the first time for Julia,” he said. He knew the waiter and bartender. Soon the restaurant workers stopped by our table to meet the “Americanos”. He had found the “least expensive restaurant” but felt he needed to apologize for the prices. He looked around the open porch. “These people are all tourists,” he said. “Cubans can't afford to eat here.” A cat scurried under a nearby table. “That cat's hungry.” He gestured to the lean tabby. “Cubans like cats, but we can't afford pets when we can't feed ourselves.”

We ate the “too expensive” ice cream, Julia's first taste of ice cream, then walked back past a well lit hotel listening to the tourists applaud the

evening show. Ramon glanced over. “I wouldn't be welcome in a nice hotel even in my uniform.” He shrugged. We walked without speaking toward the cement tunnel. Ramon was worried. He had a pass for the bus, but Julia didn't.

When it was time to part, Julia hugged me and Dave and Ramon shook hands. Then, Dave and I walked back to the four star hotel to catch a cab.

Andrei Guruianu

Jobs

Father remembers the cool of an office littered with blueprints, boxes, and machine parts, the smell of dark coffee brewing in the morning. On some days he strolled in late, and it was all right because they waited for him.

It was his job as assistant engineer to lay out the work plan for the day, and more or less make sure it was done in a relatively timely fashion. The factory in the heart of the capital made industrial sized fans for subway systems, other factories, and for large monsters of machinery that were shipped off to Germany, Russia, and elsewhere with enough money to afford them.

Life there transpired as it did at most other factories where employees made believe they worked on something important, then drank afterward to make believe they got paid enough for their efforts. They did their jobs, then went home to cold living rooms, cold showers, empty refrigerators that were not make believe.

Father thought of these things after coming to America while he rested on the dusty floor of a dentist's office in New York or Long Island, among planks of recently gutted sheetrock and white chalk powder that coated his boots, jeans, bearded face, and bruised knuckles. During those first long years, it was his job after knocking down the walls to shovel away the broken pieces, and roll them out in a wheelbarrow to the dumpster out back. It was mindless work, thankless drudgery that gave him too much time to think.

He repeated this three-dollar-an-hour routine every day in different places. No cluttered office, no pot of bitter coffee boiling on an electric plate in the corner. Sometimes his days began just after sunrise by the side of a road, by a ditch he'd finished digging, carting the dirt away to a nearby mound. Sometimes it began in a long, empty warehouse that would soon be turned into a supermarket. From morning to early evening he dug, tore apart and carted away. He swept, cleaned up, and made holes for others to fill in again after he was gone.

He got a short break from work around noon, and it was then, resting by the edge of a gash in the ground, shovel by his side that those other days crept back; the days when he would stroll in, and the work would begin orchestrated under his instructions.

Father remembered the time at the ventilator factory, but he still believed it was the right decision to pack and leave the country for good. Hard work would pay off in America, if not now, maybe sometime soon, he'd say. He still wore his confidence behind a stare, stiff and unyielding like tempered steel. It was a look that never betrayed much, but rather gave his face the appearance that it was always in a state of mid-emotion.

He hid behind that mask for years, still digging, carting away, hoping. One day the armor cracked, the strained heart yielding before he would allow the face to wrinkle under pain. As he lay in a hospital bed, his large, scarred hands with dirty fingernails and thick skin moved awkwardly over the crisp, white linens. The clear tubes and needles attached to his arms with layers of tape looked unnatural. Mother sat by his side, stroking lines of coarse gray hair flattened by sweat to his round forehead.

After the day when he lay helpless in the hospital, father began to show frustration. What had kept him going became more elusive. He began to feel weaker, uneasy, and didn't like it. He had to lie down, and it wasn't his choice. He became scared, uncomfortable, and wished he could bring back the stone face, the icy cool stare that said so much without ever saying anything.

But that man is gone. The man who came here fourteen years ago when the hard days began to take their toll is beaten by broken promises. He's been gone for fourteen years away from family, friends, co-workers, familiar sights, the old language, everything that used to make him laugh out loud, forcing pudgy cheeks into small, round pillows under his brown eyes.

It's been fourteen years since we left, locked the apartment in Bucharest, and boarded a plane with a few ragged suitcases packed in search of promises. We were looking for maybe, for the possibility of something other than that. We took a few memories with us and didn't look back, became strangers, foreigners, others. We started again in a new place that was nothing like the old place, and it can never be, the same way that father will never be the same man as the one who decided to leave it all behind. He gave up the job of an engineer so he could dig and sweep, before moving eventually to construction and electrical work.

But when his heart no longer allowed him to climb tall ladders and scaffolding that swayed in the wind because the blood pressure gave him

panic attacks, he gave that up also. Now his days consist of wearing an apron over his growing belly and walking cold, white bright retail aisles, putting nuts and bolts back in labeled boxes, answering customers' questions with a wide smile.

Father likes sharing what he knows with people who don't look down their nose at him when he speaks with a heavy accent, but I can tell he doesn't like the new job. He doesn't enjoy waking up in the morning to punch his employee number into a computer without a project waiting to be completed, without being able to see the finished product. He doesn't feel the satisfaction of pointing out a building along the road that has his sweat and blood somewhere inside the walls.

He goes to work now for the paycheck, and for the insurance benefits so he could afford the pills that will keep his heart pumping and the blood pressure at bay. He goes to work, punches in, and waits out the days like someone who's given up the fight. It seems like such a waste of those brick-thick hands that used to do so much more, and still look like they can. They are hands much better suited to gripping the long handle of a hammer, and feeling the stiff nail at the other end slip in one smooth motion down into the wood. They are hands that haven't realized the rest of the body has begun making different plans.

CONTRIBUTORS

Peggy Landsman's poetry and prose has been published in both online and print literary journals and anthologies, including *Poetica*, *The Kerf*, *Thema*, *Spindle*, *The Muse Strikes Back* (Story Line Press), *The Largeness the Small Is Capable Of* (Score Press), and *Bridges* (Indiana University Press). Her first poetry chapbook, *To-wit To-woo*, is available from FootHills Publishing. <http://home.att.net/~palandsman>

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