

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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www.universaltable.org/reliableneighbors.html
reliableneighbors@universaltable.org

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FEAR AND FAMILIARITY

To travel is to engage with the other—and with ourselves as the other. Our assumptions, for better and worse, strain, then, depending on their elasticity, stretch or shatter. What are we afraid of? What gleam of possibility do we see here that we never imagined? What does it feel like to be an object of common curiosity, to understand personal space as a privilege? To desire a portion of the courage and resolve of someone who faces many more obstacles to reach social freedoms that we now take for granted than we could imagine? To begin to imagine what might be possible for both of us if we both had both the fierce will and the social freedom to make the most of it. What does it mean to understand ourselves as Americans through this experience of otherness first and foremost, to always feel alien, whether illegal, legal, naturalized?

Cherise Wyneken

Stranger – In a Strange Land

It started on the plane ride from Malaysia to Madras – the pressure of people – body contact with strangers in a crowded aisle. The impeccable white-haired man in an impeccably white dhoti and shift, in the seat beside me, crowding me and forcing me to curl into myself. The crowds of young men, following us, haggling to carry our luggage the few short yards to a waiting cab. The wild ride, clutching my seat, craning my neck to watch my satchel tied precariously to the bumper. Being jolted to a stop at the first service station and forced to pay the fare prematurely, in order to buy enough gas to get us to the hotel. Now past the river where crowds of people were bathing and washing their clothes. On through this place where people press you as you walk, sleep in doorways inset from the street, and make their homes beneath the rising ramp of road, exposed to passersby. Leaving a trail of dust behind, we turned into the gardened entrance of the hotel. Looking out the window of our elegant room, I peered into the yard below and saw a tethered goat.

India was the boyhood home of my husband and he was thoroughly enjoying every sight, sound, and smell. But I was afraid.

We took the train next day to his birthplace, Kerala, in the southern portion of the country. Police in stiff, pointed khaki shorts stood guard at the stations. Men clad in mundus mustered near the track, armed with shovels and picks. Monkeys perched on nearby roofs. And there were people. People with black parasols. And people. People and people and palms. Swaying palms. Coconut palms. Forests of palms like forests of pines. Backwaters lapped at their feet. And women in sari with black shining hair. Clean shining hair. Sweeping their yards with a broom. And pink and green houses. Men tedding hay. Barefoot children waving good-day. Bananas and rice fields and streams. Chenganoor, Tricher, Trivandrum. Kerala. Garden of India: home.

We visited the lovely veranda'd house of my husband's childhood on the compound near Nilamel, a small village outside the city of Trivandrum, the capital. Heading south toward Neyoor, to the tiny hospital where he

was born, we drove across mounds of rice spread on the road, waiting for passing vehicles to break the husks in readiness for winnowing. In open fields, women, with sari tucked between their legs, stooped to plant stalks of rice, and in nearby brown-watered ponds men and oxen bathed as one. At the hospital we found people in the yard, squatting over small charcoal burners, preparing food for their sick family members.

“The patients get well quicker if their families take care of them and feed them what they are used to eating,” said the nurse, taking us through the primitive wards.

We continued south, to the tip of the continent. Blue, blue water, as I had seen it in my dreams, but so crowded with monuments and market stands that there was but one bare plot of beach where I could tip my toe and touch the tongue of the bottom of the world.

From there we headed north to the Hill Station in Kodaikanal, where my husband had attended boarding school. We drove all day through hot and dusty plains, palm strewn cities, raucous, odoriferous bazaars, roads teeming with beasts and bikes, buses, lorries, and loaded bullock carts.

Up and over precarious, winding mountain passes where sparse, slender palms played lookout for tender chaparral and green chenille-spread tea bushes covered rolling hills. Down into dry, dusty desert roads lined with dusty men, we dodged cattle, goats and wagonloads of hay.

The promised lunch stop turned out to be a couple warm beers from a roadside shop and the restroom was a path to a ditch under the shelter of a tree. By the time we turned onto the Ghat Road, which was the last steep climb, we were already several hours late. This might be home to my husband, but I was exhausted and overwrought.

Around a bend, past a white washed post, signifying Anglo-land, the rented car broke down. Unperturbed, Ahmed, our driver, left us by the roadside under some tall tamarind trees while he hitched a ride back to the nearest town for help. We were not far from a small village, and since it was late afternoon people kept passing by, driving their herds of goats as they headed home. One withered, old woman with scraggly hair and no teeth latched herself onto us. She followed me around and around the car, staring and trying to communicate.

“Don't give to people out in the open,” my husband had warned me. “You'll be inundated.”

But skin-deep, sculptured bones and torchless, caverned eyes unarmed me. I yearned to give. This woman's insistent stares disturbed me and I tried to persuade my husband to give her some money, hoping then she would go

away.

“She doesn’t want money,” he replied. “She’s just curious.”

Eventually she got bored and went on down the road. She was soon replaced by a professional beggar. Upon seeing us in our predicament, he stopped, pulled a tattered piece of cloth from his sack and carefully draped it around his shoulders. He, too, followed me from one side of the car to the other as I tried to escape his stares.

Finally I climbed inside the car and pulled my hat down over my eyes, hoping to discourage him. But that only made him try harder. He stood next to my window and began making loud sobbing noises.

At this point I became completely unnerved. “Give him some money,” I screamed at my husband.

“Pordah! Be off!” he said, giving the man some coins.

“What were you afraid of?” he asked. “You saw for yourself it was all an act.”

By then another group of people was approaching. My husband raised his hand and smiled in greeting, “Salaam, salaam.”

Oh don’t do that, I thought. Let well enough alone.

I began to feel ashamed however, as they came over to the car to see what was wrong and try to help. Like actors, they conveyed their sympathy with gestures and expressions, even offering to go back to the village to get coconut milk for us to drink. I began to relax amid the salaams and smiles as they proceeded on their way. But when the chicken, which had been hanging, neck down, from the handlebars of their bicycle, lifted its head with a loud “squawk!” – I must have jumped a foot.

Just then a car pulled up with our driver. A crowd of onlookers piled out with him and watched as he deftly exchanged the broken part with one he had scrounged off another government car back in the town. Soon after we were on our way.

Safe and settled later in our hotel room, the dark, sooty-suited man laying a fire in the fireplace, dispelled the damp and gloom – more with his gilded smile, than with his sticks in trade. Of what and whom was I afraid?

Johanna DeBiase

Meenu’s Kitchen

Meenu told me to leave my shoes on as we entered the tiny kitchen, “So your feet don’t get cold.” Her mother passed a small wicker stool under me, gesturing for me to sit down. Soon after, the haze of early morning still clouding my consciousness, I realized that everyone else crammed into the room was barefooted and squatting on old sheets lightly placed over the cold stone floor as I sat above like a queen in command of her subjects, though I was quite the opposite.

Hunched over my notebook awaiting cues from Meenu, I felt a chill and considered how my sweatshirt and t-shirt might not have been a warm enough combination. Meenu was also wearing a sweatshirt but beneath was the unmistakable cotton fabric of her red and brown kurta which she stretched over her knees so it reached to the small bells of her anklets.

The light that seeped in from around my silhouette through the open shutters behind me, fell over Meenu’s small silver bowls scattered about her, filled with powders of various colors and finely chopped onions. In her lap was her baby boy, whose name I could never quite pronounce. She was attempting to force a warm milk concoction into his mouth while he twisted, smearing the white paste all over his face. Giving up, she pulled out her breast for his immediate suckling. I looked for something else to place my attention on.

Meenu’s mother, a fragile old woman who seemed younger than her appearance suggested and must have been very beautiful in her youth but now had no teeth, scuttled around the remaining space in the room in her well-worn green and gold sari talking with Meenu in Hindi. Their language encircled me but did not enter. I had not learned a word more than *Namaste* since arriving in India two months earlier.

Shifting uneasily on my short wicker stool, I just barely felt the feather air of a pigeon flying through the window behind me and settling in a cove in the molding around the hallway ceiling. I tried not to appear surprised. The constant struggle of the foreigner is to appear as if they’ve seen

it all either to keep from being taken advantage of or, as in this case, to keep from making the guests feel awkward.

Tackling the zipper on my sweatshirt, I was relieved when Florian entered to alleviate Meenu of her baby so we could begin the class.

Queen's Café and Guesthouse was just next door to our own guesthouse in the Hanuman Ghat of Udaipur. Our guidebook recommended the cafe for having the best Indian home cooking in Rajasthan. The confined dark atmosphere made us hesitate upon entering.

A beautiful young woman introduced herself as Meenu and handed us menus. We stared admiringly at the way she filled her skins shamelessly and spoke perfect English as if she was only visiting from London to see her family. My fiancé, Eric, stubbornly insisted on continental cuisine though I told him the café was known for their Indian food and then I let Meenu quite easily persuade me into the stuffed aubergine curry before we sat back in anticipation of a commonly long wait.

That's when Florian appeared with plates. "Here you are," with his German accent and left as quickly as he arrived. Eric's insatiable curiosity started him in on a slew of questioning about Florian's place in this peculiar habitat. I hushed him, worried they might hear.

Meenu brought us the food and stared for a few minutes as I took in the explosive flavor of her homemade curry aubergine: coconut, mint, yoghurt, masala, so dense with spice I could only take small bites. Meenu left pleased. After Florian cleared our plates, he quickly returned with two children. Meenu talked us into not just a cup of tea but a pot of chai and two chocolate balls. Then she handed us a book full of comments from people who had taken her cooking class and loved it. Loving to cook and loving Indian food, I was easily convinced but I didn't think I could stand the 5 hour course so I asked Meenu about the 3 hour course.

"The 5 hour class goes by quickly," she said now taking the youngest child into her lap. "And it's better with two people."

I knew Eric wouldn't be interested so I helped him out of the grips of Meenu's persuasive force, "He can't cook."

Florian laughed. Eric, an unemployed journalist, took that as an opening to learn his life story. Florian was from Berlin, a concert violinist who spent his off-season months in Udaipur where he exchanged his services, mainly babysitting as became apparent due to the attachment of the children to him, for room and board.

After we finished dessert, conversation, and playtime with the kiddies I had conceded to the 8 a.m., 5 hour class but alone. Eric was invited to come

after class for lunch.

When Florian sat down in the kitchen with us that early morning my foreigner status was decreased though only slightly since he was so much a part of the family communicating seemingly effortlessly with a limited Hindi vocabulary.

"Okay, let's begin," Meenu crossed her legs as if the stone tiled floor was the most comfortable spot in the house. "First the spices," Meenu lifted the cover of a large silver pan to reveal smaller silver bowls within. As she pointed, she named off her main ingredients, "Cumin seed, mustard seed, red chili, coriander, tumeric, salt, garamasala which includes 10g. blackpepper, 50g. dry ginger, 10g. cinnamon, 20g. black cardamon which you mix in a blender to make a powder." I quickly scribbled what she said into my notebook and she would slow down or repeat when I looked like I missed something.

Next she gave the list of spices used for masala tea and checked on the milk simmering in the pot on the two burner stove resting beside her feet on the floor. Florian grabbed a potato and began slicing it into another silver bowl. A small mouse scurried out from behind the stovetop and into the hallway, to join the pigeon I presumed. Meenu explained the various ways in which masala tea was made and her own way before passing me the anxiously awaited steaming hot glass that I immediately put down to let cool.

Slowly, she recited all the possible varieties of pakoras as she prepared her own mixture of green chili, with onion and cabbage so finely chopped they were almost a powder and a little bit of chopped boiled potato. But before she could drop the breaded mixture into the already hot oil on the wok on the stove, the phone rang. The sound of her mother's Hindi echoed from downstairs and Meenu excused herself before jumping up for the phone.

Florian was playing with the baby so I fiddled with my pen trying to conceal my American awkwardness, the weight of extra space I took up. I attempted the tea, burning my tongue and regretted making the impulsive move which would then dull my taste buds for the rest of the day's tastings.

"That was my husband," Meenu was out of breath, "He's going to call right back. The phone keeps disconnecting" I smiled and nodded my head as if I understood completely. The room was quiet while Meenu mixed her pakora stuffings with water and flour and dropped spoonfuls into the hot oil. "If there is too much water, the pakora will be soft, but if you mix it just right, they will come to the surface quickly."

The phone rang again and Meenu jumped to answer it. Florian smiled at me. I adjusted the straps on my sandals once or twice. Meenu soon returned, speaking at me quickly.

“When my parents wished to make me a good marriage, they consulted an astrologer who said I was a perfect match for my husband. Unfortunately, she did not check my match with my mother-in-law.” I laughed uneasily. “They have a village mentality. My mother-in-law says I should be home taking care of her and my husband and not here with my mother, but I haven’t spent time with my own family since the baby was born.”

“Do you live in the village with your husband and his mother?” I already knew the answer was yes, but I felt like I had to say something. “Is it far from here?”

“A few hours north of here. It is very small and there is nothing to do there. I am very bored and I can’t come home as much now that I have the baby because my husband’s mother wants to keep me there.”

I had no experience with in-laws, though in America, a common topic for stand-up comedians, one was expected to dislike their in-laws. Fortunately, we were not expected to live with them. Eric and I had only been engaged a month since he had asked me to marry him on a beach in Gokarna. I hated being engaged, a formality, and wanted to skip right to married, but there would have to be white dresses and flowers and all-night dancing, so I would have to wait. Eric and I succeeded after I failed at a long succession of bad boyfriends, something Meenu had never known. When married, I would have to give up nothing but one-night stands. Meenu would succumb to her role as wife, giving up her cooking, spices, henna, foreign friends, her home and, ultimately, her family. I listened only partially as she went on to explain the various chutney recipes to dip the pakoras in.

And just as she promised, hours of masalas, dahl, stuffed curries, sweet curries, chipatis, paranthas, puri, naan, samosas, pulao, lassi and catchori went by without me checking my watch and by the time Eric arrived for lunch I was too stuffed to eat. We sat on the terrace just below the rooftop where Meenu and her mother laid out all their spices to dry in the hot desert sun.

When we left, Eric commented on how pushy Meenu was, the way she coerced us into buying her spices and masalas after we had spent all that money on her class, but I disagreed with him, she was powerful, not pushy. He shook his head wondering what potion she had fed me and I shook my head, regretting I hadn’t bought more of her spice.

Andrei Guruianu

Alien Authorized To Work

Legal for one more year, my father’s voice
like an excited child on the phone
tells me his papers have come,
the papers, the papers,
all I ever heard growing up
with the weight of expectations,
playing the good immigrant son,
learning to anticipate
those envelopes from the government
more than the arrival of Christmas morning.
The papers came today, my father said,
and it means he’s legal for one more year,
made real by a document,
not by the worth of his mind,
the sweat on his gray, receding brow,
a broken body defined by two words –
legal, alien – the internal rhyme
of a working immigrant man.
And because his taxes are good enough,
his muscle and blood is good enough,
he’s allowed to work to pay
for the name that scars like a firebrand,
the number and the letter A engrained
in the skin that cannot be washed clean
and printed under laminated shifting holograms
that for a price renews the burned every year,
should he ever dare forget
that indeed he comes from somewhere else.

Main Street America

Here on Main Street, tall brick walls
 shield backyard memories and overgrown green lawns,
 and everyone knows where they stand
 because the straight stiff border of planted oak
 divides opposite white lines into coming and going
 with the mechanical precision of a military drill.
 On Main Street America, you can get safely lost in the familiar,
 watching a world created and destroyed
 in the normal chain of day to day,
 and it's easy to watch ten o'clock news
 because our young girls won't be sold as slaves
 where there are no shadowed blocks of gritty bars or brothels,
 and the corner barbershop has aged with grace like an old man,
 its smells of Old Spice aftershave dissolving
 into next door Russian baker's yeast and fair-trade Guatemalan coffee.
 On this Main Street America,
 you can drive with your right hand on the steering wheel
 and your left arm out the window, riding waves of weather
 breaking clear across the windshield,
 and it wouldn't be hard at all to believe God has a plan
 or that there is a plan and therefore a God,
 when no one needs to fear being dragged away at night
 and hungry young fighters will never break down bolted doors
 or shatter double glass window panes in search of freedom,
 food or guns or water to feed their endless wars.

CONTRIBUTORS

Cherise Wyncken's essay was first published in *Palo Alto Review*, Fall 1996. She was born in South Dakota in 1928. She moved to California in 1939, to Florida in 1973, and back to California in 2003. She resides with her husband in Albany, CA —mother of four, grandmother of eight, former teacher. She studied creative writing at Florida Atlantic University, Florida International University, and Broward Community College and enjoyed her connections in FL with the Hannah Kahn Poetry Foundation, and The Writers' Network of South Florida. She is currently a member of the Bay Area Poets Coalition (BAPC) in Berkely, CA. Her poetry chapbook, "Old Haunts," came out recently from PUDDING HOUSE. Over 200 selections of her prose and poetry have appeared in a variety of journals, periodicals, books, anthologies, and in two books of poetry, "Touchstones," and "Seeded Puffs," as well as her memoir, "Round Trip: Reflections On My Life and Rebellion," and her recent novel, "Freddie." <http://authorsden.com/cherisewyncken>

Johanna DeBiase has taught Creative Writing at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She has been published in *Hysteria: an Anthology of Poetry, Prose and Visual Art* (LunaSea Press, 2003), *SNReview*, *Transitions Abroad*, *Adagio Verse Quarterly* and *hotmetalpress* among others. She received a BA in Creative Writing from Bard College and her MFA from Goddard College. Currently living outside of Taos, New Mexico after being bi-coastal for most of her life, she is finding the mountains a quiet and fair substitute for ocean.

Andrei Guriianu's work has appeared previously in a full-length book of poems and short stories, *Days When I Saw the Horizon Bleed* (FootHills Publishing, 2006). Individual works have been published or are forthcoming in *Paterson Literary Review*, Ted Kooser's *American Life in Poetry* project, *River Oak Review*, *Vestal Review*, *Saranac Review*, *Dogmatika*, and *Marginalia*. He is a doctoral student in creative writing at Binghamton University, and the founding editor of *The Broome Review*, an annual literary print journal. In June 2007, he was honored with a month-long residency as a fiction writer at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, NY. www.thebroomereview.com