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Will Travel : Journey Memoirs

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WILL TRAVEL

Journey Memoirs

by Kelly Renee Broce

Thesis submitted to the
Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Approved by

Dr. Katharine Rodier, Committee Chair

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Abstract

Memoirs and poetry. Concerns the travels of a West Virginian woman, the granddaughter of a first generation Sicilian West Virginian, within the U.S., the Bahamas, Thailand, and China, where she taught English as a second language for two years from 2000-2002.

Themes include identity (Appalachian, Persian, African-American, Chinese, and even Uigur), ethnicity and gender in West Virginia, fatalism, religion, poverty, Diaspora, travel, discrimination, the Ugly American/European, Ah Q, Imperialism, Orientalism, otherness, political asylum, victims and survival, substance abuse in West Virginia, feminist narrative, West Virginian authors, mountaintop removal, environmentalism, and protest.

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Special thanks to those friends willing to be friends, in West Virginia and abroad. You know who you are. And you taught me how to know myself.

Thank you to my family, for the chutzpah, and for being a fascinating group of characters.

Thank you to elephants and memories, the innocence and mischievousness of children, ghosts and specters, and to one side of the moon, for always being dark, so that we know the light when we see it.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Bad Endings.....	9
Ms. Placed.....	36
Chinese and Other Symbols.....	68
An American in Another Country, 2001.....	106

*Got some candy and a sweet saying
Give me religion and a lobotomy
Beulah land
Beautiful home
Tell me when
I don't need you anymore
-Tori Amos "Beulah Land"*

Introduction

Like many West Virginians of my generation, growing up, I dreamed of escape. I found that escape when I left the state and the U.S. for two years while working as a teacher of English as a second language at an international boarding school in Shanghai, People's Republic of China. Before that time, I found escape in books. Initially, those books were biographies, particularly stories of Helen Keller and Amelia Earhart, who disappeared from this world forever in 1937 on July 2, a date I was born on many years later.

In elementary school, I idolized these women who overcame insurmountable odds: Amelia Earhart for her pioneering sense of adventure and Helen Keller in her fight for a normal life. I didn't idolize them as much for their deeds, but for their spirits, myself a tomboy and a very sickly little girl. Having always felt like an outcast, when I found no one in my grade was as obsessed about talking about these two as I was, I quickly switched to the Choose Your Own Adventure book series at the library. Of course, I later found out it wasn't the subject matter that I chose that made me an outcast, but the fact that I was a

bookworm. Nevertheless, I continued to read, though the genre changed from the Choose Your Own Adventure books in elementary school to age-inappropriate romance novels in middle school then back to non-fiction works in high school, harrowing stories like Go Ask Alice in particular, until, in the twelfth grade, discovering Margaret Atwood, who often writes in the first person, with characters whose back stories read like autobiographies or memoirs. After reading The Handmaid's Tale, I searched for everything Margaret Atwood. I never thought about why I was drawn to this author in particular until I later studied literature and creative writing in college.

Although the only class I had in college that covered anything Atwood was a poetry workshop in which we studied the poem "The Woman Who Could Not Live with Her Faulty Heart" (which, incidentally, is the prequel to my all-time favorite Margaret Atwood poem, "The Woman Makes Peace with Her Faulty Heart"), I realized why I loved her work so much when I began studying feminist and Marxist literary theories in literature classes, and discussing how much of my creative writing focused on relationships between women, like Atwood's does, even though, during my university education, I'd been taught mostly literature penned by male authors. I'd always known I was a feminist by nature, although that particular movement had been given a bad name while I was coming of age during the second wave, those who followed the movement characterized as zealots. Margaret Atwood was writing third wave feminist literature during the second wave, and whether I sensed that or not, I appreciated her ability to access so many points of view and delve deeply into the

human psyche, especially as it occupies the world and condition of women, without being sanctimonious.

I remember reading a critical introduction to something about or by Margaret Atwood, in which the author of the introduction states many critics see Atwood as glib, perhaps because she is not conspicuous in her reflections or points. Atwood is reflective through creating reflections; she purposely does not tell you what to do or think, only presents material and scenarios, constructing feminine mazes in which the reader decides which path to follow, much like the Choose Your Own Adventure books I loved as a child.

I try to do the same in my Journey Memoirs, at least as far as the character of myself goes. Sometimes, when I tell friends in West Virginia about my time in China I get one of two reactions; they think I'm the alpha dog or they think I think I'm the alpha dog. I'm not comfortable with either of these perceptions, although I do remember idolizing those I met who lived abroad before I left. But I've made peace with the fact that the only way to address these perceptions is through writing, putting my quirks, triumphs, and failures into print, finally able to address what's not said in conversations.

Admittedly, I did leave for China trying to outrun the backwards West Virginia hillbilly stereotype, hoping to become an alpha dog of a kind among skeptics. What I learned in China was that there are no perfect people, that everyone has a past and pain, and that West Virginia might be a place worth living. Friends and enemies alike taught me this, but the liminal space that drove the point home occurred in a week-long summer camp

where I taught seven girls from the exclusively Chinese section of the school I taught at in Shanghai, the section I was not contracted with.

The seventh grade girls at camp asked where I was from, and when I told them, like most Chinese I met, they referenced the song "Country Roads." At English-language camp, I had to help these students with a research project on which they would give a presentation for their camp mates and teachers. My students decided they wanted to present on West Virginia, and began to ask me about it. I realized that I had nothing to tell them because I had been programmed that my state had nothing to offer, and that I should abandon it as soon as possible. I never told my students any of this, but I felt like a let-down and a bad role model. I researched as much as I could for things I thought would be pertinent to their presentation, which one of the Ah Q from the U.S. (Ah Q is explained in the "Chinese and Other Symbols" section) hired back for that one week, snickered at when it was shown in PowerPoint.

The summer camp was held at the end of my last year at Shanghai High School International Division, and by this time, the Ah Q's opinion no longer mattered to me, but I was livid over the fact that he laughed at my students' hard work, at children. My students did not work for grades in summer camp, and I know the motivation behind their presentation was sweetness. The Ah Q only snickered loudly enough for me to hear, but since I hadn't seen him since the first year he lived in the dorm, knew he was probably still chasing Chinese girls half his age because he was desperate and alone, while I'd made friends

with some really interesting people in Shanghai, I let it go. Some people never grow up.

Once I returned to West Virginia after my stint in China, while working as a graduate assistant for the Appalachian Studies Association, I read Survival, a critical non-fiction work by Margaret Atwood about Canadian literature in which she observes that most Canadian literature is about victims and survival, not unlike much contemporary literature set in or about West Virginia. What Atwood's manifesto did was carve out an identity for Canada, something badly needed in Appalachia, especially West Virginia, for contemporary times. I don't intend to take on this task (at the moment, anyway), but I now write and read about West Virginia and encourage others to do the same, whether they read or write for or against type, as a means of survival and discussion about identity, fuel for the fight against negative stereotypes.

My current work, Will Travel, is not just about West Virginia, but a *female* West Virginian, and a work still in progress, much like “the dream” I refer to throughout the first section of my thesis. The idea of “the dream” is inspired by Anais Nin, another favorite author who was one of the first English-language writers in the twentieth century to champion female writing, though I feel my purpose and personality is closer to Atwood's. I don't have to succumb to the fatalism of being the West Virginian others expect or tell me to be; I can choose my own dreams.

When deciding on the title for Will Travel, I knew the words were reminiscent of a well-known phrase or something well-known, but I could not recall where I had heard the

phrase before "googling" the words. I now know Have Gun, Will Travel is the title of a popular 1950s-60s television Western about Paladin, a gun-for-hire who is well-traveled, well-dressed, and well-read, preferring to use his wits rather than violence to battle.

Paladin receives his moniker in the first episode of the series, from a man named Smoke, curiously played by the same actor (Richard Boone). Paladin fights and kills Smoke, a man who states that he's actually a champion of the poor and helpless before he dies. After Smoke dies, Paladin takes Smoke's dress-style and persona, and then kills the man who hired him to kill Smoke, later becoming a champion of the poor and helpless himself.

Although I have never seen the television show Have Gun, Will Travel, I feel the theme of the show somewhat fits what I'd like to accomplish in my thesis. But now I'm not as interested in the title as I am in Paladin, whose name means "advocate of a cause." West Virginia is my Smoke, and a part of myself I tried to destroy. I tried to destroy it because I lamented being what Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan call "other." I did not understand that part of myself outside of the way other people saw me, aware that most images circulated about West Virginia stir up visions of the Great Depression, not unlike the reaction often caused by photographs in National Geographic of what seems archaic and destitute in other countries, taken out of the larger context.

When I found out the origin of the phrase ending in "will travel," I thought about changing my title, despising guns, and considering the male symbolism of the gun. A gun does not symbolize power or empowerment to me. But I ultimately decided to keep the

title because I like the idea of the word "will" as a noun, how a double entendre can be read in my title, and how the will contributes to action and survival, which was my intention in choosing the title in the first place. My will is the item that allows me to travel.

However, I am considering a revision of this work, looking into the television show and perhaps constructing a conversation with Paladin, although I wrestle with the idea of how this conversation might invoke "local flavor," afraid that I'd reinforce some stereotype about female West Virginians as cowgirls, when I am intentionally writing against type. And in light of the knifing attacks at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, I'm debating on whether or not to discuss those attacks in the next revision.

The attack at the Olympics occurred just days before the deadline of this thesis, long after I wrote the first section in which I describe how I was mugged in Dali, Yunnan Province, in 2002, a mere two weeks before I left China for good, after living there for two years. I placed that narrative first in hopes of addressing any anxiety in regards to traveling abroad, getting those fears out of the way, unwilling to end my thesis on that particularly negative note, although I had no choice in reality in 2002. That narrative is in no way meant to be a negative reflection of the People's Republic of China; in my eyes, it's quite the opposite really, focusing on those in Dali who helped me after I was mugged. Nor do I focus on the politics of China in these memoirs; I think West Virginia and the U.S. need to look critically at their own politicians and policies first. As the news reports from Beijing state, it is true that violent crime is rare in China, especially toward foreigners. The reader

will see throughout Will Travel that I'm either just extremely unlucky or meant to be a writer.

By writing about myself and my travels, I hope to re-introduce myself, West Virginia, and that state's possibilities to anyone who reads my thesis. I do not deny that West Virginia has many problems, that it is the poorest state in the U.S. behind Mississippi, and that the conditions concerning fairness for workers are deplorable, especially in the case of women. But nothing will change those statistics until West Virginians wipe the coal dust from their eyes and begin talking about possibilities, dreams, the future, and making those things a reality.

Note: For privacy, some names in the following work have been changed.

Bad Endings

At Putuo Shan (one of four holy Buddhist Mountains in China)

Holy mountain heal me

Goddess home the cobblestone

streets here, this island no

traffic, nunneries and painted

bracelets indigo, lovely lotus

flowers, temples yellow, and the water sun

reflecting shine from a distance I

see her, Guanyin

People's Republic of China, July 2002

This is the beginning of the end of the long road of my first solo international journey, the two years I've lived and worked in the People's Republic of China. I think of this as I unpack Pantene, Colgate and sandalwood soap – familiar toiletries inscribed with ingredients and directions in English and Mandarin script – from my overnight tote. As I head to the loo of my temporary room in a modest hotel in Kunming, I begin to dwell on the reality that this excursion is ending, the events which will no longer be the day-to-day of my life. I try to push away the depression over forever leaving the vast foreign country of the People's Republic of China and the uncertainty of my future back in my small hometown in the U.S. But I still have a camera full of film and landmarks to photograph, now a favorite hobby, during my last month here. This last trip through Yunnan Province, then to the former capital of Xi'an is the end of a life I've lived separate from those I grew up with, a self they'll never fully know, and that I fear forgetting in time. I take a shower before the hot water curfew at the hotel, memories rising and dancing like the steam as quickly as the traffic in Shanghai, zig-zagging toward the next destination.

No more classrooms full of chattering international students hoping I don't assign too much homework. The end of my modest dorm room, kitchenette, hot plate, and loo on the campus of Shanghai High School International Division in Shanghai (SHSID). The end of buses and subways packed to human capacity beyond the imaginations of sardines.

The end of traveling through a country different from my own, taking photographs and developing film as if money were no object. The end of my feeling inferior for being from a small rural town in the U.S. (or so I thought). The end of close friendships among lone travelers I hope will last forever. The end of searching for myself or something bigger against the industrial miasma and Feng Shui gardens of the Chinese landscape.

The end of a secluded campus lined with pomegranate trees, ponds full of crawdads, and a garden with a jasmine and mimosa tree. The end of red and peach roses as large as my face, grown from a manure and refuse compost Western gardeners would never dream of using. The end of tall yellow pagodas and bright, one story temples where monks and nuns happily allow you to take photographs of ceremonies on the grounds. The end of Lu Xun Park, ponds with fuchsia, mauve and lemon drop-colored lotus flowers on lily pads; sets of older people playing mah jong at round stone tables; calligraphers showcasing their craft on the concrete with paintbrushes wet with only water then allowing the poems to dissolve; and groups of contented and focused strangers practicing Tai Chi in good clothes and high heels.

The end of living next to Zara, a friend from London, and down the hall from Karina and Ivan, friends from Sao Paulo and Caracas. The end of mala dofu and hong shao qieze, cheaper to order out than make, at the neighborhood eateries. The end of dodging bicycles with bells and loud, regally announced loogies. The end of neighborhood strangers exclaiming "laowai," wearing Mao jackets or pajamas with cloud-jumping sheep, thinking I don't know the word means "foreigner." The end of

strangers asking if I'll pose in pictures with them and me asking if they'll do the same for my camera.

The end of purchasing silk, cashmere and pashmina textiles for the price of cotton. The end of Mr. Kai, Annie, Helen, Fu Bing, Nancy and all the other tenured staff at SHSID giving me good advice and asking me about the U.S.

The end of the Lian Hua grocery and convenience store chain that provides packaged sushi snacks, yogurt candy, and live seafood sections whose contents look more like aquariums than food. The end of restaurant seafood brought out live in black plastic bags, leaping for my approval before it's cooked. The end of eating hotpot with my western colleagues as if it's Thanksgiving each time we go. The end of George, the doorman at the expatriate teachers' dorm, asking me "Ni chi fen ma, Kai Li?" – "Have you eaten, Kelly?" – every time I enter the building, thinking he was trying to fatten me up, not realizing the question an idiom for "How are you today?".

The end of riding on the back of motorcycle cabs and in the front seat of taxi cabs with no seatbelt while the drivers dart through traffic, dodging other motorcycles and taxi cabs in the wrong lane. The end of cheap bootlegged international CDs and VCDs, the vendors suddenly packing up and running off when a Mandarin whisper that the police are lurking buzzes through the pub or market like an electrical current. The end of drunken rickshaw bicycle rides from club to club in central Shanghai, insisting the drivers take tips, an oddity in China. The end of a Western style pub on Mao Ming Lu offering free draft beer, Monday through Thursday 5-10 pm. The end of expat friends criticizing the awkward English syntax on English language billboards and deciding, while drunk at bars, to create a

Ministry of Spelling – a way to cope with the foreignness of this fleeting home, a way to make our small and intimidated selves feel better about being alone in a densely populated country with a long, ancient history and rich culture formerly kept hidden from our young Western world. The end of bamboo chopsticks, Double Happiness cigarettes and “gambei” – “bottoms up.”

The end of journeys to the Great Wall of China, the Terracotta Soldiers, the West Lake, the Holy Mountain dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy, the never-ending, aching staircase of the Yellow Mountain, the raucous Shanghai markets and vendors, and the landscape of Xinjiang – the predominantly Muslim province located above Tibet – its fruit, Yurts, Heaven Mountain and Lake, unsure if I was hoping for envy or Zen.

I desperately want to relate my experiences in China to those who aren't here with me, for this end to be a beginning...of something, not just of memories fading. I rinse out the shampoo lather in my dark dyed hair, and let the memories dissolve like the artisan's calligraphy into another dimension.

I turned 26 at the beginning of July. My second year-long contract to teach at Shanghai High School International Division officially expires at the end of the month. The administration at SHSID invited me to stay for another year, satisfied with my performance,

and apprehensive at the prospect of replacing me, as the international teacher turnover rate in China is high. But I've decided to return to the U.S. and my hometown of Huntington, West Virginia as suggested by one of my best friends and former colleagues at SHSID, Karina, a film student, Pisces and dreamer from Sao Paulo, Brazil, Carnivale.

Karina's notion of place is more idealistic than mine; in her dorm room one evening at SHSID during spring semester 2002, after watching Western VCDs and eating massive amounts of popcorn as we always did, Karina fondly recalls visiting the U.S. for the first time at age twelve, traveling from Sao Paulo, Brazil to Wisconsin then somehow ending up in Disney World, a place I've never been. Together we've traveled to Moganshan, surrounded by a bamboo forest, located on the outskirts of Hangzhou; and Songjiang County, outside of Shanghai Proper, where we stumbled onto a local play and traditional dance performance after climbing Xilin Pagoda. Karina's interest in places I take for granted replaces my jadedness at the prospect of returning home with inspiration, making me feel that I can breathe my friend's interpretation of the paths less traveled into the places I know as home, despite the fact that I have always felt West Virginia an indifferent, stagnating place, ranked the poorest U.S. state behind Mississippi. The outline of my state even looks like someone's flipping the bird on maps, a negative attitude that has turned inward; and the name sounds like something you sneeze or cough up when you say it, an obvious omen of its future state planning, leaders making the wrong decision by not calling the state Kanawha,

the first choice. But Karina thinks West Virginia must be like Wisconsin, another place I've never been, but a place she loved. We do have cows in West Virginia.

But I worry. When I return, I have no idea where I'll work for a living wage as West Virginia is not kind to non-industrial workers, and really not even kind to industrial workers for that matter. Maybe I'll go back to school, get my M.A., and leave for Asia again, figuring out what to do to rally others to pull my state out of the proverbial garbage bin while I'm there. My decision to return is a strange choice, but dreams are strange choices, and I want the dream, the dream that my home is actually a place to live, John Denver's version. Dreams are not how things were or are, but how they should be.

I laugh as I remember first meeting Karina at SHSID in August of 2001 and becoming friends, walking through and talking in a neighborhood market that sells trinkets, flowers, parakeets, and goldfish, when Karina realizes that my home state is rural. In conversation, she asks me if Huntington has sidewalks. I grin though I'm suddenly indignant, a knee-jerk reaction. I try to hide the fact that my hometown doesn't have a lot of things, but it does have sidewalks. "Of course we have sidewalks!" I try to laugh. Sensing my embarrassment and surprise while we stop to look at various items in the market, Karina smiles and casually assures me that Rowan, New Jersey, the town where she studied film, has no sidewalks.

Before Karina said this, it never occurred to me that any place in the U.S. lacked sidewalks. I smile to myself. Even the smallest towns I'd been to in West Virginia have

sidewalks. The revelation sets my imagination spinning.... *A place without sidewalks? Other places in the U.S. are lacking...things? Not just the place I'm from? Other towns are... neglected? Other people have to find ways to be content, realizing contentment is not guaranteed? But how? Other people must rely on dreams for survival too. Other people in far away places must stare longingly out of windows and dream of other far away places. Dreaming as a means of human survival....* I survived China for two years, but found living at home virtually impossible. Why should I put up with it? I've paid taxes since the age of sixteen. But, as Karina suggests near the end of spring semester in 2002, I'm going home to West Virginia.

While I prepared to leave for my final trek through China, Karina broke her contract at SHSID to work full-time at PPI, a film company in Shanghai, where she would work for another year, filming footage for various advertisements and an English language movie that would be released in the U.S. Scenes of our friendship flash before me, and I think of the time Karina dropped the copy of Henry and June she borrowed in the Andaman Sea (at the time I was reading a copy of Tropic of Cancer I picked up at one of the many outdoor book vendors in Bangkok) while we laughed and swam and made up stories off the coast of Koh Lan Ta, Thailand, during Chinese New Year vacation 2002. Koh Lan Ta is a predominantly Muslim island where we heard chanting several times a day, ate coconut curry every day, and found a commune of sea gypsies on the far side of the island.

When Karina apologized for water-logging my book, I assured her I thought Anais

Nin would approve of the fact her story was dropped into a sea off of a tropical island because the book now has more character. I listen to Karina because I know what Anais Nin often describes as the dream is what we want. We are water signs. Karina, a Pisces like Anais Nin, a fish; I, a Cancer, playing near the Tropic of Cancer, a crab. We want to float through the body of water that connects us all. Before I leave for Kunming, my final journey in Asia, Karina and I kiss each other on each cheek, as she has taught me, for the last time before she escapes in a taxi cab from the displeased administration of SHSID, off to chase her very own dream.

Kunming, Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China, July 2002

My Sicilian grandfather always spoke of Kunming before I left the U.S. for China, as my grandfather's brother was stationed as a soldier with the U.S. forces there during WWII. My great uncle often described Yunnan Province and its capital, Kunming, as beautiful to my grandfather, although he was there more than half a century ago. Despite its fabled place in my family history, I do not plan to stay in Kunming. I'm only passing through this semi-tropical city where the flight from Shanghai, my Chinese home, lands. I notice immediately that the laid back atmosphere of Kunming comes closer to the Zen-inspired China one imagines than does the bustling metropolis of Shanghai's population of fifteen million strong.

The summer in Kunming is breezy, open, natural, much different from Shanghai's humid summers, during which the city, populated by high rises and international businesses, becomes a virtual human stew peppered only with the occasional tree or intricate garden. The flora of wild green leaves and musky bark prevail in this southern province, breaking up the sheer numbers of people, more like my Appalachian home than the stark metal and harsh concrete metropolis of the Chinese city that's been my home for the past two years. Here, the people of Kunming don't scurry about like the Shanghainese, who rush as if time were a rare, precious commodity on the verge of extinction. Thanks to Chinese city life, I now have difficulty standing in any queue, for it seems that standing in a queue in Shanghai is

blasphemy to the city's very own time god, and I know I'll get nothing done if I don't play the line-jumping game too. No such panic in this part of China.

I walk, actually stroll, through the streets of Kunming, elated by the familiar unfamiliarity, the awareness of myself in a foreign land, the greenery, and friendly vendors selling prepackaged bags of dried bananas and apricots dipped in coconut oil from their open shacks and stands. Wahaha liu cha (bottled sugary green tea), a cool refrigerated Chinese staple I often drink instead of soda, is readily available here as in every other Chinese province I've visited. I return to my hotel room to consult my Rough Guide to China – a present given to me before I left Huntington by a friend and fellow creative writing student at Marshall, Zoe, who often traveled before she landed in West Virginia—to figure out how to get to the ancient town of Lijiang from Kunming, the real reason why I've come to Yunnan Province. I skip the few cable channels where sometimes an English-language movie with Chinese subtitles can be found and sleep, then board the bus to Lijiang the next day.

Once in the ancient town of Lijiang, I roam around on the cobblestone streets, snapping photographs of the shops with the ancient Chinese-style of tiled roofs curved into dragons and other animals of the Chinese zodiac. It pours the rain the day I visit, prompting me to buy a lavender, purse-sized umbrella from a convenience store shack. Lijiang is home to the indigenous Naxi people who practice the Dongba religion, which features a

form of written character different from traditional Mandarin, and even closer to the ancient hieroglyphic forms of writing. I stumble onto a florid but somehow modest Naxi temple, a refuge from the downpour, complete with open corridors, fuschia columns, and a healthy garden where the roses open themselves wide to the rain. In one of the halls of the temple, I wander into the middle of a traditional Naxi ceremony, taking my place among the other onlookers. The ceremony consists only of men, the priest in a long black robe. I wish to understand what they say, but can't. My elementary Mandarin gets me by in China; I definitely won't starve or want for a cool drink, or be thought of as rude, and I can sometimes even say something witty with the vocabulary I know. But the international community of Shanghai and my job as an English teacher do not make fluency easy. Nor does the fact that anyone learning English in China enjoys practicing conversation in that language. Not learning more of the language is my biggest regret. I hear a large brass gong placed on the pulpit, ceremoniously rung after chants by the robed priest, and the crowd moves on.

When I realize the rain has calmed, I leave the temple, and wander back toward the shops at the center of the town. I find a Naxi artisan, fluent in the Dongba script, who graciously allows me to photograph him while he lovingly works on carvings in painted wood. I purchase small carvings framed like photographs from him to take home as gifts. He writes the meanings of the carvings in English and Chinese on the backs of the frames. I

keep for myself a carving of two people rowing a boat, symbolizing “friendship.” Of course Zen exists in a place where such a language lives! I continue to wander through the streets of the picturesque town and its markets, almost guilty at how happy I am, breathing in the moist air and ancient culture, this other world. I snap back to the present after passing a closed Bank of China building, constructed in traditional Chinese architecture for the sake of the tourists and the landscape, and imagine how the country transitioned from the iron-fisted propaganda of Chairman Mao to the optimism of Deng Xiaopeng, then add the image of the country's modern culture to the film in my camera with a click. After just one day in Lijiang, I decide to head to Dali, another popular tourist destination in Yunnan, hoping to breathe in as much of Yunnan Province as I can before moving on to Xi’an, then leaving for home.

Dali, Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China, July, 2002

I take a bus to Dali. The ride only lasts three hours. The landscape of Yunnan Province is lush and green and hilly, and I breathe in the scenes of rural farmers plowing the earth while their children play alongside them. The bus to Dali is much more comfortable than any bus I've ridden in China (or the U.S. for that matter), including a surprisingly thoroughly-sanitized loo and a television broadcasting a Chinese movie about a man who is a ghost, looking back on his life and the people he's affected. Upon entering Dali's landscape at dark, I spy three shining pagodas, lit up, golden for the night. I am dizzied by the scene. Before I left Huntington, my aunt who married young then moved to England for a year, where her husband was stationed, told me that she regretted never taking any pictures while there. She advised me not to make the same mistake, and I don't; I will mail home at least five shoeboxes full of photographs from China, many repeats, not because I order double-prints, but because I often take two photographs of the same thing, changing settings in case the first picture is marred by my thumb or too bright a flash. I make a note to get close enough to the lit pagodas for a photograph to add to my collection of glossy celluloid prizes.

As I never intended to be a backpacker in China, but a teacher here, when the bus reaches the center of Dali, I decide to stay at a local hotel rather than a hostel; I have worked in China, I have lived there for two years, I am a resident, and I feel I should support the local economy. China is not so much a short-term adventure for me, but a life experience,

and I can afford stays at the cheaper hotels although I sometimes envy the bohemians staying at hostels. But I do wonder if those travelers ever acquire any deep understanding of the culture as it is, the similarities between the Chinese people and their own, beyond the obviously exotic lure of this large foreign land. China is not a difficult place to be, not for me at least.

I wander through the markets lining a plaza with the many other tourists who appear to be traveling all of Southeast Asia, as they look more like those I encountered in Thailand during Chinese New Year 2002 than those I've seen elsewhere in the PRC. I buy a khaki canvas hoodie with a sporty front pocket from a vendor for seventy quai (about U.S.\$5) because it looks adventurous and casual and sturdy and warm, and Dali is cooler than the intolerable heat and humidity of Shanghai in the summer; it's been raining in Yunnan the past few days. I find a Kodak stand shaped like an ancient building, buy film, and dream of my pictures of the pagodas. A friendly-looking building called Sunshine Café, the same name as my favorite Western eatery in Shanghai, rests among other bars and restaurants near the stand. In the café, I find another American who works there, a sweet-looking, sandy-haired, skinny, blue-eyed guy from Kansas, who's dating a girl from Dali, he tells me, after I ask him where he's from and what he's doing in the province. He takes my order and asks me if I have any musical requests, proudly displaying a CD collection I glance at. I request Cocteau Twins Heaven or Las Vegas, a CD given to me by my sister before I left the

U.S. He seems surprised and impressed that I have any idea who Cocteau Twins are, and I don't mention that many of their albums are bootlegged and sold in the markets in Shanghai, I just grin. I'm glad he has the CD. I order an omelet, a dish more popular in Southeast China and its bordering countries than the rest of the PRC, and dream of the home, porches, lemonade and family I'll see again in a few weeks.

After eating and exploring central Dali, I return to my hotel room around 9 pm. The contact lens in my right eye often bothers me at night after a day of wear and warding off allergies, so I remove it, depending on the contact lens in my left eye, a habit of vanity. I flip through my Rough Guide to see what I can plan for the following day, but I am bored by 10 pm, so I decide to venture out to find the brilliantly lit pagodas I saw on arrival, a gift to myself and my camera.

I exit the lobby and start on my trek, thinking the pagodas couldn't be more than a half hour's walk away, as the town of Dali is only a few miles long. Because I lived and worked in China for two years, I feel confident in the ways of the country and in traveling alone, something I had done many times. And I'd often been out for late nights on weekends in Shanghai, alone during the first semester at SHSID before I met Zara or Karina, sometimes taking long walks to each destination while bar-hopping. In China, the most intense danger I experienced, and that the Rough Guide warned against, was pickpocketing.

Once, on Nanjing Lu, the busiest neon street in Shanghai, a beggar asked me for

spare change. After I gave him a few coin quai and whatever jiao I had in my pocket and he left me, I turned to find that the cash from a pocketbook I carelessly swung behind me had disappeared. That happened in spring of 2001, so I felt comfortable that I had learned my lesson and that I need to keep note of where I put my pocketbook; The Rough Guide to China advises that as long as one doesn't take much money, one won't lose anything. China is not a violent place; I don't fear bodily harm here.

I walk through the town in my favorite flip-flops, a pair of fashionable thick black thongs I got at a yard sale at home, the warm and durable khaki canvas hoodie I bought early that morning, and a pair of black Capri pants from U2, a clothing franchise popular in China. Feeling completely confident with my two years in China, and the fact that I am carrying so little money, I stroll through the cover of night in Dali, noticing that most of the shops and shacks have closed up. I walk and walk and walk on in the drizzle under the lavender umbrella I bought in Lijiang, letting my mind wander, noting the random karaoke bars and few lights still on outside, dotting the long cobblestone streets of the town. I think nothing of the two men walking together far behind me or the lone stragglers on every other block, some leaving the karaoke bars, some heading home from work. Because there are 1.3 billion people in China, I am accustomed to people roaming around all hours of the night on bicycles and on foot. I only think of my photographs and how much closer I am getting to the pagodas and what a sight they will be.

The half hour I calculated had probably passed when the two men I barely noticed walking far behind me earlier, move before me and turn to face me, at a comfortable distance. I assume it's the same two men, anyway. *Who else could it be?* I smile blankly at them, waiting for them to speak; I am amused by this encounter. In China, I have become used to the fascination with foreigners, or laowai, people stopping me to chat, sometimes wanting to take pictures with me, the Westerner, while we all cheese together and make peace signs with our hands. Laowai are a novelty in a country that has been closed for so many years, and perhaps I am accommodating because there is no obvious harm in it, or perhaps the fact that I fascinate people goes to my head more than I'd like to admit to myself. I just walked past a convenience store with the light still on, but I'm not sure how that fact fits in to the scenario standing before me. At home, if I walk after dark, I always make note of populated places nearby, a habit I carry wherever I go. I wait for the men to talk to me, to say something in Chinese, which would happen in Shanghai whether I was expected to understand or not. But the men stay silent, which confuses me.

Because it is nighttime and raining and I don't have one of my contact lenses in, the scene before me is unclear. A few moments have passed and the men still have not spoken, nor have I, but time is only a precious commodity when it comes to queues, and staring is not considered rude in China. I continue to smile, trying to figure out what is going on. I know I see the lights from the pagoda beyond the two men. I notice that one of the men,

the man on my left, is slightly waving something shiny in the hand at his side. I can't imagine what it is: *A stick? A camera? A bottle of liquor, maybe?* I still can't see clearly, and I'm losing my patience.

I know some Chinese. I've lived in China for two years, and I am a teacher for God's sake. If you want to take a picture, ask me already; I have a picture I want to take too! I think to myself. And yes, Yunnan Province is different than Shanghai, but it's not as though a tornado had picked me up and I landed in Oz. I took a bus here! Why aren't you talking to me? I haven't got all night!

I take a deep breath, waiting, not wanting to be rude. As I stand there under my lavender umbrella, I think, perhaps, the man on my left, waving the shiny thing at his side is trying to give that shiny thing to me, maybe to take a picture. *Maybe they're shy*, I think. *There's no reason for him to be shy, and this has gone on long enough. I'm losing my patience.* So I reach for the shiny object, clasping it in my left hand between my middle finger and my thumb, coaxing it away from him, hoping to get the picture taken and finally be on my way. But that's not exactly what happens.

What does happen is that the man I attempt to coax the shiny object from gets angry and wrestles the shiny object back from my grasp, which surprises and confuses me even more than the silence. My middle finger and my thumb burn and sting, which also surprises and confuses me. I realize I'm bleeding and my fingers are cut. *A knife...? He just wrestled a knife from me that he thought I was wrestling from him...! He has...a knife...? He's mugging me...in*

China? These men in Dali are mugging me! Pickpocketing I expect, but mugging is a scenario I am not prepared for, not in China, the Communist country where I lived and worked and taught children. I'm being...*mugged?* The shock and anger wells into adrenaline. *What would your mothers think? Mugging a teacher!* I had been so close to the pagodas. I could see them. The men stand still in front of me. My left hand is bleeding more than I can ever remember bleeding, and the two men are still standing there, with their knife, staring at me, waiting for me to fork over the 10 quai – approximately one and a quarter American dollars – I had so cautiously put in my purse.

I remember the convenience store a few meters back and turn toward it using my lavender umbrella as a shield behind me, yelling as loudly as I can from my diaphragm as I had been taught in college-sponsored self-defense classes in the U.S. My thong flip-flops fall from my feet to the wet concrete and I don't dare stop for them as I run as fast as I can through the mud puddles and rainy night toward safety.

When I reach the store with the light thankfully still on, I realize that I've bled all over the front of my light khaki hoodie, staining it with a rivulet of crimson. The shopkeeper answers my insistent knocking. I know I look like a walking nightmare – a barefoot, bloody, foreign woman. The shopkeeper opens the door to find me crying and bouncing and waving my good hand, pointing to the blood on my hoodie, my cut middle finger and thumb, and the street where the thugs had attacked. All I can do is pantomime

and sob as I don't know how to express what just happened in Mandarin.

The shopkeeper takes me in, sits me down, gives me water and, as always, whenever anything exciting such as a bicycle or car wreck happens in China, a crowd materializes and gathers around the store and me, the exhibit, the blood-stained, barefoot foreigner. I believe most of the crowd is from the karaoke bar across the street, which I now notice is still open in the sleepy town. But because the crowd consists mostly of men, I begin to fear that the blurry apparitions who attacked me are among the onlookers. I panic, insisting that women come to comfort me. "Wo yao nu ren! Wo yao nu ren!" I cry.

Someone in the crowd is kind enough to drag a few women from the karaoke bar across the street into the shop, making the fact that I am the night's entertainment feel less humiliating. The local police come, and I am reluctant to get in the police car. In a state of shock, I imagine being quietly toted away to a Communist farm to be re-educated; if this gets out, Dali's tourism will suffer. I should have known better than to go out walking by myself at night, crazy laowai! My wild fears are unfounded.

The policeman drives me to the local hospital before heading to the police station to file a report. At the hospital in Dali, a nurse numbs my fingers with an injection and sews the bloody gashes in my middle finger and thumb with thick black stitches, reminding me of Frankenstein's forehead. While in the local hospital, I think more about the hardwood floors and lack of hot water than I would like to admit, being used to the OCD sanitation of

the medical facilities in the States. What I really don't think about as much as I should, however, is the fact that the needles used to stitch me are previously used, sterilized needles. I don't protest, I just sob, thinking there is no way they'll stitch me with used needles, that I'm not really seeing what I'm seeing, that no one is that crazy.

All of the staff at the hospital seem kind, but not bilingual, nor am I. A kind, local bilingual woman who owns a Dali hostel appears at the hospital and translates my story to the police, although I'm unwilling to tell the story at first as I'll remain in the town one more day, according to my non-refundable bus ticket. But once I agree, the bilingual woman talks me into going to the police station, kind enough to meet me there and help me file a police report. When the officer takes my passport and Foreign Expert's Certificate into another room, the woman assures me that everything is ok, that the policeman is just xeroxing my documents as proof of identity. She's thoughtful enough to have brought a pair of shower shoes for me, something most hostels and hotels in China are stocked with, after seeing that I had lost my own shoes. I buy her a bouquet of flowers before I leave Dali although she tries to refuse them. Her kindness prevails in China (not the behavior of the two thugs who attacked me).

At last, after signing off on paperwork, the policeman returns me to Sunshine Café, where my new friend from Kansas works. The mugging isn't a tornado, but this is the way the incident has blown me, to a restaurant where I know the songs. Presenting my newly

bandaged fingers to my new friend from Kansas, I ask him if I can hang out with him for a while. He asks what happened. I begin to cry, the outpouring to a stranger making me feel even more vulnerable than I already do, getting mugged, in China, on my farewell trip, after two years. My friend offers me a Tsingtao beer I eagerly accept, which calms me a little, and plays Heaven or Las Vegas. Once I've finished the Tsingtao, he walks me to my hotel and gives me a much-needed hug before going back to the café and his girlfriend.

Back at the hotel, I wrap my blood-soaked hoodie in a garbage bag and throw it away before crying myself to sleep and propping a chair against the door of my room. The presence of the bloody shirt disturbs me, and I think about putting it outside the door in the hallway, but wonder what the cleaning staff would think if they found it there. When I tell this story to friends in the States, some are surprised that I would return to China if I had the chance, which surprises me. The same thing could happen in the U.S., only the weapon would be a gun, and rather than having tiny, inch-long scars on the tips of two of my fingers, I could have my head blown off.

Most of my friends, however, think I'm a bad-ass (their words) for grabbing the knife, even though I admit that I had no idea what I was reaching for, and I laugh when I tell the story because the whole situation is completely absurd within the context of China. I suppose I became experienced and confident enough in two years to actually become naive, finally realizing after the encounter that there is a fine line between knowledge and naivete,

no matter where you are.

However, in China, unlike in the U.S., I never had to fear anyone sticking a gun in my face, as Chinese are not allowed guns, and the penalties for harming foreigners are severe, as such behavior causes China to lose face on the world's stage, as well as being an affront to the basic beliefs of most Chinese. I saw one gun in China the entire time I was there, and it was in the hands of a guard of an armored car while money was being moved from a Bank of China, a scene that caused me to uncover a fear of firearms I never knew I had, despite growing up in the pro-arms culture of the U.S., though never around guns during my upbringing. Despite misconceptions, China truly is a safe place for foreigners, a nation fond of travelers to their country and the money that tourism pours into the economy. The mugging in Dali shook me, but returning to a country where anyone on the street could be carrying a gun is nerve-wracking after living for two years in a country safe from such things.

The next day, after a fitful sleep, I take a taxi and my camera to the pagodas. I am angry. Angry that I was mugged two weeks before leaving China and angry that I might lose my fingers to gangrene or something worse over 10 quai and angry that I don't have time to get pictures of the pagodas lit up at night and angry that the guys who mugged me didn't think about what their mothers would think about them mugging a teacher! In China, teachers are regarded in the highest respect. I really did think of Shanghai and China as my

home for those two years, felt I belonged there, felt safe. *I can't believe I got mugged on my farewell trip in China, after two years!*

Arriving at the pagodas in the middle of the day, I get out, and I get my pictures, taking at least four, more than usual, in case the first three don't turn out because I want *these* pictures of *this* landmark. For some reason, I'm leery of the taxi driver, but I know I'm being irrational. When I get back to town, before checking out of my hotel, I find the vendor who sold me the khaki canvas hoodie and I buy another one.

I don't feel that this next-to-last travel in China defines my time there, although it is symbolic of the deep impression I am left with. I thought I'd only have pictures to remember China by, but now I have a constant reminder of how it actually changed myself. For some reason, fate deemed that this change appear physically on one hand, my left hand, a cosmic joke, the absurdity of life I learned how to appreciate while living in one of the oldest cultures on Earth. Perhaps Karma punished me for abandoning my journal after writing a mere four entries in China, only holding memories, forcing me to open up, but then again, I know that this Westerner's concept of instant Karma is as absurd as the idea of a drive-thru in a place where most people don't drive. I ponder the experience over and over again in my mind, wondering what it means, why it happened *to me*. The literature of the Cultural Revolution is coined "scar literature" but I didn't endure that time in China as a native. There is a Chinese proverb, "yu bu zhuo bu cheng qi" – "jade that is not chiseled

cannot become a gem.” What was I supposed to learn about myself while I gazed into my flesh, my self, torn open, on the last trek through a foreign land before returning home, the reality of a place bleeding from my fingertips?

Ms. Placed

Money House Blessing

Every day her eyes open
blue sky the scent of patchouli
sage, incense, kerosene fumes,
shag carpet. She glances outside
homes mobile and some silver like
shotgun shells, propped up on cinderblocks like dead concrete legs,
not even red, white and blue.
She considers her legs; prays to the virgin and the son on the wall
to find in their hearts,
to find this parked heart,
to find the heart that will let her go.
Old grocery store tabloid, black and white on the nightstand -
St. Catherine sighting, front page, soothing in Albuquerque, New Mexico:
She stares and envies that incandescent woman - holding
a rosary, beaming toward Heaven, standing in
that desert's panoramic sunset.
She brushes dust off the paper,
exactos the article - collage
for her scrapbook - faces
the sunrise, opens
the blind.

Misplaced

Mermaids bathe on a mountaintop and
eat marsupial sandwiches.

The snow melted. An ocean rests
on the rocky peak.

Sun shows through stained glass windows in the sky, and
the mass begins.

Little mermaids become daughters of air. The men they love
have abandoned them.

Now it is time to disintegrate and come back again misplaced.

Huntington, West Virginia, 2004-2005

A year after I return from teaching in Shanghai, I befriend a Jain from India, Anand, a graduate student majoring in history. One day, out of nowhere, he gives me a wavy metal bookmark engraved with a quote from Anais Nin: "Dreams are necessary to life." He says it made him think of me and he wanted me to have it. As many things as I've lost, I've somehow managed to hold on to that bookmark.

When I visit Chicago in summer of 2005, I see people tying kayaks and canoes to the tops of their cars, abandoning the city for the Wisconsin Dells. I'd seen many people around Marshall's campus in Huntington do the same, heading for Seneca Rocks or Gauley Valley in West Virginia. But I haven't seen any cows in a while. I smile and think of Karina.

Huntington, West Virginia, June 2008

Husson's Pizzeria sits across from campus. It's swathed in Marshall University's green and white colors and equipped with a jukebox and Soprano's pinball machine. High on the scent of melted mozzarella cheese, baked bread and marinara sauce, I meet here with editors to interview for a fun paper about my hometown, Huntington, West "By God" Virginia. The Second Mondays invites contributions of news and irreverent musings about Huntington, having started out as a newsletter among residents of a three-apartment building in the Southside neighborhood near Ritter Park. The editors are Cynthia, a recently graduated M.D. and daughter of a coal miner who drove to work in Mingo County with "I Love Mountains" bumper stickers plastered on his car despite his occupation; and Noah, a man from New Hampshire who went to school in Canada, now lives in West Virginia and commutes to work in Virginia. They ask what I'd like to write about, and I suggest that I'd like to see a section on environmental issues and mountaintop removal in West Virginia, as well as Appalachian identity in the paper.

Cynthia knows instantly why I think the topics are important, and our friend from New Hampshire quickly realizes why we both want identity covered although he's clueless about the practice of mountaintop removal (MTR). Cynthia and I explain to him, but I'm still not sure he fathoms it; an atrocity to many West Virginians, but difficult to fathom, especially for those from outside of the state. When she came to Marshall University to speak about Strange as this Weather Has Been, a book about the Buffalo Creek disaster in

West Virginia in the 1970s, Ann Pancake revealed that she often has to explain mountaintop removal when she tours in Washington State, where she now teaches. Outside of Appalachia (and inside for that matter) many have no clue about the practice.

After a long discussion, and putting off eating my two slices of pizza because I feel guilty that Cynthia and Noah have not ordered anything, I tell them I lived in Shanghai, PR China for two years and could write a travel piece but, inevitably, I begin a Huntington-girl diatribe about the first time I traveled to New York City with MU's art department in January of 1999.

Then, as an undergraduate, I didn't have anything to do with the art program aside from art student friends, but the excursion was open to anyone at MU willing to help pay for the charter bus and the hotel rooms we'd share on Broadway. I tell the editors how I was "outed" as an Appalachian during the trip. The rant comes after laughter over an irreverent musing I pitch concerning swarming cicadas – currently inundating the town with their exoskeletons and strange chirping – that vandalized a mobile of brightly colored birds hung from a tree outside of Birke Art Gallery, also in view across the street.

During the art department's 1999 NYC trip, a group of the MU students visited Rodney Dangerfield's Comedy Club one night, because it seemed like a big-city metropolitan thing to do, especially as Huntington didn't get a comedy club until after the millennium. I would learn, however, what I really loved during that trip to New York City

was Chinatown (well before I even thought about moving to Shanghai to work as a teacher), that it didn't matter to me that I wouldn't see the Empire State Building up close, and that I'm not a big fan of stand-up comedy. I remember two comedians performing at the dark club decked out in red vinyl booths with candles on the tables that evening, but I don't remember the first one's schtick, or either of their names. When the second comedian came on – one who'd been featured on TV, the club's emcee announced, maybe Comedy Central or HBO – he asked our group and the only other group at the club, where we were from. The other group answered “Canada,” but our group lied about where we were from, as usual. At our booth, without saying a word, we all knew that lying about where we're from is part of southern West Virginian discourse because we know we "don't get no respect" whether traveling in groups or alone.

We answered “Texas,” one of the standards along with “Virginia,” convinced the lie protected us from a bashing we knew all too well, until one member of our party blurted out “West Virginia.” We could have strangled him. Why would he do that to us? Sure enough, the comedian started with the usual incest and “you're all related” jokes, jokes as much fun to endure as pap smears (yes, we do have gynecologists, and even dentists, in West Virginia) and similar indignities, although I can't imagine many. I don't know if we were mortified or if the admission actually made us brave; we walked out.

Despite the fact that none of us on that trip struggled growing up in West Virginia like Jeannette Walls, who wrote about her adolescence spent in the town of Welch in the

memoir The Glass Castle, we understood the affliction, the survival instinct and need, to lie about our pasts, the landmass from which we came for fear of...just for fear. It was something we'd been taught – that we all might as well have grown up in crumbling houses with no running water in hollers, acting as our own parents because the grown-ups surrounding us might as well have been from outer space. The Glass Castle, on the New York Times best-seller list, is resonant and heartbreaking, allowing Jeanette Walls to put to rest memories of extreme poverty, neglect, abuse and taunting at the hands of an alcoholic father, indifferent mother and bratty locals in Welch, West Virginia. But her story is only unique in the fact that Walls is an extremely gifted storyteller and a very brave, beautiful and resilient soul. Though many like to fantasize struggles such as hers are unique to West Virginia in the U.S., they're not. And it's no joke.

As we walked out of Rodney Dangerfield's Comedy Club, we overheard the comedian asking a manager if he was going to get fired, but none of us ever really talked about it again. I don't think we realized what happened at that club was good for us, that we didn't have to hide, just like Jeannette Walls realized after moving to NYC and finally publishing her story. If one of us threw out a stone and shattered the walls of the glass castle it might actually be a good thing. (And someone might peer in and realize what a great idea solar energy is, and quit raping our land for coal.) We were “out,” at least in one place, and the air we breathed thereafter, refreshing. We heaved our chests and walked out on the

comedian, whether he liked it or not.

After hearing the NYC story at our Second Mondays meeting, Noah smiles, realizing, "Oh my God, West Virginians do travel, they just lie about where they're from! Nobody knows they're there...." Cynthia and I laugh. Noah's remark seems a little backhanded to me, but I think about it for a moment, feel out his attitude, and conclude he's not aware of it, he meant no harm. And he's cute, and actually quite nice, so I let it go. Before, when I was younger, I never even acknowledged West Virginia if I could help it. Now, I affectionately refer to my home state as "The Dub-Vee," as made popular in the state alternative news magazine, Graffiti, though I still refuse to call my hometown of Huntington "H-Town," what so many little punks like to spray paint on the telephone poles.

I didn't even consider that denying my home state was lying; I thought of it as survival, and I had always loved to pretend anyway, hoping to become an actress (when I was in high school). But now, in my thirties, having worked as a teacher, faced with the prospect of children of my own and the need to be a good role model, I'm tired of lying about my roots – they're not perfect, but nobody's are – something else Jeannette Walls learned. Noah, Cynthia and I discuss having regular meetings and advertising possibilities, and Noah assigns me the to-do section in Huntington.

After the meeting, I head home to Highlawn in the East End of Huntington, walking past the mobile of three birds outside of the Birke Art Gallery again. One bird is knocked to

the ground, covered in chirping bug-eyed locusts, shells all around. It's late spring, June,
blooms still on trees, fragrant, not too much traffic, a quiet walk home.

New York City and Elsewhere

Despite my recounting the uncomfortable story to my editor friends, on the sixteen-block walk home, I remember going places in NYC by myself, although I knew some of the art students on the trip. In those four days, I became addicted to Chinatown, taking the train there every day. I remember walking down one street, seeing a Chinese man coming out of a shop in front of me in a white butcher's outfit with two dead, salmon-colored leathery pigs slung over his shoulder. Despite common stereotypes about West Virginia, I'd never seen such a thing, although at my first paying job in Huntington I did work with a girl who grew up on a farm in another county and was unknowingly fed her pet chicken for dinner one night. But the unexpected exoticness of the scene thrilled me. I bought a sterling silver chain and moonstone pendant in one of the Chinatown shops, knowing that, being a Cancer and ruled by the moon's cycles, moonstone was supposed to be good for me, balancing and lucky. I perused the other shops with jade animal pendants, dragon masks, and red silky circular, thick string-twisted wall hangings, bound by gold lame. I bought a bamboo parasol decorated with paintings of pink delicate flowers. In Chinatown, I felt most alive, anonymous without having to hide.

Aside from Chinatown, initially, I also visited the Cloisters Museum alone with a camera, thinking it would be good for me because I had taken some medieval lit classes. Disappointed that my camera did not want to work, I ran up the first credit card I ever had in the museum's bookstore, buying books on alchemy and the like in order to have

keepsakes. At St. Peter's Cathedral, the fact that the church had a gift shop surprised me, but I bought a three-pack of holy water, holy soil, and holy olive oil there before hearing a choir performance. I also had some wonderful times with friends: one who now runs an airbrush kiosk in Albuquerque, New Mexico, one an exchange student from Croatia who died in Ohio of stomach cancer before he made it to thirty-five (we'll never forget you, Senesha), and one a painter who now teaches MU's Rendering the Landscape class held every summer at Twin Falls State Park. We went to a Thai Restaurant, an Irish Pub, the Virgin Records tower store where I bought as many PJ Harvey Is This Desire? singles as possible, and a club called Swing 46, which I *had* to go into after seeing the dancers in the retro outfits – suspenders, fedora hats, and flapper dresses – and the brass band.

In NYC, sightseeing didn't interest me, life did; I wanted to believe I was in another world, one where I got some respect and had some fun. I wanted stories to tell. I remember it snowed one of the late January days as I was walking along Broadway in a black peacoat, black qipao minidress with mock short sleeves and pastel embroidery (made in the U.S. of A. by All That Jazz and purchased at a discount store in West Virginia for \$12), five-inch black platform mary janes with velcro straps (purchased at a boutique in NYC on said credit card for \$70), and an essential oil made in Egypt called Baraka (purchased at a new age store/herb apothecary in Huntington) while one person handed out free Hershey's Kisses and another handed out handfuls of Dove chocolates for those companies on adjacent street corners. I didn't care that my No-Nonsense nylon-covered legs were going numb,

and I realized then that the Hershey's and Dove handouts were marketing ploys, but hey, free chocolate. If there is free candy in West Virginia, I don't know about it, but I want to, especially if it's at the Swiss chocalatier in Helvetia. When I returned home, I realized I didn't so much have stories to tell as I did bragging rights to say I'd been to New York City, not sure why the trip was a collector's item, but not questioning it either.

On the NYC trip, I was twenty-two years old. I'm thirty-two now, born in 1976, a dragon on the Chinese astrology chart, same as Pearl S. Buck, a West Virginian, by birth at least. I'd traveled outside of West Virginia before that trip, mainly Myrtle Beach (evidently dubbed the Redneck Riviera within West Virginia) and Virginia Beach on family vacations. My family also visited Kings' Island and the Cincinnati and Columbus Zoos in Ohio pretty regularly during summer vacations when I was in elementary school; my sixth grade class took a field trip to Arlington, Virginia and Washington, D.C., where I gathered information on a report for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, my chosen landmark after watching the Changing of the Guard. And against my good judgment, I visited Seaford, Delaware home of an ex-boyfriend addicted to Xanax who tried to steal my cat and pretty much everything else I ever owned in West Virginia. I also visited Charleston, West Virginia for various hair-metal band tours throughout high school; Louisville, Kentucky for Tori Amos' Dew Drop Inn tour at The Palace Theater; the Bahamas for four days; and of course, I'd been to the Ohio and Kentucky towns near Huntington – Ashland, Southpoint, Proctorville, Ironton;

and several places in-state, including – believe it or not – Stewart Street where Jeannette Walls' mother decided to finally splurge on a trip to the laundromat for her kids in Welch, McDowell Co.

McDowell County, West Virginia is my grandmother's home county, and she returned there after working as a nurse and raising my half-Sicilian mother and uncle in Huntington, watching my sister and me grow until I entered Enslow Middle School. Grandma moved back to Welch in order to take care of her own mother who had lived with her for a while in Huntington. The family would drive to Welch to visit on holidays and eat the feasts Grandma happily prepared for us. We once visited Twin Falls State Park with Grandma during a summer trip, before I ever attended the writing section of the university's Rendering the Landscape Class. These times I enjoyed though Grandma was a little too Baptist, a little too dogmatic.

If not for her dogmas, Grandma would have made a wonderful teacher though; she loved literature. Aside from the many biographies and political commentaries written by right-wing Republicans, Grandma's shelves were stocked with Pearl S. Buck, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Shakespeare, collections of Readers' Digest Condensed books, and, for reasons inexplicable, books on Eastern countries.

When my cousins were old enough, they joined us on those trips, and my sister and I would take them to the playground a block or so away on Stewart Street to play, pretty

much the only thing to do aside from watch TV while we were there. My grandfather, born to Sicilian immigrants in War, West Virginia, always boasted that Grandma never would have moved out of McDowell County and into Huntington (a big city by West Virginia standards) if it weren't for him. Despite Grampy's initial triumph in their young adulthood, Grandma blamed their irreconcilable differences and divorce, when my mother was fifteen, more on the fact that Grampy was Sicilian than the fact that the two of them were bull-headed West Virginians who couldn't live together, which always irked me. Of course, in Grandma's upbringing in McDowell County, as well as the ambiguity of her unhappiness over being a divorcee, this blame extended to all non-white peoples, which also irked me and my mother. Grandma didn't socialize beyond family much though, except for church, what I perceived as the bull-pen of Appalachia, where one person could be trampled under a stampede of gossip once a gate or mouth was opened. But I did like the free food and candy in Sunday school. None of us ever really said anything to Grandma and let her go on nursing her grudges.

In hindsight, grudges were something we should not have let Grandma nurse, and probably only did so because she was the matriarch and property owner in Huntington or because my father, ever the peacekeeper who'd spent the first five years of his life in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, tried to explain her dogmas, insisting it was just "her generation," she was just repeating what she heard, it was normal, don't take it seriously. Because she was mine, my grandmother, I did take it seriously, but I also left it alone and turned my

activism toward non-family members.

After I graduated from Huntington East High School, I traveled to Spruce Knob, the highest point in West Virginia. There, I attended an environmental rally with my good friend Shawna and her mom, a member of the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC), artist and antique appraiser infatuated with John Lennon, to protest the placement of a dioxin-producing pulp mill in Apple Grove, West Virginia. Shawna and her family returned to Huntington after living in West Berlin for three years while she was in middle school, seeing the Berlin Wall fall while her stepfather taught art on a U.S. army base. In Huntington, I loved going to Shawna's, staying up all night, reading tarot cards and playing on an antique wooden Ouija board, listening to CDs, high school and pop culture gossip, and Shawna's stories, thinking she was one of the most interesting people I'd ever met, even though she's a year younger than me. At the rally in Spruce Knob, we met Jedediah Purdy the author, a quick, home-schooled kid a year older than me, before he was Jedediah Purdy the author.

After nights spent sleeplessly amid the cacaphony of grasshoppers jumping on our blue pup tent, enduring flies the environmentalists in the mess hall wouldn't let us swat, and being lamabasted by a nudist Buddhist (a denomination exclusive to my state evidently) for missing youth poetry hour, Shawna and I would gather around a campfire with Jedediah and the other kids/young adults, listening to stories, making conversation, roasting marshmallows, and listening to someone play guitar. We missed youth poetry hour because

we took showers and put on lipstick after spelunking in a muddy underground cave for hours, then were chased by a disgruntled cow upon our return to the campsite, but the nudist Buddhist showed no sympathy, “While you two were making yourselves beautiful, we were writing poetry....”

Knowing that our goth girl personas didn't quite fit in despite our good intentions, Shawna and I stayed with her mother at Spruce Knob for a long weekend, usually keeping to ourselves. But we listened to her mother's updates, then followed up at a protest of the pulp mill on the lawn of the State Capitol building in Charleston. The local papers portrayed the protesters as radicals who didn't care about West Virginia's economy, but the protest was successful and the pulp mill never built. For no particular reason, that was pretty much the extent of my public career as an environmental activist, although I do often anonymously comment, "Has anyone in West Virginia ever seen Erin Brockovich?" on articles in The Herald Dispatch website. (I guess those comments won't be so anonymous anymore.) But looking back, it's a feat I'm very proud to have accomplished in West Virginia.

Shawna wasn't with me, though I wished she had been, the next time I saw Jedediah Purdy in the summer of 2000, when he visited the Cabell County Public Library to promote his first book For Common Things: Irony, Commitment and Trust in America. Shawna and I drifted apart as we grew up, but would find each other again after I returned from China. I didn't even remember Jedediah's face until the book signing.

At the library, after Jedediah's lecture and remarks on the bi-polar reviews the book he published at twenty-five had received, I took my credit card to the table where he autographed the books, happy to purchase something contemporary from a regional author. As he swiped my card I studied his face, realizing he was the nice kid at Spruce Knob, amused by my making excuses for my dirty mud-caked clothes on the trek back to the campsite after spelunking. I told him I remembered him and reminded him of how Shawna and I had been unfairly chastised by the nudist Buddhist for taking showers and putting on lipstick after our underground adventure because we missed youth poetry hour. Again, he seemed amused, nodded toward the line formed behind me, then scribbled something inside of the book I purchased. I thanked him, but noticed that he watched me as I exited the library, a look of disappointment or bewilderment crossing his face as I walked through the door, which puzzled me. I didn't read his autograph before I left; I didn't want to leave him with the impression I thought *too* much of him. After all, I'm only a year younger and I hadn't published anything beyond the university literary magazine, while taking creative writing.

Once home at my unintimidating apartment, I opened the book. I realized why Jedediah had watched me leave the library, and I giggled on my floor for an hour as I opened and closed the book, reading and re-reading the message: "To Kelly – in memory of Spruce Knob and dubious showers." How irreverently sweet! But I left that copy at home, unable to read the book in its entirety until I picked up a paper copy at the Foreign Language

Bookstore on Fu Zhou Lu in Shanghai.

When I read the book, I found that Jedediah is also not a big fan of stand-up comedy nor of shows based on stand-up comedy out of New York, at least in the form of Jerry Seinfeld. I didn't quite understand this. I mean, I got Jedediah's point; he was warning of the dangers of complacency and self-satisfaction rather than irony, but I didn't see Jerry Seinfeld as a threat. Given the chance, there's another Jerry S. in entertainment I would have railed against, a self-proclaimed ringmaster who recruits 'guests' from West Virginia, one of them actually having been my first boyfriend in middle school (native of Korea). I cringe at The Jerry Springer Show and I'm pretty sure it's done more damage to the U.S. than Seinfeld ever dreamed of doing.

Besides, I liked and still like Seinfeld. I liked the writing and the fact the conversations and situations could be had anywhere, that the characters were rendered as real, decent, imperfect people in a city so many Americans see as a kind of cultural Mecca. I especially liked Elaine, who hung with the boys and talked to them like girlfriends. It was a female role no one had really seen up until to that point, a character I related to, having had close guy friends before. But I know Seinfeld's brand of comedy wasn't Jedediah's overall point. It was about time someone put the events of the Buffalo Creek disaster in West Virginia into print.

In the preface of For Common Things, published when he was about twenty-five, Jedediah seems at peace with his life growing up in West Virginia as the son of hippie farmer

parents from California, and he also, like the girl I worked with at my first job, made the mistake of naming his family's livestock, but got through it. As for me, outside of West Virginia – whether in the hollers or cities of Kentucky and Ohio, the beaches of Virginia and the Carolinas, or on Broadway in New York City – if anyone asked where I was from, I lied about it.

I lied, I suppose, for the same reason I was attracted to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on that Arlington/D.C. trip in sixth grade. I couldn't stand that, even though the soldier was symbolic of something, no one knows who he is, his story, *his* history, not simply the history of his role as a soldier. Did he have a wife, kids? Was he drafted or did he enlist? Was he poor or well-off? Did he have hobbies? Maybe he was an artist or a writer with unfinished works. Maybe he liked to whittle. Was he handsome? Where did he live? Did he prefer the outdoors or modern life? Maybe he played baseball. Or football. Or rugby. Maybe the soldier had a dog who sat on the porch every day, whimpering, waiting for his master to come home, scratch behind his furry ears and play catch. What was the soldier's childhood like? Does he look over his famous final resting place from beyond, wishing his identity someday discovered so his family could know what happened to him? Does he want to be known? What does this person turned symbol really mean? About the U.S.? About nationalism? About humanity?

I used to think I lied about my home state because I wanted to be unknown, because I too am a symbol, a representative, whether I like it or not. I knew people outside of West

Virginia would never really bother to ask me questions beyond that symbol once I told them where I was from. With age and experience, I know that I lied because I actually want to be known, understood; I'm tired of telling people I'm from West Virginia then watching their eyes glaze over as though I just stepped off the spacecraft in The Day the Earth Stood Still. I suppose naming cattle you later eat because you live on a farm equips one for the perils of a public life as an author and person who can deal with such looks and remarks.

For example, in 2000, one reviewer portrayed Jedediah as a 'photogenic' (actually a backhanded insult) philosophizing hillbilly sitting atop a mountaintop smoking a corncob pipe. Another "writer" published a satire on the internet with Jedediah as the main character, living it up in Vegas, hanging out in a limousine, sipping champagne with strippers or hookers or something. Believe it or not, there are strippers, hookers, limosunes, and champagne in West Virginia, and we've seen movies and television shows about Vegas. Unfortunately, things we have in common, but not common things. The satire is amusing, but the point is lost on me. Can someone please explain? The symbol of the West Virginian, again, I suspect. This is why the literate, or erudite for that matter, in West Virginia don't come out and play with the rest of the white, usually male, American pseudo-intellectual cynics, and why we lie. We know what's going to be said to us before we say anything at all; we know there are plenty out there who will not listen. Most of us are much more thin-skinned than Jedediah. I know it's taken me longer to armor up.

Getting to Paradise Island

For whatever reason, at The Second Mondays meeting, I hadn't mentioned the four-day trip I'd taken at twenty to the Bahamas with my best friend, Stacy, or what my life was like at that time. Even though I've always lived near water (I like hearing barges on the water in the morning and inhaling the fog late at night), the riverbank near my house and Beech Fork Lake are nothing like the tropical beaches of the Atlantic.

To visit the Bahamas, I skipped a few classes during fall semester of 1996 at Marshall, more concerned about the time I'd miss from work. I was confused as an undergraduate, didn't really care, although my mother was adamant and insistent about my going to college and graduating, especially as she and my father didn't receive degrees until I was in middle school, working blue-collar cashier and restaurant jobs until that time.

Rather than majoring in theater as my father and I dreamed while I was in high school, I decided I should major in something practical and helpful like psychology. But I found psychology wasn't for me after taking a survey class taught by a grad student who described people who attend therapy and take medication as "crazies." The remark was extremely offensive despite the fact that she had excellent – very retro, very hip, very glossy magazine – fashion sense, which I envied. I changed my major, switching to journalism. I wrote for my middle school newspaper and took advanced placement English in high school, and the ASFAB exam my high school counselor advised me to take as a career assessment

indicated I'd make a good writer, so I thought the new major should work out. Then again, the ASFAB also indicated I'd make a good psychologist.

After a class discussion in which we were asked why we would like to major in journalism, I became disenchanted with that field as well. I listened to my classmates' reply to the question toward the front of the room from their desks:

"For the prestige."

"For the money."

"Because I love sports."

"Because I want to be on TV."

"Because I want to see my name in print."

These answers were fine until I chimed in, "To empower the people." When I said this, everyone turned around and looked at me like I just walked out of Belleview, a place I thought I'd be ready to visit by the end of that semester. Sally Jesse Raphael, Geraldo and Jerry Springer's sideshow were popular around this time. My mother would come home from her new job as an administrative assistant (a job secured after she studied court reporting and stenography at the junior college), and flip between those programs and The People's Court. After a lecture in which the instructor told us to write as sensationally as we could in order to sell our stories, I had nightmares about Geraldo Rivera and his

mustache, an entity in itself, and I changed my major, again. The unbridled negativity was too much. I decided journalism was not for me.

But during the one semester in journalism, I took an introduction to creative writing class, which I adored as much as the drama and speech classes I took in high school, all from the same instructor. The creative writing students relaxed in a room on the fourth floor of Corbly Hall at MU, studying contemporary 20th century poets like James Wright, Donald Hall, Margaret Atwood, and James Tate. I especially loved Margaret Atwood after reading The Handmaid's Tale in 12th grade. The students in the creative writing class seemed more approachable than the students in my other classes. At the time, the instructor of the class was the Chair of MU's English department, maintaining a neat office decorated by a sculpture of a tree pressed against his office wall, one with bright red roller skate wheels dangling from the branches.

The students in the creative writing class were less preppy than in my other classes, more misfits like me, wearing a lot of flannel, jeans, combat boots, eyeliner and thrift-store clothing, popular at the time. In the class, we studied postcards and wrote poems about them, participated in the "exquisite corpse" exercise, and read poems written in foreign languages, translating them based on sound rather than knowledge of the language. We created and played, something I didn't realize I missed in my first two majors.

I had been exhausting myself going to school full-time and working a full-time job as

a curb/kitchen/bar girl at a drive-in restaurant, a job I'd had since sixteen. After being stiffed by Christians leaving clever propaganda pamphlets stating, "Here's a tip, get to know Jesus," and "Here's your ticket to Hell," sexually harassed by men in pick-up trucks who looked like they'd never been to a dentist in their lives, and being accused of discriminating against a Seventh-Day Adventist because the drive-in only gave free gallons of rootbeer with a dozen hotdogs one particular day of the week, I would draw pictures in colored pencil of the restaurant engulfed in flames and burning down once I got home late in the evenings. I had worked there in order to pay for the apartment I lived in, my orange kitten Butter's catfood, catnip, and the hemp necklaces I wore he liked to chew on so much, and the fact that I just didn't know what else to do.

Perhaps because of working that job, it never occurred to me (in those playful workshop classes) that I might not ever get a job doing what I loved, which is the reality for most fine arts majors. It just struck me *how cool it would be* if I did get paid for doing what I loved in the English classes at some point, rather than peddling to the masses hotdogs made in a shack beside a blue dye factory.

By the end of the semester, I'd changed my major to English, signing up for more creative writing classes and a class on The Canterbury Tales, the Middle English version, that I somehow got through, in a language I began to understand by the time the semester was over (*Here bygyneth the Book of the tales of Kelly... I mean, Caunterbury*). I attributed this

to the fact that my instructor graduated from Chapel Hill, is from the Ukraine, speaks five languages fluently, actually gives us bonding candy when assigning our study groups, and knows what it's like to not understand, knows the mini-panic attacks we have when we look at the pages of English words that aren't in any English we recognize yet.

Although happy in my new major, I still felt I needed a vacation. During the trip to the Bahamas with my best friend, Stacy, ocean waves whispered in an accent thick with conch fish, cowrie shells, and braided hair. We stayed on Paradise Island, the same name as the home of my childhood television hero, Wonder Woman. (I didn't point this out to Stacy, knowing she prefers nature shows and documentaries to fantasy, and that I'd just sound silly.) Stacy was sponsoring the entire trip, got a great deal, and invited me because she didn't want to go alone. And of course, in the Bahamas, I didn't trot around in Wonder Woman Underoos, my mother's oversized boots, and homemade feminine bracelets and a tiara I cut out of notebook paper and colored in with gold and red crayons like I did when I was a tot. As a matter of fact, I was such a big chicken on the flight over I probably could have flown myself.

When Stacy and I boarded the plane out of Cincinnati, I sat in the aisle seat and refused to look out the window. The flight to the Bahamas was my first ever, and I had an almost inexplicable fear of flying though I knew it somehow extended to my mother's irrational fear of all forms of travel and to the fact that the plane carrying the entire Marshall football team crashed while she was growing up in the 1970s. This explained why Stacy

insisted on flying out of Ohio rather than West Virginia.

As we took off, I noticed a little girl who couldn't be older than four looking out the window across the aisle from me, telling the two women she was with, probably her mom and aunt, about the pretty aerial view. After listening to the little girl, I felt ashamed of my fear, being nearly five times older than she, amused by her awe and her willingness to share her amazement with grown-ups. I decided to peer out the window my best friend was looking out of, the landscape a pattern as intricate as those I'd seen at craft fairs at home, a beautiful green, amber, and sage mossy quilt under the blue sky, punctuated with fluffy clouds. I wanted to thank the little girl and her traveling companions, but I was too embarrassed to explain.

Upon arrival in the Bahamas, Stacy and I were approached by a group of local women who hoped to generate income by braiding tourists' hair before we boarded the boat to our hotel. This was not so foreign to me. Another classmate since middle school, Lena, who performed traditional dance at her black church, appeared in the local paper several times for it and later became a nurse, braided my hair in waist-length, fake extensions when I was eighteen for \$40 while we watched Crybaby and The Lion King at her house, near my apartment. Lena was a guardian angel who watched after my Grandma at HealthSouth in Huntington before she passed away, visiting with Grandma as my grandfather often did, and braiding Grandma's hair dutch-style with one braid on the side after her stroke in 2005. I

believe in that time, my grandmother found that it takes many strands to make something beautiful and complete, held together with a circle that sparkles, individual beyond that. Lena braided my entire head, which took about four or five hours, twisting my hair tight, asking if she was pulling too hard as she went to work on each braid. That hairstyle is not, cannot, be enjoyable work, but it looks awesome. I wanted my hair in extensions after seeing Casey Niccoli, the girlfriend of the lead singer of Jane's Addiction, in a rock-n-roll movie the two made called The Gift, thinking I looked a little like Casey Niccoli and liking her Italian name.

Before Lena braided my hair, I showed a clip of the film to her in her VCR to give her an idea of the look I was going for. The film is about a man coming home to find his wife dead from a heroin overdose. Once Lena got the premise of the movie, she exclaimed, "Oh my!" the kind of sharp reaction I wish I would have had as a teenager, recognizing the reality rather than the story.

West Virginia is the leader in methadone (that drug is pretty much legal heroin) overdoses in the nation, and fifteen is the average number of prescriptions for a West Virginian. (I guess that count factors me in, only prescribed Allegra and Flonase, neither of which I can afford at the moment.) In my thirties, a few people I've known casually, some my younger sister's friends, many (like Jeannette Walls' parents did) seeing themselves as bohemian artists and pioneer squatters, have succumbed to fatal drug overdoses before

reaching twenty-five, and those statistics keep increasing. One acquaintance, who I didn't think knew me, just my sister, crossed my path in a coffee shop the afternoon before he died in 2007. I didn't say "Hi"; I didn't think he would know who I was.

In Huntington, growing up, my generation was exposed to and embraced the richness and responsibility of ethnic and foreign culture, friendship and organic reality; Lena, my classmate since eighth grade, is from one of many great Huntington families who made sure of it, raised us all right and shared with us, and never faltered in their opinions on what is right and true, much different from the segregation mentality of Welch in The Glass Castle. Generation Y and the Gen Xes on its cusp, however, are susceptible to synthetic, two-dimensions only, too much TV. Rather than seeing just a hairstyle or dress style as cool, Gen Y sees the lifestyle as cool. Instead of emulating fashion, Gen Y emulates addiction. There's no more fiction, no more craft; reality TV makes the depth of a mud puddle seem like an ocean fathom, causing something like asthma for fish and leaving no escape but substance abuse, an attempt to breathe, a vacation from the reflection of the self on the airwaves.

On balmy, breathable Paradise Island, my dyed black, bobbed hair was too short for the local women to braid, and Stacy did not think she had the face to have her curly, sandy blonde hair braided. I saw another sandy blonde-haired girl with braids, and wished my hair were a little longer. A guide led us to a motor boat we took to our hotel, and in the lobby,

while we waited to check in, an older American, a plump man in a suit behind us asked where we were from. We blushed, hesitated, but actually admitted the truth for once – Huntington, West Virginia. He smiled and exclaimed, "Oh, the Thundering Herd!" Marshall's football team was on an undefeated streak. We were relieved the man had such a positive impression, even though we didn't follow football. But the lobby was the last place we saw the man.

The view for the next four days from the window of our hotel room on Paradise Island overlooked turquoise waters and the sandy beach. It was paradise, except for the occasional waterbug in the elevator, the bitter wine in decanters at the seafood buffet in the hotel's restaurant, and the hairy white people from Pittsburgh with obnoxiously loud accents and Gheri curl mullets, who soaked in the hot tub we refused to enter afterward.

At a mock safari a hotel shuttle transported us to, we watched pink flamingoes dance, and I convinced Stacy, who is terrified of snakes, to hold one around her neck. The next day on the beach, in the ocean, after I taught her to swim in the hotel's pool, one arm in front of the other and kick! kick! Stacy got me back. My back was turned and she threw something toward me, yelling, "Manta Ray!" I screamed and swam furiously in the other direction until I noticed the object that grazed my back was just a piece of floating plastic. Even though she owed me (although I also held the snake around my neck despite finding it loathsome), I couldn't help it – when we were walking on the beach again, I made a hissing

sound then yelled, "Snake!" laughing as she jumped, screaming. When she heard me laugh, she turned and ran after me, pushing me and throwing sand.

Near the hotel we stayed at, we walked the grounds of the Atlantis Hotel, admiring the aquatic life in the saltwater ponds and tunnels, taking pictures and walking across rope bridges. Before leaving for the plane trip home, we rode a boat meant for snorkeling tourists to the middle of the ocean where no shore could be seen. But Stacy and I didn't venture out in the water once the boat stopped; Stacy had just learned how to swim, and neither of us had put on bathing suits, so we stayed on board in our wrap-around skirts and t-shirts, watching everyone else. Most snorkelers bought fish food from the boat captain before jumping into the water.

From the boat, a free-spirited British woman outfitted in a tangerine sport bikini, goggles, a light blue mouth pipe, and equipped with a bag of feed dove happily into the inviting water, but within minutes, goldfish pummeled her, tearing off her bikini top trying to get to the food. She tossed the bag and escaped to the surface of the water, exasperated and yelling, "Bloody Hell!" Swimming back to the boat and laughing, she managed to adjust her top before the boat captain hoisted her back on board with an extended arm. Despite the fact the Bahamas was supposed to be an "other" place, the fish pummeling the woman followed by her distinctly British cursing was the most exotic, entertaining and memorable thing I saw.

After the boat trip, Stacy and I returned to our hotel room on Paradise Island to pack, knowing we'd have to board the plane to Cincinnati in a few hours. Along the way, I picked up a decorative leather mask for the wall of my apartment, a bottle of Anais Anais or some other overpriced perfume I'd never tried, and a wooden jeweled pipe, carved into a face at the front of the bowl (and I sneaked back a Cuban cigar in my luggage). Once on board, I asked Stacy if I could sit by the window.

Through the window I photographed a small prism hiding in the clouds. The little girl from the outgoing flight was not on the return trip. During the peaceful journey, Stacy and I gossiped, lamenting the fact we had to return to Appalachia, anticipating when we'd develop our photographs and show them around. We napped a little. But hours later, above the airport in Cincinnati before landing, the plane began to convulse. I'd heard of turbulence, but this was something else, something that would have knocked us right out of our seats if not for our seatbelts. I panicked. *It's my fault, it has to be, for sitting beside the window, for thinking negative thoughts when we first took off.*

Stacy leaned over me, tensed, bewilderment in her eyes, staring out the window as the scene shook like the inside of a snow globe in the hands of an overzealous child at Christmas. *This can't be happening; this is not happening, this is only the second time I've been on a plane!* My mind reeled, but I reached inside myself for something calm, gently pressed my best friend since ninth grade back against her seat with my left arm (probably more for my

state of mind than hers), and insisted we'd be okay. *We have to be. Everything's going to be okay.*

The pilot announced over the intercom that there was a wind tunnel he had to fly out of and around to land at the airport. The entire plane, older West Virginians wearing shiny, pastel, reflective, embroidered jogging suits, all returning from vacation, looked around at one another, eyes wide and mouths gaping, some gasping.

But once we landed safely, all the passengers on the plane applauded, and one popped open a bottle of duty-free champagne, then offered it to the pilot. It's another incident not talked about, like the night in the comedy club in New York City, something we don't want to believe happened to us. Stacy and I developed our photographs, showed them off, and were happy with that. In West Virginia, not only do we keep secret where we're from, but we keep secret what we've endured; we don't like the smell of fear we emit when lying or telling the truth about our origins, our lives; it overwhelms us. Instead, we drown ourselves in duty-free perfume.

Chinese and Other Symbols

What I Know of Nanking

I wear a red sweater and walk
over a mass grave in a
country that doesn't belong
to me. My red sweater and Anglo face might
be ignominious
against the setting;
I feel guilty, among
the concrete walls and
barren earth from which no green grows.

Strangest thing, forty-nine minutes ago
my friends and I lit incense
at a yellow temple altar,
ran our hands over Buddhist
carvings on a hillside while walking
through drenched, green grass, breathing in mist and laughter.
Blue-grey ancient stones, their faces became
warm, some new enigmatic lover under our palms, fingers
touching secret desperation, a feigned connection,
one night stand, long-awaited invitation,
false comfort in a sense of eternity, seeping in of Zen,
you are human; not stone.

I return to where I am;
a museum, a reminder of
the lonely side of the moon forced
away from the sun and I look
at the hidden tragedies. Lack of humanity now encased in glass,
overcast ribcages, legs, mandibles displaced and
dirt-filled, barely buried in earth,
the souls and spirits lost here, wrenched away, now trying to hold on,
to say,

“I was like you, once
don't forget me.
Despite this, someone loved me
and I loved too, like you.”
I put my hand against the glass and
stare at my own distorted reflection.
I see her face. She says,
“You're alive now, like I was, I had a voice.

This is what I sang:
‘Ban ge yue liang, pan shan kuai.’”

When they come for you, don't ever forget to sing.

Huntington, West Virginia, September 2007

At 3pm, I'm expected to meet with a fellow grad student who worked in Shanghai, China from 2004-2007. We've sent emails back and forth for a week, and agreed to meet at Java Joint, a coffee shop decorated with Sigmund Freud action figures and punching rabbis, offering open mic nights and Scrabble tournaments, a favorite haunt of many students and faculty at MU. I step in to order a smoothie made of raspberries and cranberry juice. While I wait, I check the tables outside for anyone who looks like they might be waiting. When I spot a guy wearing a dark button-up shirt with short sleeves, dark pants and thong sandals, I know he's just returned from teaching in China; he shows the wear of living in a city of fifteen million people. I ask if he's the person I'm there to meet, and once he confirms it, I tell him I'm waiting for my drink inside. He follows me in and orders a coffee.

Drinks in hand, we deposit ourselves at the outside table. The weather is pleasant and sunny, not too hot, kind of breezy. Through the emails, I found out that he worked at a university in PuDong for most of the time he lived in Shanghai, but as we begin to talk, he does mention working at an international boarding school in PuXi. Soon we realize that we both worked at Shanghai High School International Division. I beam and begin rattling off names of teachers: Fu Bing, Annie Yao, Helen, Nancy, Walker and the Director, Mr. Kai. He knows every single name I mention, and tells me that Mr. Kai has retired, that Helen is to take his place, and that Annie has been promoted from instructor to administrator. The conversation becomes agreeably surreal, and for the first time in five years, someone else

knows exactly what I'm talking about when I talk about China and Shanghai Zhong Xue International Division. As our conversation continues, I even find myself referring to the school as *The Xue – the school* – like I did when I worked there. I feel like I am home, my Chinese home finally finding me in West Virginia.

I ask my classmate, Kenton, if he is in reverse culture shock as I had a bad case of it when I returned, and he replies, “I can’t stop staring.” I had the same problem. I don't know if it was the people-watcher in me or the fact that I never became fluent in the language tapestry that is Shanghai, its vastness that destined me to be such an onlooker. Kenton also reveals that there were some real characters teaching at The Xue during his stint, ornery expats like the ones I had the misfortune to encounter during my first semester in Shanghai. I now call those ornery characters the *Ah Q*.

I call some of my former co-workers Ah Q because Ah Q is the name of the main character in "The True Story of Ah Q" by Lu Xun, the father of modern (vernacular) Chinese literature. In the story, Lu Xun paints a portrait of a self-deceiving man, a bully with an inferiority complex, who symbolizes what the Chinese should aspire beyond, metaphorically beheaded at the end of the story. In my reality, however, the expatriate Ah Q at The Xue were only fired, and some, I understand, are still loose in China. I despised the Ah Q at The Xue, but am relieved to know that fate didn't single me out in putting up with those people while there. The director of The Xue, Mr. Kai, was a nice man, but I'm glad to hear the women at SHSID are taking over as I doubt they'll put up with that kind of

behavior from foreigners, Confucian traditions or not, connections and guanxi be damned.

Kenton does stare into space in the silences, but snaps back to attention when I question him. I recognize how China seeped into him like it did me, his ability to listen while hoping he misses nothing in the landscape or passers-by. I did my best to prepare for culture shock when leaving for China, but no one warned me that I'd face it upon return.

It's nice to finally to talk to someone who knows what it's like. Readjusting in West Virginia has been extremely difficult, despite my idealism on coming home, but strangely, I remember China and my initial experience of Chinese culture shock fondly.

A Crash Course in Chinese Culture Shock

Grocery shopping

Before I find out I live with a dorm one-fourth Ah Q during my first semester at SHSID, a few of us share taxis to Carrefour, a French grocery/department store franchise, not unlike Wal-Mart (although China now has Wal-Marts). Before leaving the U.S., I read several travel books about China, thinking myself prepared for the new culture. But one day, after purchasing an alarm clock, Nivea lotion and blue chalky refills for my electric mosquito repeller provided by the school, I wander into Carrefour's grocery section and past the live seafood tanks. Turtles are a delicacy in China I understand, but I don't expect to see them trying with all their might to climb out of an overcrowded, water-filled glass chamber while two little boys sit in a shopping trolley, cheering the turtles on, pretending the desperate climbing amphibians are racing to an imaginary finish. That detail was not in any of the travel books. The wheels in my mind turn, unstoppable: *Food. Turtles as food... that looks like... turtles. Turtles... in...a seafood tank!* My hand lifts to my gaping, obviously foreign jaw as the word "turtles" escapes my lips, and I feel the dirty looks from Shanghainese shoppers, as I stand in the middle of the store in a fuschia sleeveless turtleneck and blue jeans. I manage to unbend my arm, shut my mouth, and make a mental note to count to ten in Chinese next time I see something that culturally shocks me. In Shanghai, I will become accustomed to turtles, frogs, and eels in the seafood sections of grocery stores, and I will not lift my hand to my jaw.

Dining

During the first few weeks, I hang out with a guy from Marshall named Stuart, who was on the plane over with me, and who worked with me on a school magazine I edited. There's also a pretty decent guy named Todd who was in our training class on MU campus. Within our first two weeks in Shanghai, the three of us head to People's Square via metro (sounds like DTA in Chinese) to explore, deciding to eat at our first Shanghainese restaurant (what else?) near the metro stop. None of us have any idea that portions in China are huge or that Chinese people generally eat family style, sharing dishes placed in a lazy Susan in the middle of the table.

The three of us order away, clueless over the huge smile on the xiaojie's (waitress's) face. At this time, the only meat I eat is seafood. We order prawn, Chinese cabbage, dumplings, tomatoes and eggs, and hot and sour soup, thinking we can order for ourselves like at home rather than as a table. While we wait, the xiaojie brings out a moving black plastic bag, taps Stuart on the shoulder, and opens it for him to look. Evidently, the Chinese like to show diners live seafood before it's cooked to make sure they approve. Stuart gets a faceful of squiggling prawn as he peers into the bag, flinches, then turns to tell us the tale, flustered and laughing. The girl takes the bag back to the kitchen and we wait. When the xiaojie returns, she brings out enough food for a banquet, half of which we have to leave behind because traditional Chinese restaurants do not offer take-home bags, disgusted by the concept of leftover, unfresh food.

During another trip with Stuart sans Todd to a restaurant near the school, we have another live seafood encounter, though we now have portion knowledge. Knowing one plate will feed us both, I order prawn, used to the idea that I have to tear off the heads and shells myself after they're cooked. Somehow most Chinese can stick an entire cooked prawn in their mouth, peeling it while eating, like tying a cherry stem in a knot with their tongues or something, then spitting the shell out onto their plate. We also discover a delicious cucumber and garlic dish that we'll order often. We order by pointing to what we want in the restaurant glossaries of our guidebooks, which have the names of the dishes in English and Chinese.

Feeling confident after our initial restaurant experience at People's Square, I don't expect the xiaojie to guide me over to the live seafood tanks to fish out prawn that I want to eat to put into a plastic bag, because that's not how things happened at People's Square. Stuart walks with me as I stand in front of the tanks confused while the xiaojie hands me a fish net and indicates to me to fish out prawn. Stuart is amused by this; now it's my turn to deal with the critters. We look at each other and shrug. I reach in hesitantly with the net, but as I do so, one prawn manages to leap out of the tank, landing on my sandaled foot then bouncing onto the floor. The xiaojie, who has not spoken English up to this point, looks at me wide-eyed, and in a valley girl accent exclaims, "Oh-Myyy-Gawd! Dui ma? (Right?)" I swallow my surprise at her reaction and count *yi, er, san...*. Somehow I know "Dui! (Right.)" is a correct response, and we all laugh. For some reason saying "Oh-Myyy-

Gawd," in a valley girl accent is popular in Shanghai at this time, and this restaurant won't be the last place I hear it.

Over the course of two years, I will get used to my food looking at me from plates on the table. To most people in the U.S., this probably seems exotic, but the fact that we waste so much of the food that we kill is probably much more surprising to most people in the world. Birds, pigs, and cattle are never presented live at the restaurants in China, but seafood always is, served whole once cooked. So was a king snake that a few expat teachers decided to try the second year I worked at SHSID. The xiaojie at that restaurant would smile as she pulled the creature by its neck out of another moving black plastic bag while presenting it for our approval.

When other teachers order chicken at the Xinjiang restaurant we like to frequent a few blocks away in the neighborhood, it is brought out cooked, but with its disconnected head, still connected feet and all. Beef and pork often simply accent dishes instead of being served in large slabs. In China, I will sample snake (tastes like peanut butter and fried chicken), bullfrog (way too chewy), horse (probably won't do that again, try it for the hell of it at a Japanese sushi restaurant), turtle soup (like tasty but oily chicken), rabbit (this I try at M on the Bund, a fancy and expensive restaurant run by Australians), and sheep's lung (at the home of a Uigur family in Dushanzi, Xinjiang), which I think is tofu.

Of course, in Shanghai, if I get homesick, I discover a KFC within walking distance from the school, several McDonald's in the center of the city, as well as Starbucks, Pizza

Huts (with corn a popular topping on pizzas – ech), a TGIF, a Haagen-Daaz, and the Asian MOS Burgers chain, not to mention that the Lian Hua convenience store down the street sells Pepsi and M&Ms. Sometimes I visit the burger places for fish sandwiches and French fries, but if I want Western food, I'll visit Sunshine Cafe or Planet Shanghai for pasta, both on Huai Hai Zhong Lu, near Xiang Yang market where I barter for perfume, lighters shaped like Chinese lanterns or adorned with Buddhist images, silk and pashmina scarves, and other gifts to take home.

Now back home, I miss Chinese dishes that aren't served at the Chinese restaurants here. There is an Asian market in Charleston that carries Chinese cabbage and eel, chocolate Pocky sticks aren't difficult to find, and there is a Japanese restaurant in Huntington that serves octopus. But no cucumber and garlic dish, no hong shao qiezi (braised eggplant), no jiaozi, no lotus root dipped in honey, no mala dofu (spicy tofu), no squid on a stick, no bean cakes, no sweet red bean and soy popsicles, no pomelo, no watermelon juice, no chrysanthemum tea served free with every meal (tea was always free in the traditional Chinese restaurants, as the belief is that chrysanthemum tea made one hungrier). No 1 quai beer. U.S.\$1=8 quai. No 1 quai beer.

Health Care

During the first month on the campus of SHSID, I eat in the school's free cafeteria with the other Chinese teachers who share their office with me, teachers who show me how to use chopsticks, holding the top stick like a pencil and holding the bottom stick still. Unfortunately, one day, I eat some bad squid, squid that might have been handled in a way food should not be handled, although I don't realize this until after lunch.

In class after lunch, my seventh grade native speakers aren't paying attention, as per usual for this first month, and I finally reprimand them for it, letting them know I'm tired of their behavior. In the middle of my tirade, I'm overcome by a hot flash, something I've never had in my twenty-four years. I feel nauseated, stop mid-sentence, and book it to the bathroom down the cool marble floor of the hallway, though I manage to tell my students I'll be right back. I don't throw up, but the hot and nauseated feeling doesn't go away, and the hot flashes begin alternating with cold flashes. I think I'll die, for a minute.

After lurching over the western-style toilet for a few moments, I drag myself back to the teachers' office (located beside my classroom) and tell Annie and Fu Bing I'm very ill and I need to leave class. The teachers suggest I go to the campus medical clinic. They walk me back to my classroom, let the students know what's going on, and ask for volunteers to translate for me at the clinic. My two most rambunctious students, two tomboy girls, best friends, one from Korea and one from Taiwan, leap at the chance to get out of class. I'm so miserable I don't argue. As we walk across campus to the clinic, I hold onto my stomach,

unable to stand up straight or control the hot and cold flashes. The girls laugh and joke, overjoyed to be out of class.

After the painful trek across campus, we arrive at the clinic, hardwood floors and the smell of antiseptic. The floors make the place seem dark although there are windows in the clinic. A doctor in a white lab coat takes me and the girls to a room where he lays me on an examining table while I hold my stomach. The girls translate his questions:

"What's wrong?" they ask me.

"My stomach hurts and I'm having hot and cold flashes."

"Has this ever happened before?"

"No."

The doctor asks something else in Mandarin and the tomboy girls, the ones determined not to do well in my class, erupt into breathless giggles, finally translating the question a few minutes later, once they can contain themselves.

"Have you gone to the bathroom in the last 24 hours?"

The girls break down again after finally getting the question out. Here I am, helpless and ill, lying down, in a skirt no less, while two of my students have the pleasure of asking me, their teacher, if she's getting enough fiber. At that age, I probably would have laughed too.

"No!" I reply.

The doctor comes over and pushes on my stomach, which does not make it feel any

better. I suddenly remember reading an article in That's Shanghai, an English language magazine about Shanghai, warning that if you go to a Chinese doctor and complain of stomach pains, the doctor will assume it's your appendix and try to convince you to have it removed. The girls are discussing something with the doctor in Mandarin, and I can't understand. Overcome with panic, I half-plead, half-yell, "It's not my appendix.... Tell him it's not my appendix!" The girls, still giggly, appear to translate, whether my concern makes any sense to the girls or the doctor or not. I wonder if I'm overreacting. The doctor prescribes a dark brown vitamin powder to be mixed with hot water, tells the girls to tell me to rest, and sends me on my way to the on-site apothecarist.

Once back in my dorm room, I put on a t-shirt and only find relief in pressing my face against the cool linoleum of my bathroom floor, finally falling asleep there. The illness lasts a day, but I begin to eat in the cafeteria on campus that charges, the one selling caozi, lo mein, scrambled eggs and tomatoes, and Chinese cabbage, the cleaner cafeteria, where most of the international students and some of the international teachers eat. I don't return to the free cafeteria until the next year, on crab day.

Personal space and Queues

Shanghai's population is fifteen million; personal space and queues don't exist. When I return to Huntington for two weeks in August of 2001, I nearly have a panic attack while in line to renew my driver's license at the DMV because the woman in front of me allows

three feet between herself and the person in front of her. I can't shake the feeling someone will jump in that space.

At the metro in Shanghai, the first in line is the person with the fastest elbows. Clerks do not see faces, only hands. The person who gets a seat on the train is the quickest runner/darter. But, in China, people don't shove, just nudge – it's like an awkward dance where everyone knows the moves and is made of spaghetti noodles. Only two metro lines exist during my time in Shanghai, but in 2007 I hear that, thankfully, more lines have been added (and that Xiang Yang market has closed). I rode trains and buses literally bursting at the seams during the two years I lived in Shanghai.

Loos

Luckily, the expatriate dorms on campus are equipped with Western-style, sit-down loos. Loos in the more upscale hotels are western-style as well, and include towel people. But the general style of loo in China is the squatter – like a urinal built in the floor that you straddle – which is actually supposed to be better for your body, not to mention working your glutes. However, using these toilets takes grace, and toilet paper is often not provided, meaning you must travel with tissues, otherwise pay 5 jiao for toilet paper when stopping at public facilities – rest stops in the city independent of hotels, restaurants or bars. The first characters I learn to read in China are for man and woman, mindful of avoiding

embarrassment by walking into a bathroom filled with men. Just like in the U.S., I make note of the cleanest places to stop if need be.

Getting Around

In China, I travel by bus, taxi, motorcycle taxi, metro, train, boat, plane, and bicycle. Yellow and white buses shaped like Volkswagen vans but twice the size generally cost 1 quai, and, in addition to a driver, are equipped with a person who collects fare and reaches out an arm to pull you on board as the buses in Shanghai do not stop moving. If there's a crowd waiting for the bus, the crowd runs after the bus as it slows, pulled on one by one. I often hop a bus that passes outside campus to get to the nearest metro station. A metro ticket costs 2 quai, more if you need to transfer lines to go across the river to PuDong, which I don't do often. VCD peddlers and er hu and accordion players find places at Shanghainese metro station entrances, hoping for income, and the Xu Jia Hui stop boasts an underground mall. Near this stop, charters that travel to less populated towns around Shanghai Proper, like Jiading, Songjiang, and Sheshan, cost five quai, and are more orderly than the city buses, recognizable as charter buses, and are rarely packed. Only once did I ride a slinky accordion bus through the city.

By Taxi

Taxis cost a minimum of 10 quai. But because the SHSID campus is a little far from Shanghai's center, most destinations in PuXi cost campus residents 35-40 quai. In order to hail a Chinese taxi, you lower your extended arm to your waist, place your palm down and slightly wave your hand up and down. In order to keep taxi drivers from thinking that you are a naïve tourist, that you don't know what's what in Shanghai, and that you can be taken the "scenic route," you sit in the front seat with the driver, without a seatbelt, while your life flashes before you as the driver darts in and out of traffic, sometimes driving up the wrong side of the road into oncoming traffic until you're near impact. Again, you must trust in noodleness. Everyone on the road knows the game. Motorcycle taxis are similar, though generally cheaper, and not hired for a long enough distance to ever really cheat you. Helmets are not provided. If you've always dreamed of living the life of a stunt person, the experience is enjoyable.

By Train

Train rides are available on four types of tickets listed here from cheapest to most expensive: hard seat, soft seat, hard sleeper, soft sleeper (soft sleepers cost about the same as a plane ticket). I ride with friends in soft seat on short trips to Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Nanjing, brave a hard sleeper on a trip to the Yellow Mountain, and ride one of the newer, nicer hard sleepers that travels between Shanghai and Beijing on my second trip to the

capital. The shorter trips and the trip to Beijing I can bear, chatting, snacking on dried fruit and staring out windows at the passing landscape and rice paddies hidden from the urban view of Shanghai, but I'm a little too claustrophobic to repeat the eighteen-hour train ride to the Yellow Mountain, smells of the loo permeating the car, sunflower seed shells piling up on the floor, bunking near strangers. On the trip, a man bunking beneath me snores so loudly during the night that I can't sleep. I throw bits of toilet paper at him in an attempt to get him to turn over. When a woman on another bunk wakes and catches me, she gives me a dirty look, only seeing a laowai throwing paper at a man. I feel guilty, unable to explain in Mandarin, "He snores very loudly...I can't sleep."

By Plane

Planes in China sit on the runway before takeoff for a fraction of the time that planes do in the U.S. That's all I'll say. I did, however, have the good fortune to ride a plane all the way across the country, from Shanghai to Urumqi, Xinjiang Province, eyes glued to the window throughout, drinking up the green, mountainous terrain below, the Yellow River flowing through until we reached the West.

By Boat

For my first Chinese New Year vacation, I decide I will visit Putuo Shan, an island heralding one of the four Chinese holy Buddhist mountains, this one dedicated to Guanyin,

the Lady Buddha and Goddess of Mercy. The island is closed to traffic, a welcome change. I travel to Putuo Shan by boat, the only way to the island, which takes twelve hours. A family befriends me and asks about me, telling me I have too much luggage for Putuo Shan. I busy myself by going on the deck outside, watching the sunset, talking to strangers with the little Chinese I know, or pointing to a Chinese/English glossary. On the return boat trip, several men buy me drinks in the dining hall. One invites me back to his cabin in first class, and I follow out of curiosity to find that he even has his own TV there. Nervous he might expect more, I find my bunk in my own room. Chinese soldiers occupy the other bunks in the second-class cabin, the value of a U.S.\$12 ticket.

Country Roads

Two weeks into Shanghai, armed with the knowledge of the school's address, and having walked around the neighborhood to restaurants with others, I venture down the local streets on my own. I find three CD and VCD shops on the block, each blaring out the music they offer. Walking toward a shop, I hear John Denver singing "Country Roads," probably the most famous popular song about West Virginia. In the U.S. and even West Virginia, the song is hardly ever played. Surely, I'm having an auditory hallucination. I keep walking, but the song only gets louder. Behind me walks a group of about five Chinese girlfriends. In China, not a single person is tone deaf, which might have to do with the rich tonality of the Mandarin language. The women behind me break into the chorus, in English no less,

singing for the duration. I have not eaten in the free cafeteria, I have not ingested any drugs, and I haven't even had anything to drink. All over China, I find Chinese people know "Country Roads." When I tell people where I'm from, they're ecstatic to meet someone from the U.S. State the song is about. I even get this reaction from some Australians. Much more pleasant than the greeting I get from people in the U.S. when I tell them where I'm from. I think I'm going to like China.

Huntington, West Virginia, May 2000

Spring of the first year of the new millenium, a few months into the Chinese Year of the Dragon, that calendar returning to the Chinese sign I was born under, I graduate from Marshall University with a B.A. in creative writing and minor in psychology (my first major did come in handy). I know I will leave for Shanghai, People's Republic of China at the end of summer; the interview for the position at Shanghai High School International Division went well, and I signed a contract in March to work at the school for a year, a relief, as I have no idea what else to do with a creative writing degree; all career services in Huntington don't seem to know much about placing liberal arts students in jobs that will allow them to pay back student loans. The Bahamas, where I traveled in 1996, is the most exotic place I've ever been before this excursion.

Rather than a going-away party, my mother throws a "Hurry Home from China" party, making me feel extremely guilty, though I hide it well among the guests I haven't seen for years or don't even know. I *don't* want to hurry home; there's no future for me here in West Virginia, which is what my father and others always told me. I want to stay away as long as possible. I can't wait until this party ends so I can have my own party at Calamity Café, an earlier incarnation of the Java Joint and also a popular hang-out for English majors, poets and musicians. I want a private party that lives in a glass of Long Island Iced Tea. But I smile and hug because that's what good daughters and snot-nosed little brats who dare leave Appalachia and the good ole U.S. of A. for other countries do.

My boyfriend, D., who says he is not my boyfriend but who comes to my apartment on weekends and takes me to dinners and movies, recently broke up with me over the phone while I cried among bubble wrap, Beanie Babies, and boxes of Jelly Bellys in the storeroom at the candy shop where I work. I just received a B.A. in English, D. (what his friends call him) a B.A. in psychology. He refused to go to China with me despite the fact that he hates Huntington, hates being a foreigner in Huntington, the son of a couple who left Tehran, Iran after the Islamic Revolution. But two days before I leave, he comes to my apartment, hugs me, and kisses me goodbye. The visit makes no sense to me, but I let him. I believe a thirty-hour plane ride and different country will save me from any confusion, and will make the clean break he won't allow.

Charleston, West Virginia, August 2000

When I depart from Yeager Airport in Charleston at the end of August after a good-bye night at Calamity Café, where I finally drink that Long Island Iced Tea while taking down phone numbers and email addresses on a napkin, it appears to friends that I shove off for a future: I leave the hysteria and hype around the year coined as Y2K, the new millennium I celebrated at a party during which a buffet of old computers assembled for the event were smashed with sledgehammers in a backyard after the ball dropped; I leave a position as editor for the university's literary magazine; I leave D., who I never believed loved me, but who later, after walking up the Great Wall of China with me, almost convinced me that he did; and most of all I leave the ominous stereotype of backwardness in my home state, West Virginia.

But inside my own red velvet corridor of family secrets and doubt, I know I am leaving a childhood miasma of hospital visits and illness; two grandmothers, one a zealous Baptist who found religion after divorcing my Sicilian grandfather, the other a ghost, a schizophrenic agorophobe grandmother, who lived with my paternal grandfather until she passed away when I was twelve; the perpetually teenaged Irish Amish Dutch Sicilian couple who are my parents; two obviously bewildered and doting (but far from infallible) grandfathers, both veterans of WWII; a sister I love, but who gets lost, a lot; long-standing fabulous friends; and a history of jagged love affairs, lying like shattered glass along a pavement, like spilled pills along a floor, no longer sedative or delicious in their mediciny

taste. And I will leave behind a nagging echo in that red velvet corridor, always reminding, "You can't...you can't...."

The charter to the Bahamas in 1996 is the only plane I've ever been on before boarding this charter, connecting to the Detroit flight overseas. Two other students from Marshall University travel with me; Heather, a psychology major I never met before the mere three days of training at Marshall, and Stuart, an English grad student and section editor on the university magazine who decides to tag along after hearing about my plans, and who, bless his soul, I have to calm once he is on the plane as it's pretty obvious, having never really been away from home, how much it hurts him to leave his family. We make one overnight stop in Detroit, where we share a hotel room at a Red Roof Inn, before boarding a direct flight to Tokyo.

I have prepared for the flight by packing strawberry Creme Savers and Extra sugar-free bubble gum in my carry-on, but as we proceed, I think my head will explode from the pressure of the altitude, no matter how many pieces of gum I gnaw. I put a blanket over my head and my hands over my ears, occasionally peeking out to watch the in-flight movies, which amuses my traveling companions. Once we reach the airport in Tokyo, I am dehydrated and dizzy. We sit for two hours, waiting, wondering how similar life in the airport in Tokyo – the pre-packaged meats resembling the whole animals they are and children who run wild as if they ruled – is to Shanghai.

Shanghai, People's Republic of China, August 2000

When we finally arrive in the airport in PuDong, a section of Shanghai, an excitable and fit man named Mr. Kai, Director of Shanghai Zhong Xue (Shanghai High School), holds up a sign displaying the name of SHSID alongside our names – the only clear sign we see in the behemoth of an airport. We walk over to introduce ourselves and I stutter the phrase, "Hen gao xin jin dao ni" or "Very happy to meet you," a phrase I learned in a crash course in Chinese in the States, and a phrase Mr. Kai entertains, despite his perfect English. Mr. Kai leads us outside of PuDong airport to a white van with a driver who transports us to Shanghai High School in the PuXi section of Shanghai, where we arrive at 3AM, Beijing time, the time used throughout China. The trip in the van lasts about two hours, and all I remember is highway, shadows from headlights, night, and green signs overhead in Chinese. We are awake on the drive; our bodies know it is afternoon in the U.S., and we don't manage to sleep until the Shanghai night passes.

Once we arrive on campus, Mr. Kai allows us to call our parents collect on an office phone, gives us supplies of bottled water, and shows us to the expatriate teachers' dorm and our temporary rooms, as our permanent rooms are being renovated. On the first floor of the dorm, the temporary rooms are dank, smelling of mossy mildew although the tile in the bathrooms is new and a bright, almost hot pink, which I find soothing. The rest of the room is spartan and painted white, with a twin bed, a grey metal closet, a desk with a locking drawer, a television, and bars on the lower part of the sliding windows with pale orange

curtains. In front of the expatriate teachers' dorm, there is a large pond; in back there are shade trees.

After sleeping off jetlag, the expatriate teachers attend a meeting where we get to introduce ourselves, finding that we are from the U.S., England, and Ireland. Some of the expatriate teachers have already been working at the school, or elsewhere in China, for a year. After the meeting ends, I get lost on the way back to our dorm, as there are many gardens and walkways, and I can't tell one building from the other, nor do the buildings have names in English. A teacher from Indiana walks past, and I remember her name because it is the same as mine, call it, and ask her for directions. She walks me back to our building and shows me where her room is in the dorm. Later that evening, she invites me to Tequila Mama's, a popular hang-out offering two-for-one margaritas in central Shanghai, after dinner with the President of SHSID in the French concession. By the time we reach the bar, I'm already drunk from the river of red wine at dinner, where I was expected to drink with my superiors. I have one or two margaritas at Tequila Mama's then begin to drink Evian. Things at the club seem to go smoothly, if drunkenly. In an effort to curb prostitution in the bar district, the police come to clear out all the bars at 2 am. Afterward, the SHSID teachers end up at Lawson's, a convenience store that sells sushi and beer, and some drink outside as there's no open-container law in China.

At the teacher's meeting, I felt happy to meet the other teachers, but that feeling dissipates quickly. In the U.S., at Marshall, I had friends from abroad, mainly art students

from Germany and Croatia, and in those relationships, nationality never seemed an issue. But as the semester begins at Shanghai High School International Division, I discover that ethnocentricity persists in this group of people – some from the U.S., some from Europe. Outside of Lawson's, a teacher from Liverpool some of us later dubbed as "xiao bai zhu" or "small white pig," hurls insults in English at a family of beggars who come to ask our group for change, smiling while calling the mother of the family a "whore," among other things, in a language she doesn't understand while some laugh and some look on in disbelief. When I am in a cab separate from the xiao bai zhu, I can finally cry over what I witnessed. I had hoped to meet more progressive and open-minded people than what I was always told I was, a hillbilly. My sense of my role in China doesn't consist of reinforcing the Imperialistic history of the Western hemisphere, although that seems to be the intention of some of my colleagues. They seem to be here to mark their territory, like rabid animals.

I am here to explore and, quite honestly, escape. I am excited over the idea of taking photographs and visiting ancient sites: the Jade Buddha pulled to Shanghai by monks from Putuo Shan, temples that survived the Cultural Revolution, and the markets of Yu Garden. Perhaps, my colleagues simply aren't thinking photographically. Or, perhaps, they are just assholes. My colleagues (not all, but enough to allow some generalizing) are a group of drunken maniacs, the Ah Q, who revel in the fact that many Chinese don't speak English.

In the neighborhood grocery stores and shops, the Ah Q walk around with smiles on their faces, getting in the faces of locals, hissing, "Lazy-eyed psychos!" as the locals smile

blankly and nod. It's disgusting. And it's not even original. I heard the line when I finally watched the first Austen Powers movie. In the dorm, an Ah Q, often drunk, repeatedly knocks on my door and tells me he, "Wants to hurt me sexually." He never seems to comprehend that it isn't that I don't get repetition, I simply loathe it. Nor am I into bestiality. After washing my laundry in the communal room that provides washers with cold water and lines to dry clothes on, I'm careful to take my sopping underwear back to my room to dry, fearful that a drunken Ah Q will streak through the dorm wearing a pair of my red lacey boy-shorts on his head if I leave them hanging in the laundry room.

Another Ah Q regularly knocks on the door, asks if I'm a witch because my hair is black, then asks if I'm a lesbian because I didn't try to hook up with any of the males when I arrived in what's now beginning to seem like a kennel, or zoo. The answer to both questions : No, I just have good taste. Usually, when the Ah Q come to the door I just stare at them until they leave. Once, a Jane's Addiction CD played in my room, an Ah Q came to the door, asked what I was listening to and seemed to like it, expecting me to be flattered by his approval. Um, yeah. I stopped playing that CD in the dorm. I know that the Chinese go to great lengths to avoid confrontation and to keep connections intact whether they're worth the effort or not; there is no one for me to tell, and nothing for me to do. When I return to the U.S. in 2002, I speak of some of the Ah Q as "European rednecks," a sentiment some of the traveled people in West Virginia understand once I return.

Apparently, I will learn, some of the European Ah Q/rednecks feel it is their duty to "take the piss" out of the Americans, or women in general as none were very polite to Chinese women either, which troubles me, because I always thought Europeans were cooler than Americans, more worldly and civilized, not ornery, gossipy drunks. I expected the people I would meet in Shanghai to be more like the European exchange student art friends I have at home, that I'd meet nice, interesting, real people.

But the cabin fever-type vehemence I attribute to dorm life and the dorm as a territory (something I never endured until China) doesn't stop with the European Ah Q; there is a middle-aged thing that looks like he crawled out of a toxic waste dump in New Jersey, his bleached hair turned green. I figure he's so nasty, behaves the way he does, because he must not be able to get any women in the U.S. The Toxic Swamp Thing preys on Chinese women half his age, and automatically harped in his obnoxious accent on the MU students when we arrived for being from West Virginia.

One morning, after staying with a friend who didn't live in the dorm, I returned to hear how Toxic Swamp Thing lured a bit of prey back to the expatriate dorm, unaware her father followed her there. The father told the guards what Toxic Swamp Thing intended to do with his daughter, was let in the dorm, went to Toxic Swamp Thing's room, and pulled his daughter out by her hair. Doubtless that girl will thank her father later. Of course, because of Toxic Swamp Thing, all visitors to the expatriate dorm had to begin signing in and out, and there was talk of not allowing Chinese visitors in the dorm at all.

Another American, a woman from Los Angeles, a little older than me, wears caked-on blue eyeshadow, has a very bad perm, and owns pants in prints for every animal in the jungle. For no apparent reason she decides to dislike me. Once she is nasty to me, I begin to think she looks like she just walked off of the set of The Jerry Springer Show, recruited from a trailer park, complete with bad perm. Perhaps it is the fact that I'm from West Virginia that bothers her, which doubly bothers me. I later find out she actually did grow up in a trailer park somewhere in the Eastern U.S. Even though I grew up in a house, some of my friends and classmates lived in trailers, and had better fashion sense, better manners, and better perms.

Maybe I shouldn't have made it known to people that I had a supply of cure-all antibiotic samples my mother's boss had given me. I know I am nerdy, a bit of a space-case, but no one's ever been downright nasty to me like the Ah Q, Toxic Swamp Thing and Pants Girl. My personality and openness have previously worked to my advantage, endeared me to people, but I suppose I'll have to switch over to cold bitch, at least in the dorm. I signed up to teach English, not work in a sideshow.

So the first month in the dorm proves to be difficult. I lock myself in my room and cry silently over my disappointment and loneliness, and the fact that I might as well have been kidnapped by Jack Daniels' Drunken Circus. I try to write letters, but I don't want anyone at home to know how miserable I am as this is the path I chose and I have to tough it

out, I'm under contract. I never send the letters. I am, still, for some reason invited along to dinners and drinking with the maniacs in my dorm, perhaps because they find me amusing, like target practice. I am impatient with their indecision about where we will go for dinner, as they stand outside the dorm and blather, waiting for everyone else to stumble outside, drunk.

Before one outing, while waiting outside, a fairly nice European reports that he's trying to get one of the Ah Q to come out with us, even though the Ah Q is plastered, at 5 pm. The fairly nice European emerges from the dorm, stating he's given up. Suddenly, the Ah Q emerges from the dorm, barefoot, wearing a dinner jacket, bare-chested underneath, and a yellow necktie, which he somehow managed to tie. Some of the Europeans take him back up to his room, but they never come back down. We go inside to check on them. On the second floor, where most expatriate teachers' rooms are, I see the Ah Q running, unsteadily lunging, headfirst toward his handlers, then tackling them. I go back down the stairs and report. Somehow, at some point, we make it to dinner at a restaurant around the corner.

During dinners, I busy myself eating, listening, drinking. The expatriate teachers, most in their early twenties, seem obsessed with talking about sex, which annoys me. I like sex, but I like having sex more than talking about it. And since I just came out of another failed relationship before leaving for China, I don't want to talk to any of them about my personal life because I don't trust them, nor do I want to tell them that I was a buck-wild,

talk-show-guest-type teenager during high school because I'm trying to get away from that, had thought my degree cinched my departure from that. Plus, the fact that the last failed relationship was with a Persian guy living in West Virginia, I'm sure, will cause them to believe I'm making things up, open another wound for them to pour salt (or "piss and vinegar" as we say in Appalachia) in.

I just shrug when they – the crowds change sometimes – ask me questions, drink my beer, and pick at whatever is on the plate with my bamboo chopsticks. These people are convinced they're interesting, but they bore me. However, Stuart decides he's not bored and tags along with them for a while, as they're usually too drunk to go anywhere far away, and he really doesn't like leaving the campus.

Heather, the psychology major from MU, who accused me of breaking off into a clique after I told her another teacher helped me find the building because I was lost the first day (I've officially decided all psychology majors are deeply troubled people), befriends the girl with the pants. The idea that this is, perhaps, a pissing contest never occurs to me, and by the time it does, I'm used to hanging out by myself, and the stumbling tumblers that are all acts in Jim Beam's Drunken Circus have been fired. After a month, I decide that I'll have to discover China and Shanghai alone; I can go pubbing and listen to people talk rubbish in my hometown. I didn't travel to Shanghai in search of enlightenment or becoming a Buddhist, imagining myself meditating in Zen gardens making OM signs with my hands, but I certainly didn't expect this.

Shanghai, People's Republic of China, October 2000

I do find sanctuary from the dorm in October on Monday and Wednesday evenings, in a beginner's Chinese language class across town, an hour away by train. The only other person in the class is Trevor, a thirty-something business lawyer from Perth, Australia, where his family migrated from the Indonesian part of Borneo when he was a kid. He's friendly and sane, and a little timid, but sweetly so. He tells me he began practicing law at twenty-four, which confuses me, before he explains to me that he practices contract law, different from law in the U.S. Finally, a friend, and the type of person I expect to meet in Shanghai. He asks where I'm from and when I tell him West Virginia, he immediately knows "Country Roads" and seems delighted to meet someone from the state the song is about, something that never happened to me before I arrived in China. I develop a crush on him and wonder if he's single.

After classes, I return to the dorm beaming, prompting the animals in the circus to ask me where I've been – they obviously smell something different about me. I smile, narrow my eyes and reply, "Wouldn't you like to know?" then walk away. The expatriate dorm clique, real or no, is no longer my problem. I've finally escaped from the dorm into Shanghai. It dawns on me that the Ah Q are cowards are hiding from China or from something else. But I have my own identity issues to work out without being bothered by theirs.

With the security of a friend in Shanghai, and the fact that the Chinese teachers in my

office – Annie and Fu Bing – take me under their wing, I don't mind being alone in the dorm anymore. Aside from the Chinese language classes, I learn that the Shanghai Botanical Gardens are literally right around the corner from us: I can walk five blocks, past bootleg DVD and knitting shops, apothecaries and cosmetics shops, shops full of chicken coops, hot pot restaurants, and tailors to a place I've only read about in storybooks: a place with a small lake full of pink and white lotus flowers on lily pads and a beautifully constructed wooden coop of doves that you can buy kernels to feed. But I quickly learn that, unlike in fairytales and storybooks, the doves fly right for your hand or head all at once and you must run away, tossing the kernels you've paid for in the air, if you'd like to leave unscathed, and that the doves do poop. I laugh at this; I don't care – I'm out of the dorm. Maybe I'm finding enlightenment in Chinese gardens after all. I'm by myself, meditating in a way, but of course, sometimes ghosts, pasts, and the Ah Q interrupt my serenity.

I don't know if it's the stress from my living arrangement in the dorm, but while walking to my office located in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade building during the first month, a disturbing image enters my mind, recurs, and will not abate. There's a pond with a fish sculpture in the middle of it in front of that building. When I walk past that pond, I see myself floating there. My skin is grey and I am lifeless, drowned. The vision subsides after a few months, and I never tell anyone about it. The next year, in an article in an English language newspaper, I learn the expatriate dorm was used as a concentration camp for Americans, Australians, and Europeans when the Japanese invaded in the 1930s. An

Australian woman held there as a child visited the dorm as an adult and gave an interview. I wonder if I felt something unseen. Later, in 2007, I reveal the unsettling images I had to Kenton, and he recounts hearing a story that a student's backpack was found near that pond and the student was never seen again. I dismiss his story as urban legend, but I'm glad that the vision subsided after a few months, once I began making friends in Shanghai.

During the first semester, other annoyances include an entire week during which most of the expat guys, Ah Q or not, find a neighborhood shop that sells BB guns, and take to running around the dorm firing the guns at one another. Add to that the fact that I am teaching seventh graders from all over the world, a curse and a blessing, considering it's the absolute worst age for dealing with kids en masse if you don't have any training, although most days I can't tell the difference between my students and the juvenalia of my expat co-workers.

In the first days of the first year in the classroom, students pelt me with smart-aleck questions no travel book prepares me for: "Ms. Kelly (most expat teachers go by a prefix and our first names), why aren't you married?" "Ms. Kelly, why don't you have any children?" "Ms. Kelly, why do you wear so much make-up?" These questions arise from my native speaker class consisting of kids from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, France, Italy, and even the U.S., all fluent in English, although I face similar inquisitions from expat teachers. Honestly, I don't even wear eyeshadow, especially not caked-on blue eyeshadow. My other seventh grade class consists of ESL students from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, and

Japan, all at different levels in English. Considering the fact that some can survive native speaker class and some hardly know any English, at first I haven't clue how to teach that class, but I start giving them vocabulary words to include in stories they will write, then read aloud. One class won't talk, the other class won't listen.

Along the way I learn to be terse with that age group, not to give in to their moods and prodding. I would learn the same with the Ah Q. I remember myself at that age though, seventh grade – good at school, bad everywhere else. I explore Shanghai as a distraction from my frustrations on campus, but I hang on for two years.

Old Liu and Iris

On campus, I'm not the only person the Ah Q cause long-term grief. Lao Liu, who had worked and lived as a doorman in the expatriate dorm along with his wife, is sent back to his home province by October because it's not believed that Old Liu is agile enough to guard the foreign teachers, or rather, guard the rest of the campus from us, the expats, the hairy alabaster-skinned, with eyes various shades of glowing green and blue, and large teeth, the white devil, laowai, Ah Q.

I remember watching Lao Liu net-fish for crawdads out of the pond in front of our dorm. He was old enough to have lived through the most of the Cultural Revolution. I think working as our doorman was supposed to be an easy later life and I wondered where he went, what he was going to do for food. I read that Pearl S. Buck's childhood gardener was also named Lao Liu, that he once took the blame after she broke a rake to save her from her parents' punishment. But she was a child then, the Ah Q were not.

The Ah Q primarily responsible for the dismissal of Lao Liu are finally fired before spring semester, though I always prayed for it to be sooner. I swore I would never let anyone know how much I cried when alone in my room the first few weeks.

One Ah Q was fired for drunkenly pissing on a school grounds' guard who interrupted him pissing on the lawn behind the guard box; another Ah Q for doing something a little less inappropriate (but not by much); and the last Ah Q nearly two years later for lying and telling the new guards that he had poisoned himself and was going to end

it all, causing the entire school administration to break down his door when he didn't answer, only to discover later he was out pubbing.

When I move office to the high school building during the second year at SHSID, there is one Ah Q left. We share the office with a man from Boston and a man from Atlanta, a female Chinese administrative assistant who speaks no English, and a female Chinese calculus teacher fluent in English, whose English name is Iris. In the office, under the gaze of the Ah Q, I watch Iris retreat inside herself, as I did, while he prods and antagonizes. On some days, she looks as though she might cry or that she imagines if she concentrates hard enough, she might become invisible to him. One evening, Iris and I are alone in the office grading papers, and I ask if she likes the way the Ah Q speaks to her.

She smiles and dismissively replies, "Oh, you know, Westerners are very independent."

I look her in the eyes and explain, "No, Iris. They're not. You don't have to put up with him speaking to you like that." I finish my work and head for my dorm room.

The next time I'm in the office with Iris and the Ah Q, it's a typical morning and we prepare for class along with the other expat teachers. The evening before, the Ah Q spotted Iris walking along campus with a man.

"Iris, was the man you were walking with last night your boyfriend?" he asks.

Suspecting, like I do, that the question is a set-up, Iris does not reply. The Ah Q

takes her silence as incomprehension.

"I say, do you think he's handsome, Iris?" he asks while looking down at some papers.

Nancy narrows her eyes, looks directly at him and grins, "More handsome than you?"

The Ah Q looks up from the papers, dumbfounded and silent. Iris has never questioned him before. The other expatriate teachers in the office stop what they're doing, trying to pretend like they're not listening.

"There are many men more handsome than you," Iris finishes, smiles, then goes back to her lesson plans. It is the Ah Q's birthday. The expat teachers know this, but Iris does not. The Ah Q's jaw drops, and the other expatriate teachers try to contain their laughter and surprise. Although the man from Atlanta lives in the dorm room across from the Ah Q's and is friendly with him, and the man from Boston is friendly with everyone, both knew the Ah Q had this coming; it was just a matter of time.

When I am alone again in the office with Iris, I tell her it's the Ah Q's birthday, that I'm very proud of her for what she did, and that the other foreign teachers in the office were proud too.

This is the first time I hear her laugh and see her relaxed. "Kelly, after we talked, I watched the foreign teachers. The guys can't stand to be alone. They walk around like boyfriend and girlfriend!"

No one in the office dares mess with Iris again.

An American in another Country, 2001

Shanghai and Beijing, People's Republic of China, Spring 2001

A few weeks before his birthday in April, my ex-boyfriend, D., emails me and explains he is having a difficult time in West Virginia. I tell him it sounds like he needs a break and that he can come to Beijing with me for my spring break vacation if he wants to, maybe we can walk up the Great Wall of China for his birthday. Before the email in spring, the last correspondence D. and I shared was around Halloween in 2000, after he attended a mutual friend's costume party in Huntington, dressed up as a monk.

When I invite D. to Beijing, I have no intention of getting back together with him; I've never liked relationships that feel like Ferris wheels, round-and-round, stopped in mid-air, waiting, stranded, wondering when my feet will touch the ground. But I care for D. I wanted to love him before he said he wasn't my boyfriend after we fell in bed together after a Henry Rollins concert in fall of 1999, even though he kept calling and hanging around. And I find him interesting.

D. always complained of how alone he felt in Huntington when we were "together," even though all the friends we shared really were fond of him. I figure that leaving the U.S. for a few weeks might break him out of his rut, give him something to look forward to. And I'm just as lonely after a semester of the Ah Q, hoping that D.'s visit will bring a little bit of home to me. D. asks me if I mean it, and I reply, "Of course. Come visit me." He buys a

plane ticket to Beijing and sends me his flight schedule.

Before flying out of Shanghai, I make reservations for a private room at a hostel in Beijing, knowing there's no way to get an affordable room or bed as a walk-in in that city. When I arrive in front of the hostel, the cabbie who drove me from the airport charges me 50 quai more than The Rough Guide says the ride should cost. I unload my luggage from the trunk of the car while debating over the fare with the driver in Mandarin until I realize that D. is standing behind me, smoking a cigarette, has been waiting for me to arrive outside the hostel. I can't believe he's really there. I drop my luggage, squeal D.'s name, and leap up to hug him as he's an entire foot taller than me, nuzzling in the familiar scent of cinnamon and cucumber. D. doesn't understand why I'm arguing with the taxi driver, and I surmise he thinks I'm trying to pull something over on the cabbie rather than the other way around. I surrender, pay the driver the 200 quai even though my book says fare should only be 150 quai, and D. and I check in.

The room at the hostel is adequate, but not equipped with a private bathroom like I thought I booked when I called. I read this sometimes happens. D. is more disappointed with the room than I am and decides we will find another place to stay, asking to look at my Rough Guide. He decides on a mid-range hotel – Qianmen, named after the shopping district – that the guide book warns is a tourist trap, featuring a version of Beijing opera modified for Western tourists in its very own theater. D. says he will pay the 600 quai a night for the four days we stay there. When we return to Shanghai for three weeks, he will

pay nothing, stay in my room. Things even out. We never watch the hotel's kitschy performances.

After a good night's rest in separate beds, we eat at the breakfast buffet, then head toward the Temple of Heaven and Tianamen Square, equipped with our cameras. As we walk through the center of the city, navigating through Chinese crowds, a few people stop to ask us where we are from. In this nation, among the Chinese, neither of us fear the reaction our answers might evoke, both of us used to lying about where we're from in the U.S., D. choosing Italy, another country, and Texas for me, another state. In China, we are from Tehran, Iran, and Huntington, West Virginia; however, the reactions we receive from the Chinese still surprise us. With my black hair, star-fire green-blue eyes, porcelain skin, and refusal to wear shirts with name brands across the front or tennis shoes, most Chinese think I look British or German. In China, in his usual attire – a Quicksilver ball-cap, carefully trimmed mustache and goatee, khaki cargo pants, Hawaiian-print button-up shirts, and Airwalk shoes – most Chinese assume D. is from the U.S. While out and about in Beijing, D. smiles and tells me the city reminds him of his native home, Tehran, where he lived until he was thirteen. He is more at ease in Beijing than I have ever seen him.

When we emerge from the crowds and reach Tianamen Square, D. spots a guard and asks if I think the guard will let him take a photograph. I haven't a clue, but tell him I highly doubt it, and remind him that we're in *Tianamen Square post-1989*, where an ominous image of Chairman Mao stares down at us all. D. heads toward the guard anyway, and I'm

apprehensive, hanging back. There are many things I embrace in China, but authority figures such as on-duty police and military officers, at home and abroad, make me wobbly. After a few minutes, D. returns to report that when he pointed to his camera, the guard smiled, but shook his head "No." In Iran, he explains, guards didn't mind, and actually liked posing for photographs in uniform. The observation is interesting, but I'm overcome by the urge to walk somewhere else as quickly as possible.

Around 5pm, we find a night market where small-scale but authentic Beijing opera is performed. I find a stand selling squid on a stick, a favorite treat, despite being food-poisoned by a squid dish during the first weeks at SHSID. But D. is skeptical of my snack, and finds a vendor who sells jiaozi, dumplings. The night market is much like an everyday fair or festival, and we deposit ourselves at a long table where many other people sit to watch the show. We find an artist who paints our Chinese names in calligraphy on rice paper. I have already been christened Bai Kai Li in a crash course in Chinese in the U.S., while D.'s height earns him the name "Shan," Chinese for "mountain." Later in the evening, we stop to buy some wine, and return to the hotel, where we talk about the day and what we've been doing since the last time we saw each other. We are restless and sentimental, and we move close to each other on the same bed as we drink. We smile at each other, we touch, and kiss. We wake up, tangled, the next morning. I stroke the sides and the nape of his neck, bury myself in his scent, and tell him I missed him.

Happy to once again be entangled with each other, we make plans to walk up the

Great Wall of China the day after D.'s birthday. After I shower, I walk back into the bedroom, towel-drying my hair, and D., out of nowhere, asks me, "Kelly, what do you think about marriage?" *What a weird question. Where did that come from?* I stop drying my hair, and study him. Our relationship and conversations had always been highly philosophical, and D. knew about troubled relationships I had before, ours included, though I'm not sure he knew I felt that way, although I thought it was obvious. I answer his question.

"I think marriage is a disaster waiting to happen," I shrug, walking back to the bathroom to brush my teeth. *What a weird question*, I think again, as I brush with, then nearly choke on the winter-fresh toothpaste in my mouth, wondering if D. was asking me a different question. I see my eyes widen in the mirror. *No. No way. We haven't spoken for months. No way.* I peak my head out of the bathroom to see that D. is not smoking, but sucking, on a cigarette, eyes wide like he's just touched a frayed electrical cable. My chest tightens, and I duck back into the bathroom before he can notice me, busying myself with make-up, unsure of what I should do, secure in my hiding place for the moment.

By the time I'm done in the bathroom, D. acts like everything is fine, and I decide to do the same. We leave the hotel and locate a packed city bus headed to Simitai, the section of the Great Wall that has not been restored for tourists, the ruins. D. is extremely uncomfortable on the bus, which costs 1 quai, and is not only crowded but smells worse than any bus I've been on in China. Halfway to the Great Wall, after D. nearly gags from

the odor, we see taxi-vans for hire on the road, and D. decides that's the way he wants to get to the Great Wall. The taxi-van costs 150 quai, but we have it to ourselves, sitting in the back, staring out the windows while the green hills the guard towers of the Great Wall sit atop rise and fall in and out of view, under a the blue sky.

When we arrive outside of the gate to Simitai, before we buy our 20 quai tickets, we stare in awe, at the gate. *The gate to the Great Wall of China.* At a threshold such as this, most would imagine something eloquently spoken before entering; but D. says nothing, just stares, mouth agape and smiling, and I start to squeak, bouncing up and down, waving my arms in rhythm as I speak, alternately smiling at D. then the Wall, "It's the Great Wall of China! It's the Great Wall of China! We're going to walk up the Great Wall of China!" D. chuckles.

Finally in the gate, once we've bought our tickets and regained our composure, we come upon a farmer with Mongolian ponies for hire that he will lead to the second guard tower of Simitai for 50 quai each. Not realizing those beasts are comfortable walking near the edge of the Wall, where the drop is at least eighty stories, we leap at the chance to ride up the Great Wall of China on the backs of the ponies, imagining ourselves travelers from a forgotten time. D. smiles as we mount, looks ahead, and tells me he often rode horses as a child in Iran.

Once we have reached the second tower of Simitai, and the handler takes the ponies back to the gate, we're met by two women who explain they are out-of-work Mongolian

farmers, now working as guides. D. thinks guides are a good idea for our walk, and we begin to follow the women, who are dressed in slacks, jackets, turtlenecks, and chunky heels, up the Great Wall. The women do their best to help us up, locking arms with us. Some parts of the Wall ascend like hills, but some have old steps to climb. When I'm comfortable with the rhythm of the climb, understand how to anchor my feet on the stones so I don't trip, I get ahead of everyone in the party, used to hurrying and scurrying, after living in Shanghai for several months. D. catches up, and we cover nine towers, total, a two and a half hour walk, including exploration and photography. Beyond the ninth tower, the Great Wall gets much steeper, and we decide Mongolian pony rides and nine towers are enough. The guides also help us on our descent, which takes at least another hour and a half.

When we are back where we started, just inside the gate, the women begin to conjure decorative chopsticks and coffee table photograph books of the Great Wall of China, for sale from inside their jackets, though D. and I can't figure out where they found room to hide the items. We buy the photograph book, feeling the women should be compensated for guiding us, and return to our taxi-van, triumphant and sore.

Before packing at the hotel after our climb, we eat Peking duck at a restaurant in central Beijing before walking to Jingshan Park, which overlooks the Forbidden City. We look out at Beijing as dusk turns to night, sitting on a bench from which we can see the entirety of the Forbidden City and some hills in the distance. There, D. tells me news of his

remaining family in Iran, explaining that he's missing everything. His family members are growing up, being born, and passing away in Tehran – and he's missing it, only hearing news by telephone. When we first got together, I was reading a book on palmistry, thought it a fun game to play with hands. D.'s lifeline is divided, which means he was moved away, separated, from his first home. I left home by choice. He was thirteen when he moved to Europe, then the U.S. I hug him. I know I don't really know what it's like.

The next morning, after breakfast and check out, D. and I take a taxi to the airport and I don't argue about the fare once we arrive, don't even look at the guide book. D. points out the hour-long flight back to Shanghai is the first time we will fly together, and we hold hands on the way. Once in Shanghai, I return to work, rested, happy D. is with me. I leave him to entertain himself early in the days, my Rough Guide on the desk. For posterity, we deposit his things in an empty room SHSID sometimes rents out in the dorm. The administration thinks I'm a good girl, and although they're not naïve, I know they'll appreciate the fact that I know how to keep them out of my private life. It gives the school a good impression of D. as well.

At the dorm, I introduce D. to Zara, the first real friend I made at SHSID, who arrived the second semester after I returned from Putuo Shan, Xiamen, and Gulangyu, vacationing by myself during Chinese New Year. Zara, who's from London, majored in music at Oxford, brought her violin to Shanghai, and often plays in her room, bringing

harmony to the building. We became friends after her first teacher's orientation, talking on the way back to the dorm. I'm relieved by the company, and it's eerie, but I think someone in the universe must be looking out for me: I later found out Zara shares a birthday with my mother, November 20th; her Singapore-Chinese mother is a nurse like my grandmother was; and her father shares a birthday with my grandmother, February 24th. Every so often, I think synchronicity is on my side. Before heading for Beijing to meet D., during the spring semester, Zara and I traveled on brief train trips to Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Nanjing on weekends with friends she knew at other schools in China, placed by the same recruiter, and it was nice to finally have friendly girls to hang out with.

After class one afternoon, I walk back to the dorm to find Zara and D. sitting on the lawn together outside, talking and pulling at grass. I'm impressed when I hear D. found his way to Yu Garden, although I find he's littered my floor with trinkets, despite his own empty room. I trust Zara with D., but I'm apprehensive that the Ah Q might get to him, start a rumor, turn him against me, rob me of anything that makes me feel secure.

Miraculously, the Ah Q – those who remain – are actually nice to me when D.'s around, asking where he's from, commenting that he seems cool, curious why I didn't mention him before. *Seriously?* I'm glad for the temporary respite from their negative attention, but I doubt I'll ever trust them; they've already proved themselves as utter asses.

When I tell D. what the first semester among the Ah Q was like, he surmises that his six feet four inches might be the motivation behind their newfound respect for me,

something about the way guys interact with one another he must have learned in a psychology class I didn't take. He begins to instruct me in the art of the comeback, how to always be prepared with an answer so twisted it will silence a room full of people who sit stunned, wondering if I'm insulting them or not. D. stays by my side.

Mr. Kai, who thinks I'm a good teacher and knows I'm better behaved than most of the other expatriates hired the first year, meets D., and is impressed, calling D. "a gentleman," which I think translates to "not-Ah Q" in Mandarin. He asks me if D. would like a job teaching at the school next year.

In Shanghai, even more so than Beijing, and a thousand times more than in Huntington, I feel close to D. He is my confidante and protector, at least in the dorm, a place I normally dread although I have no choice but to live there. On the streets of Shanghai, however, I lead, teaching D. phrases he needs to know to barter, how to recognize when an item is too expensive, and which foods not to eat. He stays with me in Shanghai for two weeks. A few days before he's scheduled to leave for the U.S., while we sit on my bed made in orange linens, I bite my lip, feel my eyes dance, smile, and ask D. to stay, tell him he has a job at the school if he wants it. *Please stay.* I think we can smooth things out. If he was serious in Beijing, maybe we could take the time to really get to know each other in Shanghai.

D. looks at me, unsmiling, like he's trying to explain something to a child, "Kelly, you know I can't stay."

The Ferris wheel stops mid-air, and I'm stuck, again, passengers in other cars I can't see swinging back and forth, making my car swing as well, although I want to stay still. Being trapped there, in mid-air, makes me want to cry, scream for the others to stop. *No, I don't know that. Why? Why can't you stay? You're here now. Why do I let you do this to me? I want off this ride! Why are you here? Why did you ask what you asked in Beijing...? Why is this happening to me?*

"Oh," I say. "Ok...." I look away for a moment at the wall in my room. "Wanna get something to eat?"

"Sure," he smiles.

The day of D.'s flight back to the U.S., we ride together in a cab, an hour or so drive, to PuDong Airport across the Huangpu River, and I begin to cry. I don't want D. to leave; we've had such a good time the three weeks he's been in China. I'm confused again; I don't understand why he does the things he does at all. He sees my eyes brim, and my nose starts to run. He reaches his hand out, brushes my hair back from my forehead, and says, "None of that." I rest my face against D.'s arm, and I know he can feel my tears through his shirt sleeve, but I manage not to sob. *Why are you leaving me? Wouldn't you be happier here? Please stay.* I stay with him at the airport until his departure. He smiles at me before kissing me goodbye, then walks through the gate.

Once he returns to the U.S., communication between D. and me becomes sporadic, an improvement. He mails me copies of photographs he took in Beijing and Shanghai, and tells me how the U.S. airports treated him upon his various arrivals, certain he was singled out for more rigid security measures, worried that some of his film, held too long under X-ray, might have been destroyed after the inspectors dumped it out of his bag to be put through the machines. *Why did you leave? Wouldn't you be happier here? Please stay.*

My sense of well-being at the expatriate dorm at SHSID has improved greatly since D. stayed with me there, but I still keep to myself, except for outings with Zara at museums, and Trevor at coffee shops. I'll sometimes go to group dinners at hot pot restaurants and sushi bars, but my tongue is now so sharp sometimes my own gums bleed. I've become master of the comeback after D.'s stay, in addition to another strategy – a curious apathy disguised as kindness.

At one point, I ride by metro to Nanjing Lu with an Ah Q, to direct him to the window where train tickets are sold. During performances such as this, I feel vindicated; this Ah Q found it entertaining to knock on my door whenever he felt like it to purposely make me feel small. My turn. Now I get to look inside his world: I've taken an overnight boat to one of the four Holy Buddhist mountains; flown to Xiamen, and its connecting "Island of Pianos," Gulangyu, where the Chinese Naval base is stationed across from Taiwan; found the charter to Sheshan on Easter Sunday, witnessing a pilgrimage of Chinese Catholics to the cathedral on that mountain; and often take a charter bus to Jiading, a

breathable, under-populated town outside of Shanghai by myself; and this joker doesn't even know where to buy a train ticket! An added bonus for my endeavor – if he purchases a train ticket, he won't be around the dorm to get on anyone's nerves for a few days.

Although I'm feeling better, stronger, I still continue to busy myself with school work, and I find I become pathologically secretive on campus, even keeping from Zara the fact that I have a summer job teaching at a month-long English-language summer camp in Dushanzi, Xinjiang Province. For whatever reason, because she is European and knows the game; because she graduated from Oxford; because she's not from West Virginia; because she plays sweet music for all the dorm to hear, Zara is not a target of the Ah Q, and is liked throughout the dorm, despite being my friend. But I am not possessive of our friendship. If D. will not stay, then Xinjiang will be what I have to myself to keep my heart warm during the first semester of the second year. I am fearful that semester will be a repeat of my first semester in the dorm at SHSID, but I sign a contract for another year anyway. I know which teachers will not return for a second year, and this means only one Ah Q will be left at SHSID.

Xinjiang, People's Republic of China, July 2001

I've answered a listing in City Weekend – an English language newspaper distributed in Shanghai – for a job as an English language summer camp instructor in Xinjiang Province, passing the interview. The job is sponsored by an oil company in the small town of Dushanzi. The recruiter and interviewer, who goes by the English name Joyce, is a Han Chinese born and raised in Xinjiang Province, now living in Shanghai. Along with her family, Mr. Sun, her husband, and Janet, her young daughter, she will host the four English teachers chosen to teach at the Dushanzi Oil Company-sponsored camp in Xinjiang. We meet at PuDong Airport, then fly out of Shanghai to Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, where we stay the night before driving to Dushanzi the next day.

The English teachers on the trip consist of a man from Minnesota who is fluent in Chinese, a married couple of public school educators from Perth, Australia, who've been teaching in Ningbo, and me. Before settling at the hotel, Joyce, the recruiter, shows us around Urumqi, happy to be in her home province. We walk through bazaars selling lamb, naan bread, crafts, and adidas silk, music with a distinctly Middle Eastern flavor playing throughout. Xinjiang is the predominantly Muslim province located above Tibet in China, surrounded by the majestic Tian Shan or Heaven Mountains, home to the indigenous Uigur people. I notice a few vendors gasp then smile as I step inside their shops, and I smile back, as foreigners are few and far between in this province, unlike Shanghai.

After resting, the next day, we are driven past fields of sunflowers and roadside

honey stands to Dushanzi, where we will live and teach for the next month. Dushanzi is not a town I can locate on any map in my Rough Guide, and reminds me of the quiet of Highlawn and surrounding neighborhoods in Huntington while I was growing up. The hotel we stay at is atop a hill, each given private rooms with bathrooms, a small refrigerator, and a TV. I also find the hotel has a hot water curfew after I've tried to dye my hair late one night, somehow managing to wash the gelatinous substance out under cold water, which takes twice as long, and should be refreshing due to the desert heat in Xinjiang Province, but isn't. The family of recruiters, Joyce, Mr. Sun, and their daughter, Janet, also stay at the hotel, in the room beside mine.

When we arrive with Joyce for orientation at Dushanzi No. 1 Middle School, a short distance from the hotel, we find many buildings, a fountain that is never turned on, and a basketball court. Each building is one story, and made out of concrete, what the Chinese call "tofu schools," much different from the intricately planned campus in Shanghai. I'm assigned to teach the middle school classes, and given a teaching assistant from high school who will translate if need be. The textbooks we will use, colorful books of fairy tales from Oxford Press, seem like better teaching tomes than the black and white books issued from Pearson Longman at SHSID, more engaging in their design. The school has a computer lab, and loans me a bicycle that I ride to work and around Dushanzi.

I'm apprehensive that I'm teaching middle school students again, after my experience with seventh graders at SHSID. I found out that the key at SHSID was maintaining control

in the classroom, and I'm a little too serious at the beginning of the classes, even assigning homework. Joyce pulls me aside one day to let me know that the camp is supposed to be fun. I'm relieved. Trying to maintain control at SHSID, inside the dorm and the classroom, exhausts me. I begin to arrange the students' desks at the camp in a circle, deciding that we will act out the fairy tales in the textbooks, assigning parts. Sometimes our performances are held inside the classroom, and sometimes we migrate to the campus outside. Here, I can be an entertainer, the persona of myself I like best, the skin I feel most comfortable in.

Both groups of my two-week classes are star students. Most are Han Chinese, but I do have one student of inner Mongolian origin, during the first two-week session. The kids usually wear t-shirts, jeans shorts and tennis shoes, which I credit to the local U2 franchise, and are up-to-date in the latest Western trends in music and sports – a few listen to Ricky Martin's "Livin' La Vida Loca" on walkmans at lunch, some choose their English names for favorite NBA heroes. They're impressed to hear that I'm a fan of Faye Wong, the Taiwanese pop singer. Here, in the remote and wide-open spaces of Xinjiang Province, I learn how to let go and have fun with a classroom of kids, a trait I take back to SHSID in the fall. The kids in Dushanzi are not used to foreigners, happy to have an English language teacher from another country there, and they teach me much about what children need in a classroom.

On the ride down from the hotel to the school in the mornings, I often have to roll through a swarm of gnats that seem to have found their home in the air on that hill. On one

solitary ride, blinded by gnats flapping their wings in my eyes, I even wiped out on the bicycle loaned by the school, but managed not to scrape my bare knees. I can't help cursing, swatting at the insects, yelling, "Shit!" out of utter frustration, sure that no one who happens to pass by will recognize the word. But during break one day at the camp, while my students are outside, my assistant, a young man of seventeen or eighteen who calls me by my first name, like all the students do, asks me if I know the English word "shit." Blushing, afraid of being a bad role model and that this conversation will go somewhere I don't want it to, I choose my answer carefully and reply, "*Maybe*," pause, then ask, "How do *you* know that word?"

"*Shit* is the Uigur word for *pork*," he informs me.

My face cools. "*Really?* In the Xinjiang restaurant down the street from the Shanghainese school I teach at," I tell him, "I learned that *kush* is the word for *goodbye*, and that *ruckamet* is the word for *thank you*, but that one, the word for pork, I never learned." Phew! I learned those words at the restaurant by thinking that *ruckamet* sounds like *luck-a-met* in pronunciation, an occasion for giving thanks. I think I remembered *kush* by equating it with *kiss*, something you do when you say goodbye. I laugh to myself thinking I'm the crazy laowai in Dushanzi, riding a bike down a hill, swatting at her head, yelling, "Pork! Pork!" but I don't tell my assistant this.

Another day in class, my assistant also asks if I know about the American food that is cooked by putting it in a cranking machine (which sounds to me like the device used to

scramble bingo numbers by his description), which is hit on the side with a spoon. I'm dumbfounded until he says, "What you eat when you watch a movie."

"Popcorn!?"

"That's right."

I don't know why I don't ask where to find popcorn in Dushanzi because I'm very curious to see it prepared the way he describes it the next time I go into the center of town.

After the eight hour days, I ride the bike around Dushanzi, often stopping at restaurants for laghman, a spicy, thick noodle dish I often eat at the Xinjiang restaurant down the street from SHSID. Xinjiang is famous for its fruit. Often, I head for Dushanzi's fruit market, to stock my small refrigerator with honeydew or hami gua, watermelon, and fuzzy green peaches I never learn the name of, tarter and juicier than the peaches in the U.S.

There are karaoke bars in the town, but, curiously, I stop drinking alcohol the entire time I'm in Xinjiang, except for a few glasses of pomegranate and rose wine at a dinner at Joyce's friend's home (while Mr. Sun and the director of the school joke that it's impressive to see a woman handle her drink). At the end of the street of shops and karaoke bars in Dushanzi, I often ride pass a road up a grassy hill. I'm curious about what is there, but I don't make the trip up until the second week in the town. Once I do make the ride, I stumble on to a Uigur and Han cemetery.

Aside from funerals, I've always found cemeteries a peaceful place to meditate during days, walking past grave stones, wondering what the lives of people resting there were like,

if they died contented, noting their names and how long they lived. The Uigur graves there are covered by structures resembling Middle Eastern architecture in miniature, branches growing from the earth inside. And the Han Chinese graves tall mounds, at the foundations rectangular slabs with Mandarin inscriptions filled with sand for placing incense at the base. I look on at the library of untold stories under Heaven Mountain in reverence then head back to the hotel, passing a sign that states, "No Foreigners Allowed" on my way down the hill. Guilt and embarrassment burn in my face. The sign is probably a precaution against Ah Q. I hope I haven't desecrated anything.

During the time spent in Dushanzi, the English teachers and recruiters are interviewed, at the school, by the local paper and television station about teaching in Xinjiang and other provinces in China, and even invited to the home of a Uigur family for dinner one evening. The man from Minnesota knows the son of the family somehow, I understand, but I think he met the family through Joyce. When we arrive at the family's apartment, it looks much like a modest apartment in the U.S., several rooms and walls painted white. Enough pastries to fill a bakery line one table, and I think that's the dinner, and fill up. We're only able to converse through the son of the family, who knows his native Uigur dialect, English, and Chinese, and I prefer to listen and smile, unsure of what to talk about or ask. When the wife of the family brings out enough lamb to feed a small army, I realize my faux pas, wish I would have asked rather than assumed, and hope they

don't think I'm a glutton.

Although my hunger is quelled by the time the main course arrives at the table, I know that an invitation to a dinner at a Uigur household is a big deal, and I don't want to do anything to offend these generous people who have opened their home to me. I still don't eat any meat other than seafood, and I don't want to conspicuously pick at the naan pitas the lamb is served in. I choose a dish that looks like a slab of tofu, but no sauces like in Shanghai. The dish tastes a little different from tofu, but I figure it is prepared differently in Xinjiang. At the Xinjiang restaurant in Shanghai, I never ordered tofu, always laghman or vegetables, so I'm not sure if the people of Xinjiang really like tofu, and if this dish is a courtesy. When I'm halfway through the plate, the wife of the Australian couple asks what I'm eating.

"I think it's tofu," I answer.

"No," my Chinese-speaking, fellow American informs me. "It's sheep's lung."

Surprised, I answer too quickly, thinking he must be joking with me, "No, it's not."

The son of the house stops eating for a moment and looks at me, puzzled, "Yes. It is sheep's lung."

I meet the son's eyes and feel terrible, hoping I haven't insulted his mother's cooking somehow. After smearing my lips together, in order to have a moment to think, I offer, "And it is delicious..." then finish the whole plate. Considering the fact that only half the plate was left before I knew what I was eating, there must have been some truth in what I

said.

After two weeks, the first section of the summer camp ends and the teachers are rewarded with a trip to Heaven Lake, then Turpan. We drive to the pristine lake by van and camp at a yurt or *mongobao*, a kind of canvas hut, rented out by Kazakhs, the first night. We arrive at night so the foreign teachers are a bit mystified, but Joyce makes arrangements to secure the yurts once we're there, and we sleep on the mats inside, no idea what we'll wake up to in the morning. When the sun rises, we look around to find that the yurt is decorated in traditional dancing dresses displayed on the wall, and delicately embroidered fabrics, many red and blue designs of flowers on white fabric. The top of the yurt has a small opening to the cloudless, blue sky above.

We emerge from the yurt to a grassy pasture and the sapphire-pristine waters of Heaven Lake, and stretch. Yaks graze near the campsite, comprised of at least twenty or so yurts. The Kazakh woman who rented the yurt to us brings us a traditional tea made from dried snow-lily and sheep's milk, and we look around to see that she cooks over a slab of concrete on the ground, where fires are built for heating.

Nearby, we attend an annual festival, lined with vendors' and artisans' tents and stands, beautiful fabrics, books and crafts sold there. Smoke rises from lamb roasts all over, naan and fruit abundant. The contests at the festival consist of a girl-chasing contest, where two men on horses attempt to catch up to a girl rider; and a sheep-carrying contest, a race

to see who can get the farthest distance while lugging a sheep. Although Joyce moved to the big, bustling city of Shanghai, I can see in her eyes and expression, while she talks about the places we travel to in Xinjiang, how much she loves her home province and all of its people. I wish I could find a reason to have the same affinity for my home.

After the festival ends, we pack the van up again and head to Turpan, the grape capital of China. I try not to sleep on the ride, not wanting to miss anything we pass on the road, but I can't help it; I nap a little before we get there. But I'm awake when we arrive at the Flaming Mountains, where Uigur girls adorned in traditional costumes are dancing at the foot of the mountains, making up for the fact that the sky is overcast and we never get to see how the sun's rays flicker like fire on the face of the mountains. I begin to wonder if there are any Xinjiang schools hiring year-round, then remember the brutal winters of the province described in my good book, and realize I'm already under contract for another year in Shanghai.

In Turpan, where we stay for two days, we visit the Bezeklik Caves, surrounded by sand dunes where we see a caravan traveling by camel; the ancient ruins of the city of Jiaohe, where Uigur children and girls dressed in adidas silk, patterned like the Flaming Mountains, sell bells and pose for pictures near their donkey carts; the Karez underground irrigation channels; and the views from the Emin Minaret. We travel to Grape Valley, where vines and bunches of big green grapes hang from the trellises we walk under. Grape Valley definitely lives up to its name; on the way there, we pass many square brick buildings with

alternating openings in the walls, used for drying grapes, and donkey carts full of cartons of the fruit. At a market, dried grapes and raisins are set up like bins in a candy store, and I purchase as many varieties of dried grapes as I think I can sneak back in my suitcase for my visit home before the next semester at SHSID begins.

The evening we return to Dushanzi is the evening the winner of the Olympic bid for the location of the 2008 games will be announced. Beijing, a contender, already showed signs of Olympic fever while I was there with D.; we walked past one hotel front that had a neon sign with the Olympics emblem and “2008” in place behind the fountain on its grounds. Around 10 pm, the sun sets in Xinjiang, late because the entire country of China operates on Beijing time. I know what channel the English-language news comes on, and flip to it before 11pm, happy to find an English-language movie with Chinese subtitles. The movie is called Paperback Hero, an Australian movie starring Hugh Jackman, which I assume is one of his first. In the movie, Jackman's character writes romance novels about and under the pseudonym of the female truck driver he's in love with, played by an actress very famous in Australia, I'm told. It's lighthearted, at least the segment I watch, but not formulaic, putting me in a relaxed mood before the news.

When the news finally comes on, the top story of the night is Beijing's victory over Paris, Osaka, Toronto and Istanbul as the Host City for the 2008 Olympic Bid. The television broadcasts images from Beijing, millions of people in the streets hugging one

another and crying, overjoyed. I realize the Olympics are a big deal, but wow! Then again, I didn't anticipate my own giddy reaction at the Great Wall of China. I decide to knock on Joyce's door to see if she's heard the news and congratulate her. She opens the door, beaming, and Mr. Sun and Janet are still awake watching the broadcast. I'm invited in, and we all watch together, imagining the Olympic torch in the grand city in the years to come, a light never shown in China before.

Huntington, West Virginia, August 2001

After my contract ends in Xinjiang, I fly to Shanghai, where I stay for two days, then back home for two weeks. I am happy to see my family. I'm also happy to retrieve several pairs of shoes from their house because I can only find men's shoes to fit my size 9 feet in China. I stock up on the brands of make-up and hair-dye I like at Kroger's, as well as tampons, virtually impossible to locate in China, while trying to learn to stand in lines again. I visit with friends, bringing gifts; Stacy is now married and has a daughter, will have two once I return home for good. I take care of things like renewing my driver's license. I seek out D., who doesn't know I planned a return visit.

I decide to stop in at D.'s parents' shop, where he sometimes works, to see if he's there. The person working the store tells me that he's due there in half an hour or so to grab a few things. I decide I'll stick around and wait for him. When he pulls into the parking lot, I walk out to greet him. D. doesn't notice me at first, just barrels toward the store until I say, "Hey stranger." He does a double-take as my name escapes his lips. I jump up to hug him.

"What are you doing here, Kelly?"

"I thought I'd stop for a visit."

After D. grabs his things, we decide to drive to Ritter Park. While we talk there, under a shade tree, D. and I decide we'll get out of Huntington and go somewhere together for a while. After hearing "Country Roads" for the umpteenth time in Shanghai, I decided

to search West Virginia online, had just read about Sandstone Falls near Hinton, West Virginia. I mention this to D., though he's skeptical of visiting anywhere in the state, still unhappy to be in West Virginia. But we pack our bags, leave maps for our parents, and take off.

On the road to Sandstone Falls, I take notice of the landscape surrounding the highway for the very first time. It's gorgeous, the bases of grassy mountainsides older than the Himalayas dotted by flowering pink dogwood trees. I can't believe I never saw my home like this before, and I say this aloud over the Cake CD playing in the car before I can stop myself.

Neither D. nor I had been whitewater rafting before, and that's what we decide we'll do the first day in Hinton before we find someplace to stay the night. After we drive for an hour or so from Huntington, we stop off at the Glen Ferris Inn, a lucky guess about a building that looked like an interesting place from the road, for lunch. The inn is a restored historical house, more than a hundred and fifty years old, complete with a deck overlooking the Kanawha River. Before our food is brought to us at the tables on the deck, D. looks around at the view, delighted and surprised, commenting, "Kelly, this is nice." I don't mention to him I knew nothing about the inn's existence before we drove past it, even though I'm a native West Virginian, but I feel myself glow a little on the inside, smiling at D. from across the table.

When we've finished our meal, we're back in the car again, headed toward the

historical town of Hinton, West Virginia, near Sandstone Falls and Bluestone Dam, where we rent a duckie (inflatable kayak) to paddle on the milder waters of the Upper New River. The clerk at the rental station estimates how long our journey should take and describes to us where we need to stop and pull the duckie ashore, a van waiting there to return us to the station.

In the duckie, I sit in front. Neither D. nor I have ever paddled a boat before. Life jackets tied around us, we float for a while, D. finding leaf helicopters in the water and throwing them at the back of my head, grinning as he waits for me to turn around. I throw a few back over my shoulder. When we begin to paddle, we turn our oars in opposite directions, getting nowhere. I know I'm paddling us forward, and I try to explain this, but D. just laughs at me. "Stop paddling. Watch me!" I finally turn around, throwing helicopters back at him. I'm frustrated that he's not listening to me when I know I'm right. He dips his oars back in the water, and we move in the right direction.

The guide at the station probably didn't anticipate that we'd make a few stops on our journey so that D. could smoke and we could both take pictures on the disposable camera I bought that I thought was waterproof, making it so we don't drag our duckie from the river to land until dusk. The section of the New River on which we travel should not have any rapids, but we do encounter one that water-logs the kayak, and my camera, whose packaging I now notice does not say "waterproof." Once we notice the sun lowering in the sky, turning it pink, we look around to locate where we are supposed to meet the van driver

from the rental station. Nothing around looks like what the guide described, but we see a trailer park, and figure there must be a road beyond it, pulling our duckie onto the land.

When the driver, a college-age kid, finally finds us, he tells us we rode about twenty feet too far, and he's glad he saw us walking back on the road because it's getting dark and some people can get “redneck about their property.” I scowl at him, figure he's playing Appalachian fatalist for the out-of-towners like I did before leaving for China. I'm right; he asks where we're from and when we tell him Huntington, he replies that we don't seem like we're from West Virginia. D. doesn't bother to explain beyond where he now lives, and the driver doesn't ask.

Once we return to the station, we ask about lodging and are directed to a cheap, quaint motel located on the river where we can see people fishing below our window the next day. As soon as we settle in the room, I immediately fall asleep, disappointing D. I'm exhausted after rowing, and still a little jetlagged, especially because it's daytime in the U.S when it's nighttime in China.

The second day of the trip is spent at Sandstone Falls and Bluestone Dam. Again, I'm delighted at the beauty I never realized was West Virginia, although I know I'll tell no one about it when I return to China; no one will listen to me. After looking at the photographs of Beijing and Shanghai D. sent me, I know he's much better at photography, and I ask him to show me how I can take better pictures. He points out a section of a valley below from where we walk on Bluestone Dam, explains why it would make a good snapshot, and I aim

my camera and click before we make our way to the tranquil streaming waters of Sandstone Falls, the last sight we visit before returning to Huntington. We spend one more night together before my family drives me back to Yeager Airport to return to Shanghai. I cry again before I leave.

Shanghai, People's Republic of China, September, 2001

Determined not to become the dorm's very own dart board this year, I have perfected my stance and gaze so that anyone who encounters me will fear spontaneous combustion if they get too close. Zara, who will leave for London at the end of this semester, is the exception. However, I did agree to email a few new expatriate teachers ready to work at SHSID – Karina, native of Brazil, and graduate of Rowan in New Jersey; and Karmen, born in the U.S. to Chinese parents, graduate of Harvard – about what to expect. I call D. and my parents when I arrive safely on campus, and D. explains that he now wants to work at SHSID. *Why did you leave?* All the positions are already filled. *Why do you do this to me?*

Until teacher orientation, I keep to myself, but I notice that this new group of teachers is friendlier, although I can't bring myself to trust them. The group is also more diverse than the first year, teachers from Boston, Georgia, Maine, Sao Paulo, Caracas, Italy. Karina arrives at my door one day as she's gone door-to-door introducing herself, and she hugs me when she realizes I'm the person she's been emailing back and forth. After orientation we walk back to the dorm together with Ivan, Karina's friend from Caracas, graduate of Michigan University. Although Karina speaks Portuguese and Ivan speaks Spanish, the languages are close enough that they understand each other when not speaking English.

Karina, Ivan and I become fast friends as I show them the ins-and-outs of the campus

and Shanghai. Group dinners follow, one Ah Q left to fray my nerves, and I still spend some time with Zara, but she's now taken up with a pianist. If D. were here, if he would have stayed when I asked him, I'd do the same thing.

After a little more than a week or so, I suggest that Karina and Ivan go to see The Bund, the Shanghai riverfront, with me. We stop at a McDonald's on Nanjing Lu, the street that leads right to the boardwalk. On The Bund, we look around at the vendors and artisans, and buy Tsingtao beers to drink from a cart while talking, laughing, and looking across at PuDong's skyline, consisting of the Pearl TV Tower and the Jing Mao Hotel, one of the tallest buildings in the world. Ivan had already lived in Shanghai for a semester a few years back and tells us about it. I tell them a little about my travels while in China, good places to go, things to do and see. I'm glad I won't be so alone this semester.

After a few more beers, we decide it's time to take a cab back to SHSID so we can sleep before work the next day. I tell the address of the school to the driver of the cab we've hailed – “Shanghai Zhong Xue, Shang Zhong Lu, si bai hao” – assuring Karina and Ivan the ride from The Bund to The Xue is 40 quai, 35 quai if we're lucky. But we talk all the way through the ride, and I don't pay attention to the meter.

Upon arrival at The Xue, the meter displays a fare of 70 quai, which I know is wrong, and I begin to argue with the cab driver, incredulous over the fact that he took the scenic route even though I told him where we were going in Mandarin, rather than pointing at a guidebook or business card like a tourist. I'd taken the taxi ride a hundred times before,

and I knew he was trying to rip us off.

"Tai gui le!" *Too expensive!* I begin as we exit the cab.

"Sheng ma?" *What?* he asks.

"Wo gai ni si-shi quai. Qi-shi bu shi. Wo ji dao, wo shi lao shi," *I'll give you 40 quai.*

Seventy is wrong. I know, I teach here.

This goes on for fifteen minutes, mainly because I think the cabbie finds the argument interesting, while Karina and Ivan watch. A new, retired expatriate teacher from the Bronx emerges from the gates of the school and stops there. She looks at us, stone faced, telling us, "The Twin Towers were just leveled. America's going to war." *What?*

When she hears this, Karina puts her hands to the sides of her head and begins to sob, explaining she has friends who work in the Towers. The cab driver is still standing there, unable to understand what we've just been told or why Karina is crying. Ivan hands the cabbie 100 quai and motions for him to go on, confusing him as he stands with the bill in his hand. I don't know enough Mandarin to explain, and Ivan tries to gesture for him to take the hundred quai and go again. "Wo de gai ni," I say. The cabbie is still confused, so we just leave him behind and walk through the gate.

On our way back to the dorm, we pass three of the new expatriate teachers, all graduates of Furman, who explain they're walking to the Korean restaurant down the street, having been told they could see the news broadcast of the attacks there. Karina is insistent about calling New Jersey to check on everyone, and I decide that it might be a good idea for

me to call the U.S. as well, although none of my family is near New York. Zara asks if we're all right when she sees us in the dorm, and follows me to my room.

After speaking to my family, I call D., fearful there might be a racial backlash in Huntington. But when I reach him, he sounds all right, in his voice, except for what he says: "Kelly, when I turned on the television this morning, I thought I was having a flashback from Tehran." *Why did you leave? Wouldn't you be happier here? Please stay.*

Once Karina calms down, after finding out that everyone she knows is ok, we make our way to the Korean restaurant, open all night, to watch the news. The images are unbelievable, and Karina, a film student, notes that the scene looks like something out of a movie. Ivan, Karina and I finally go back to the dorm and get some rest around 3 am and wake to find school goes on and so do we, which distresses the teacher from The Bronx, who begins to cry in our office at one point. But between classes, all the Chinese teachers offer their sympathies, and ask about the events, telling us they fear the Jing Mao Hotel will be next.

Chinese National Day rolls around on October 1st, our first vacation of the year, and by that time, knowing our families and friends are safe, we're all feeling much better, losing ourselves in the sheer numbers of cheery Chinese gathered at People's Square and Nanjing Lu, outfitted in inflatable wings and crowns for the holiday. The Chinese are especially exuberant this National Day, after Beijing's win to host the 2008 Olympics, and the mood is infectious. Karina, Ivan and I buy inflatable hats, crowns and wings from vendors, and Zara

buys a tiara with flashing lights. We surrender ourselves to the happiness of that celebration.

Shanghai, People's Republic of China, 2001-2002

The second year at SHSID, I'm assigned to teach eleventh grade IB Literature, in addition to the now eighth grade class, after I advised twelfth grade students on their extended essay projects the previous year, improving scores for the school. Often, I take the students to sit outside on the grass when it's warm and dry enough outside, where we discuss the reading assignments or read them aloud, and in some cases, goof off, although I manage to keep order. I'm glad for the promotion.

This second year at SHSID is shaping up to be much less exciting than the first year, thank God. I sometimes take short weekend trips by bus or train with Karina or Zara, and Karina, Ivan and I barhop through the many clubs and restaurants in Shanghai. When the next Chinese New Year arrives, Karina, Ivan and I decide to go to Thailand together, where Karina's been once before. Contact between D. and me remains sporadic, but I email to ask if he wants to go with us to Thailand; three weeks before the next semester begins would be enough notice for a position at SHSID if he still wants it, and I hope he does. But he doesn't reply to my message, and I don't hear from him while I'm in Thailand either.

Karina, Ivan and I leave for Thailand at the end of January, 2002, and find that we don't want to leave that country after watching sunsets that would make rainbows envious, dining on coconut curried squid, pad thai, and banana pancakes, and swimming in the Andaman Sea off of a baby powder fine white sandy beach every day, where U.S.\$100 means 4000 baht, Thai dollars. Karina and I even discuss moving to Thailand at one point.

When the three of us return to Shanghai, I still haven't heard from D., and won't until months later, near the end of the second semester, when he writes that he's having girl troubles, or that he had girl trouble. *I can't do this. You can't pop in and out of my life whenever you feel like it. It's not fair to me. You're either with me or you're not, and you can't expect me to be happy to hear from you when you ignored my last emails, months ago.* "How dramatic," I reply to D. "Write a screenplay." *Why do you do this to me?*

By this time, I've traveled around with Karina and Ivan, the SHSID administration has approached me about staying on for a third year, and the students this year seem ok with me, have actually let me conduct class. The Ah Q no longer bothers me after I told him he was a pseudo-intellectual fake at one dinner. I've walked up The Great Wall of China, Simitai, again, but this time with Karina, grateful that I got to make a new memory there with a friend, although there were no Mongolian ponies or guides on my second trip, just laowai tourists, one woman from the U.S., who criticized me for wearing mary janes instead of tennis shoes. *What am I supposed to do about it now, and who are you anyway?* "You have to look good for the pictures," I replied. Karina laughed. This time, we visited the Summer Palace, telling stories we imagine about empresses and star-crossed lovers while sitting beside Kunming Lake on the grounds.

I've had a few brief relationships this semester (in terms of weeks, actually) with men in Shanghai for one reason or another, that I found I had to extricate myself from. The most recent being an extremely handsome, but xenophobic engineer from Germany, eight

years my senior, working on the magnetic train in PuDong. We met one night in Buddha Bar, but later, he was rude to my friends and a Chinese waitress, and he made me cry on my birthday. We lasted two weeks before I figured him out, how shallow he was. But he wouldn't stop calling after I told him it was over, gave him my birthday presents back, and took a cab from his apartment in PuDong back to The Xue. Finally, after I explained to him I was from the backwoods in the U.S., he left me alone. I could tell when he looked at me as an American, he thought of New York City.

Huntington, West Virginia, 2002

Once I arrive at home after my trips to Yunnan Province and Xi'an, where I saw the recently unearthed Terracotta Soldiers, I feel guilty over how I responded to D. I see how the U.S. has changed, something I didn't expect, not after nearly a year. It's no longer a happy, carefree place; its resiliency is gone, millions of people, lost and frightened. China was so full of optimism during the last year I was there. I didn't understand when D. emailed, I couldn't. *Why did you leave me? I would have protected you. Wouldn't you have been happier in China? Please stay.* I take presents to his doorstep, books and a ginger and sesame candy he told me he liked, like a treat he used to eat in Tehran as a child.

D. and I talk on the phone when I return to Huntington, for several months actually, leading up to the war in Iraq, but we're never romantic again, and he often refuses to step outside of his house.

In the U.S., I can't believe how much television is promoting coverage of terrorists, plots, xenophobia, and general paranoia to the point it seems nothing happy will ever be shown on television again. I suspect sensationalism. I know D.'s always followed the news, now sees the influx of television newscasts about and images of Middle Eastern terrorists. On the telephone one day he tells me, "Kelly, I haven't shaved for a couple of days. When I looked in the mirror today, I looked like a terrorist."

Oh, God! *This is not really happening, this conversation isn't real. You have to fight it.*
Why did you leave me? Wouldn't you have been happier in China? I would have protected you. Please

stay.

I take a deep breath. "No, you don't, D. You look like someone who hasn't shaved."

"I need to go," he says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Ok."

The dial tone pulses in my ear, echoing. *Please stay.* I have never felt so alone in my life.

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