

Under Skin

Emma Heidorn

Honors Senior Thesis

May 15, 2013

Abstract:

There is a line between fact and parable, and the greatest writers of travel have unabashedly and purposefully ignored it in search of the subtle poetry just beneath the surface. This collection of non-fiction essays is about travel. More completely, it is about finding solace in the unknown, and offers that quintessential search through the eyes of a female. It explores the cadence amidst words, the melody of heading elsewhere and the subtle nuances of venturing into strange places. It grapples with what it means to feel nostalgia for things never experienced and to desire that untamed something that lies just below the surface. It offers a woman's perspective on the art of wandering into the unknown.

Under Skin: A Critical Essay of Gender and the Travel Narrative

Bruce Chatwin holds the old animal skin—“thick and leathery, with strands of coarse, reddish hair”—of what his grandmother tells him is a brontosaurus, and he becomes indelibly fascinated with the art of travel. He proceeds to write a brilliant narrative about his journey on foot through the wild and ancestral landscape of Patagonia.

John McPhee jets between Louisiana, Iceland and Los Angeles to tell the universal tale of man’s hubris against the almighty wrath of nature. Hunter S. Thompson joins rough riding Hell’s Angels to find the true story behind of the most infamous motorcycle gang. Tom Wolfe absorbs himself in the cultural fringe of Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters, follows the group of wanderers and free spirits through trips and tokens of disillusionment, and authors one of the most enlightening accounts of American youth culture.

These writers have built a legacy of exploration, one that challenges the modern world’s perception of everything *unknown*, everything that lies just beneath the surface. It is not pure journalism, as there is no objectivity. Rather, they immerse themselves in place in order to witness, understand and, perhaps, become a part of something previously unheard of. They take risks, challenge the world’s preconceptions, and write about the untraveled.

Yet, amid this brilliant legacy—one I have always held in high esteem—I cannot help but wonder, *where are the women?* Why are the greatest stories of adventure—both in antiquity and within the last hundred years—penned by men?

I read Roald Dahl as a child and instantly believed the world was magical. I took Holden Caulfield’s angsty sorrow as my own, just as I was attempting to read Homer’s epic adventure for the *n*th time in English class. I soaked myself in *On the Road* and believed my twenties

would be spent vagabonding westward. Yet, while I have relished in these stories, I have only recently begun to realize that my literary education—which I believe has taught me far more than anything else—may have been missing a very critical voice. The voice of the other half.

Perhaps I am not looking in the right places. Perhaps there are women writing about their travel and adventures. But, if they're out there, the mainstream has little access to them. Of the 405 authors reviewed in *The New York Review of Books* in 2012, 89 were women. The number was even lower in 2011, and lower again in 2010. In 2012, *Harper's Magazine* published 17 female bylines compared to 76 male bylines, *New Republic* published 52 female bylines compared to 230 male bylines, *The Atlantic* published 47 female bylines compared to 176 male bylines and *The New Yorker* published 160 female bylines compared to 445 male bylines. And, these numbers simply indicate *general publication*. They do not even scratch the surface on the gender gap in travel writing.

The inequity in today's literary publications combines dangerously with the stigma of a woman traveling and seeking adventure on her own. It is not common, and it is rarely encouraged. I grapple with this feeling in some of the following essays. In *Sahara Blues*, they stare as I sip my Fanta Limon in the cafes of Fez. In *St. Andrews*, they look surprised when I am traveling alone in Tangier. Yet, I purposely do not make this feeling of isolation the center of the following essays. I refuse to accept notion that a woman's experience traveling must be defined by that isolation. Rather, for me, it is defined by defying the stigma and the inequity. It is an affirmation of the desire we too feel to explore and savor in the unknown, despite the barriers. Chatwin remarked of the brontosaurus' skin, "never in my life have I wanted anything as I wanted that piece of skin." Never in *my* life have I too wanted to wander Patagonia and ride with Merry Pranksters and explore the political indecencies underneath environmental catastrophe.

A female writer and traveler's perspective is one to be relished. It is one that takes into account the bullets fired in war, as well as the mothers of the deceased. It takes into account the mathematics of climate change, as well as the destruction of beauty in the mountain. It relies on the poetry, as well as the facts. The subtle cadences, as well as the hard truths. This is not to say that a man's perspective cannot provide the same kind of depth. From what Chatwin, McPhee, Thompson and Kesey have contributed to the literary canon, he certainly can. But, there is a daunting task ahead of keeping the culture of written publications alive. And, designating one issue a month, a special "Women's Issue", is not the proper answer. A woman's perspective—her voice, her experiences, her critiques—provides a vital lens to understanding the world. And, it is important to give that lens fair access.

The following essays attempts to provide a female perspective on the art of travel. It takes a look at a variety of places—from the choppy shores of Canada to the dizzying heat of Morocco to a calm river in the Missouri Ozarks. Throughout the essays, I grow to seek adventure, I learn to take a step back and find poetry in the vastness of the great unknown. I grasp, defiantly and as a woman, for things just below the surface.

Zen, Baby

I rest my cheek on the chilled car window and every breath creates a pool of dust. We are floating amid the darkness and the silhouette of the forest trembles against a brilliant fleet of stars.

I stare into the rear view mirror at the exhaustion under my father's eyes. He blinks with effort, sips his gas station coffee like it's a dangerous habit, taps his fingers on the steering wheel in perfect rhythm with the cymbals and horns that play quietly from the dashboard speakers. Soft enough so as not to wake the fragile sleep of my beautiful mother in the passenger seat, but loud enough that his eyes will remain open. Focused.

The clock reads way past bedtime. Zoe and Sam sit hunched over in front of me, their faces smushed into fluffy off-white pillows with the distinct stench of a week-long camping excursion. Though, they don't seem to mind, fast asleep amidst the hum of the mini-van engine and my dad's jazz fingers.

I force myself to occasionally pull my gaze away from the hypnotizing rhythm and flow of the tree line towering over us to ensure my dad's fingers are still tapping and his eyes are still open, blinking.

"Hey, Buddha babe," he says gently. I'm *Zen baby*, he says. Always quiet. Always serene. Always in contemplation.

He startles me out of my trance.

"Go to sleep." He's on to me.

"I'm not tired," I tell him, trying with all my might to hold up my eyelids.

"Gosh, I can't even see you back there with all that crap," he says. I am engulfed in sleeping bags, camping equipment, dirtied stuffed animals and way too many blankets for a family of five. "Are you okay?"

I don't answer and, instead, ask him if he's tired.

"No," he responds, with a yawn.

I can play this scene in my head over and over again. It's a classic in the book of Heidorn family trips. The one that has grown thick and covered in Arizona desert dust and thick Atlantic mud and enough bug repellent to kill a swarm of bees. I come from a long line of risk-takers and wanderers. The marriage of quick-wit Irish on my mother's side and thick-skinned German of my father's, we are nomads who bear the façade of domesticity. But, when the first chance presents itself to break free, we take it without blinking.

My grandmother, who gave my mother her brilliant red hair, lived among horses in New Mexico, worked in Alaska during the war, and marched for others' civil rights against sour-faced Irish cops on the south side of Chicago. My father's aunt Ellen left home for the great northwest at eighteen to be the first woman in her family to attend college, against my grandfather's will. A long lost cousin was the explorer David Livingstone, one of the first westerners to make a transcontinental trip across Africa. My aunt Priscilla and uncle Mark were missionaries in New Guinea for a few decades. My father wandered and lived out of a backpack when he was young and so did my mother, and so did her father and my cousins and so on.

I've been taught time and again that the remedy to any ill is the pursuit of wanderlust.

I am ten and am about to die a slow and painful death in the wretched heat of the Arizona desert. We're in the middle of a four-week road trip from Chicago to California and back—just dad and the three kids. He insisted we stop at the Desert Museum in Tucson, which offers very little but sand, cacti, brown bushes and a searing sunburn.

“Where are the animals?” asks Sam. He is seven but dresses like he's seventy—flowered Hawaiian shirt, socks and sandals, a bright red visor and a fanny pack, in which he carries his boy scout manual, a Swiss army knife and three tubes of chapstick.

“Right over there,” says my dad, eagerly. He points to a small brown hump which, even at the closest look, still looks like a rock.

“I think it's dead,” says my sister, Zoe. She's approaching adolescence, and has the snarky attitude and heavy pit stains to prove it.

I drag my feet behind the rest, sipping a Capri Sun and moaning about when it'll be over. “I think I'm dying,” I say, over and over again.

“Cut it out,” snaps my dad. “This is building character.”

We're on Prince Edward Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia, and large grey clouds are gathering steam. We've set up camp on a small stretch of cleared forest on top of a cliff looking east across the Atlantic. There are just a few other tents pitched—an older couple, a family of French-speaking Quebecois, a pair of motorcyclists with tattoos.

My dad makes a pot of spaghetti over the fire, and Zoe, Sam and I choose to eat it on the cliff, wrapped in large fleece blankets, dangling our tiny legs over the edge. The sea splashes violently against the rocks a few yards below and we watch in earnest as the tops of whales

breach the surface of the choppy waters. The air smells like salt and fresh pine—a smell I don't often get to experience growing up in the thick concrete of the city—and I relish in it.

Grey clouds are gathering more steam and mist begins to drop on the tops of our knit hats. My father puts out the fire, my mother cleans up the dishes, the three of us kids grab more fleece and blankets from our mud-clad red mini-van, and we all retreat into the cozy comfort of our small green Coleman tent. My parents have had it for years and its flimsy walls have been weathered enough to warrant its retirement. But, my father insists on keeping it, out of a nostalgia that burdens everyone.

A torrential thunder storm begins to hurl its wrath on our small tent. We play Uno, eat Goldfish and Oreos, and barely pay attention to the noise overhead. The walls quiver in the wind. The poles shake with every large gust of rain. But, we are unphased. We've been through it all before. The roar of the thunder is a lullaby that sings us slowly into a deep sleep.

Early in the morning, before the sun has risen, our sleeping bags are soaked. The rain has stopped so we emerge from our damp cocoon and break down camp. We know the routine by heart. We head out towards the nearest town with the nearest laundromat. The morning sun emerges slowly above stormy clouds, the mist begins to settle on the tips of the brilliant green of everything around us, and I wrap myself tighter in a fleece blanket. It smells like a campfire.

“Shit” my dad screams. “God damn fish!”

We're floating down the Current river in the southern Missouri Ozarks on large black inner tubes. It's feeding time and the fish are biting the moles and freckles on my dad's large, broad back. Sam and I laugh hysterically every time another one takes a nibble and my dad jumps quickly, falling off his tube several times into the warm afternoon water.

It is my first time tubing, and I was expecting a bit more excitement. Raging waters, white foam in the face, screaming wildly as we race each other down the river. Instead, the water moves southbound slowly and calmly. There are just a few rapids, and none of them have white foam. So we float leisurely, tanning our shoulders and burning the tops of our ears in the deep Missouri sun.

“Mother fu—”

“Dad!” we both yell at him. We’re used to his foul mouth, but poke fun anyways.

“They ain’t gonna hurt ya!” we hear someone call towards us from the bank. We look and find two shirtless young men in cut-off shorts, one crouching by the side smoking a cigarette, the other washing his dreaded hair in the river.

“They only wanna spook ya,” says the one crouching.

My dad stands up to stop his tube, and we do the same. Ever the social butterfly, he strikes up conversation with the two young men, and Sam and I sit idly in the shallow riverbed and watch baby fish swim around our skinny burnt legs.

“Whaddaya to doin’ out here?” asks my dad, in his Chicago accent.

“A music festival ‘bout few miles westward,” says the one with the dreads in his thick Missouri accent.

“Salmon Fest, man!” says the other. They’re groupies for the Cajun bluegrass band Leftover Salmon. They’ve been traveling around the country for the entire summer, camping in the woods, washing their wild hair in riverbanks, striking up conversation with any stranger who will talk to them.

We decide to continue our journey and, as we float away from their bank down the river, I lay face down on top of the tube, rest my chin on the hot black rubber and watch as they grow smaller and smaller. I wave. They wave back, and then retreat back into their forest.

Rolling stones on a mission. Nomads on a salmon quest.

On a cool summer morning, my mother is tense. Her red hair is frazzled from a night of restless sleep and my sister and I are hugging her tightly in the driveway. I am about to turn 19, Zoe is a recent college grad, and we are embarking on a cross-country summer road trip from Chicago to Washington state, the destination a three-day music festival in the mountains of the great northwest. Two women on a mission.

My mother kisses our cheeks with enough tenderness to last the next two weeks. She lists everything we may have forgotten to pack. Toothbrush. Driver's licenses. Pepper spray. "For the bears," she says. "And your dad's ax?" We respond in unison repeatedly, "Yes, mother dearest." She smiles her beautiful fault line of a smile. My father kisses our foreheads like always and says, like always, "the world is your oyster." We smile at this corny signature line, and tears stream down his unshaven face.

We drive out of the city just as the sun touches the tips of skyscrapers, waking up the streets and their inhabitants with a Midwestern kind of warm affection. I look behind us at an eastern horizon of orange and purple. Dew still covers the windows and I wrap myself tight in the worn fleece blanket that still smells like a campfire. Out of habit, I rest my cheek on the chilled car window and watch as every breath creates a pool of dust.

To Be a Southern Poet

We're going seventy, headed south on 57 towards New Orleans through the deep green of southern Tennessee. Filled up in Nashville on Jack's BBQ, sweet iced tea and gas thirty cents cheaper than any found in iron-clad Chicago. Louis and the Nevilles sing us sweet soul songs from the dashboard, and Zoe and I belt the words we've known by heart since childhood. My mother bops her head back and forth, silently and with devotion.

Southbound, the early spring snow melts. Grass begins to glow. Trees grow leaves. The sky looks just a bit bluer. We count the billboards that read, "Is Jesus in You?" They come from a deep—typically American—paranoia. And yet, amidst the euphoric high of heading down towards the unknown, the question seems altogether prophetic.

Southbound, a feeling I know all too well. My family has a tendency to head to the land of deep fried foods and accents so thick they permeate when jobs get too tedious, the cold gets too gruesome, and mom and dad become in desperate need of a hurricane from Lafitte's on Bourbon St.

We make our way slowly, taking detours when needed along the way. We escape the drudging monotony of the interstate and wander instead along canopied highways of rolling hills and lush green. *Green*. A color I haven't truly seen in months. I stare out the window in perfect awe, and stick my nose out just enough to take a whiff of sweet vegetation. Like taking the first bite from the apple.

Finally, we make it to New Orleans.

We eat fried crawfish po'boys and grilled oysters with too much Tabasco. Drink daiquiris at three pm. Wander the streets without an agenda because we've seen most of it before. My mother makes fun of the tourists who wear Mardi Gras beads during lent. *Sacrilegious*, she says. We stare with disdain at the obese woman with two cameras in her hand yelling at her children to "stand still and smile, goddammit" as she takes their photo next to the straight-faced Filipino waiting tables at Café du Monde. We wonder how many family albums this guy's face has ended up in.

Zoe and I stay out on Frenchmen until four am. We dance our heels dry to wild fiddle-playing and drink the Red Stripes a middle-aged man across the bar keeps sending our way. The music is contagious. Intoxicating in itself. The brass blow with free and easy exultation, but just as methodically as a Sunday morning choir. The snares rap in perfect rhythm and, when the time is just right, jet off into wild exploit towards the cracked ceiling and beyond. The upright bass dances a lindy hop triple-step underneath it all. And, we dance with it. The singer wearing a bright red polka dot dress sings song after song of dangerous love and rolling stones. Over and over again, and none of it ever gets old.

Perfectly hung-over, I walk through the Lafayette cemetery in the morning. I meander through vine-covered above-ground tombs and over crumbling sidewalk, and pretend I am related by blood to the people in the graves. I imagine their lives—the way they said *Nawlinz* and ate po'boys everyday for lunch and smelled like vanilla and hot sauce. I imagine how they would kiss my cheeks with bright red lipstick and call me *sugar*. I imagine they had poetic demises, from far too much liquor and far too much jazz. I pretend I am a legacy, a truly rooted legacy. And I pray that they—the *they* I don't really know—have made it to heaven, despite their indulgences.

I pretend I have really lived like a Southern poet. Like I'm better off than all the "fake jazz" and giant-size beers on that side of Bourbon St and imagine myself instead to be a genuine member of the *true* riff raff of New Orleans—the violinist on the Quarter playing for rent, the waitress with a colorfully tattooed left arm who is secretly writing the next great American novel, the one-legged Vietnam vet who writes poetry on scrap pieces of paper at the same café on Royal everyday. He gave me his card once, when I was sixteen, and I've kept it in my wallet ever since. I pretend like I belong. And, I truly believe it.

We take a trip to the Ninth Ward. Just like every other time we've been in New Orleans since Katrina, I almost feel obligated to. My mother thinks we're being too nose-y. *This is too voyeuristic*, she says, as we turn off St. Claude and into the heart of it. But, I insist. Last time, there was more rubble and empty houses. Most has been cleared for either new construction or new grass.

"I think there are still wild dogs at nighttime," my mother tells us. We make a few circles around the desolate blocks. We occasionally comment on the bleakness of it all but, mostly, we don't talk. WWOZ is playing afternoon jazz on the radio, and my mother turns it down. It is not the sight of empty lots or roaming cats or broken-down pick ups that is silencing. Rather, it is the stark reality that there is no salvation here.

There is no magic and there are no sweet smells.

As we head out towards St. Claude again, we approach a group of young black men playing basketball in the street. They meander to either side of the street—like a sea being divided—and peer through our windows as we drive slowly by. It reminds me of that one time my Dad and I were sitting at a red light on the west side of Chicago. I stared out the window for too long at a group of kids waiting for the bus. They were black. I am white. And, as the light

turned green and we drove away, one of them threw a rock at our shiny blue Volvo. These young men do not throw a stone at the white strangers. They just stare. But, I'm afraid to stare back. So, I look straight ahead.

I celebrate and bathe in the sweet smell of all of it—the fresh crawfish and the brown liquor and the Spanish moss draped across damp green leaves. But when the sepia-tinted euphoria fades just slightly and the sequin mask is lifted, I'm not certain I truly know any of it. Nor am I certain that the sweet smell is at all *real*. I feel a deep nostalgia for things I have never experienced—for sipping whiskey under a southern sun, for tasting the sweat of a hard day's work, for knowing a kind of love that is dangerous and intoxicating. I may know the song of heading southbound by heart, but I will most likely never know if I've truly arrived. I have so deeply desired to become an authentic member. But, just like the young violinist and tattooed waitress who really are from elsewhere, I may have to settle for resident stranger.

To be a Southern poet is to revel in the most potent of sins and then to repent. At least, that is how the story in my head goes.

Lily

It is barely noon and southern Missouri heat is radiating. We drive too fast through thick green forest and thin strips of smoking black asphalt, blasting folk music because we think it flatters the scenery. Smooth harmonies sing to us—*If I had an orchard, I'd work till I'm raw. If I had an orchard, I'd work till I'm sore.*

"This song is perfect," says Lily, turning up the volume and pouring the last of the fruit snacks into her mouth. Besides a loaf of bread and a tub of peanut butter, it's our only food for the next two days. At least we have the beer, I think to myself.

Our wild, unwashed blonde hair flies every which way in the hot breeze. The sweat not absorbed by my oversized straw Havana hat drips down my face, and the car reeks of stale cigarettes and body odor. Southern Missouri heat at its very worst.

It is my first summer in Missouri, and I am developing habits. I work in the morning, sit and puff camel lights on the curb outside the same coffee shop every evening and, at night, when the heat wanes for just a moment, run wild with anyone who's around. We jump off of rope swings into shallow creeks, ride our bikes too fast and too drunk down steep hills, dance ourselves clean to the same four songs, in pools of tobacco and waves of artificial sensibilities.

Lily is visiting for the week to join in. We've known each other since middle school and have acted as each others compliments ever since. I am the rationale to her incongruity. She brings on the craze like no one I have met before.

As we pull into the tiny state park campground, I can't help but feel a sense of release. Finally, I think to myself, some time in nature. A break from everything. My summer routine is

taking its toll. The bags under my eyes have darkened, my golden skin is beginning to peel from the sun, and my voice is turning hoarse from the tobacco.

But, Lily is unphased.

"Put on your rage-face, Emma," she says, as we got out of the car and began to unpack.

We decide to set up camp before the mayhem begins.

"How does it work?" I ask.

"Like magic," says Louise.

"Ok." I place the tab on the tip of my tongue.

Her boldness has always astounded me. It compliments the bounce of her thick golden curls, the rhythmic jaunt of her step and the level to which her voice, and her voice alone, can rise and attract the attention of everyone around her. She is acutely aware of everything, from books to music to the latest high, yet seems to exist in a totally separate world. She can carry on a conversation about the surrealist qualities of the hippest new electronic DJ, without actually knowing what she is talking about. That is her charm.

"Swirl it around," she says confidently.

I follow her command and moisten the little white square under my tongue. It slowly disintegrates in my mouth until it is gone. Nothing happens. The whole thing seems silly. *Maybe it's just a piece of paper*, I think to myself.

Half an hour later, my suspicions are wiped away by a slow and steady onset of illumination. Trees melt. The cicada's cry softens. The river next to our wooded campground becomes a blanket of glitter. And, we jump in to become a part of it all.

As I float, my body hovers above the twinkling sun-lit surface. I can't hold onto the thoughts that race through my mind, so I give up and, instead, embrace the illusion. I swim from one side of the river to the other, covered in a sea of skittles. We call ourselves Amazon queens, shouting tribal cries and devising schemes to take over the river as our own. The kayaks and motorboats that float by are alien; the human beings in them mere exotic creatures of our fairytale. It all becomes a fairytale.

Later that night, we dance for hours around the fire. We roar loudly and laugh until our stomachs ache. The flames dance with us, adorning our silhouettes with shades of nostalgic orange.

"We are Amazon queens!" we shout into the permeating darkness, raising branches high in the air as if they are our royal staffs. The night does not faze us. We are invincible.

Tired, but still amidst the illumination, we lay in a small field next to our site and watch the moon bounce against stars. As the sun begins to rise behind the trees, we drift off to sleep.

The next morning, I wake up in our tent covered in leaves and grass. My mouth tastes like cigarette and peanut butter, and the left side of my face is smeared with mud. Lily isn't next to me. I step outside to face the mess. There are beer cans everywhere, the fire is still smoking, the radio is on and the sun is blinding. It's two p.m. and Lily is nowhere to be found.

I walk towards the river and find her floating face up, whistling and naked but for a pair of bright pink sunglasses.

"Lily!" I yell. My voice carries through the greatness of trees that have been rooted for centuries. Startled birds fly sun-bound. The leaves rustle only slightly. And, she can't hear me.

"Lily!" I scream louder. She lifts her slightly head, waves, and swims away.

She's still absorbed. But, my fairytale has faded.

Sahara Blues

I begin with the *alif*, a straight vertical line heading south, and then turn west to the *mim*, a small circle that loops all the way around, slowly, and I head westward once again. Then another *alif*. But, I send this one too far north. And it leans too far east.

“That’s okay,” says Mohamed, one of my instructors at the Institute. He speaks slowly and his voice is soothing. Every morning, I find him sitting in the school garden underneath the greatness of the olive trees, smoking a cigarette and drinking his bitter *kakhwa*. I wave, and he tilts his head forward slightly in a nod. He looks like a Moroccan James Dean—slicked-backed hair, a white short-sleeve button-down, neatly pressed dark pants, and black Raybans. Every day.

“Try again,” he says, smiling widely with tobacco-stained teeth. It’s a hot afternoon in Fez, and it’s not even the peak of summer yet. Sweat drips from my hand onto the textbook I’ve barely made a dent in, but I only grip the pencil harder. Birds chirp lovely songs outside of the window and—in any other class at home—I would turn my head to take a better listen. But, not here. Not now. I want to get this just right.

“Good,” says Mohamed. “That’s how you spell Emma.”

“No, that is not correct,” says my other professor, Abdel, the next day. Much shorter and much older than Mohamed, he wears small wire-rimmed glasses and worn dress pants that are two sizes too big. When he speaks, he shouts with perfect articulation and his eyes bulge intently out of his nearly-bald head. When he laughs—which is quite often—he shows off his crooked teeth, throws his head back with a jolt and howls.

“No, that is not at all correct,” he tells me, as he makes his way around the room checking everyone’s work. He stops at my desk, scratches his head and tells me I have a strange name that is difficult in Arabic. Like I do not belong.

“But, Mohamed told me--“

“Here,” he says, as he takes the pencil out of my hand. “Like this.”

Abdel and Mohamed stay patient—in their own ways. They do not rush us through the lessons or get frustrated when we cannot pronounce the word for United Nations. *Al-um-am al-mut-a-hid-a*. To me, we sound like a hopeless wreck. But, Mohamed smiles calmly, Abdel closes his eyes, and they say, “again.” And *again*, and *again*, and *again*.

“And again,” says our Berber guide, as he wraps the scarf around the top of my head one more time. It is my second weekend in Morocco, and we are on the northern edge of the Sahara, the sun beaming without relent. My shoes are filled with sand and my entire body is covered in escape, but for a tiny slit just above my large sunglasses that I’m sure will be bright red in the morning.

“*Jameela*, so pretty,” he says loudly. His name is Agmar, which translates to stallion in Berber, but he has a kind and quiet demeanor. He wears a beautiful, bright blue *kaftan* and laughs at everything I say. When I ask about the camels, he giggles sheepishly, as if I shouldn’t be interested. When I ask if the hot sand or the bright sun ever bother him, he laughs loudly, and I have a strange feeling he is poking fun of me.

The nearest town is ten miles away and, besides the lone hotel we’re staying at which seems like an oasis amid everything else, I can only see a sky so blue it softens the bright orange of sand heading hundreds of miles southbound. We wait in line to, one by one, climb on top of

the high backs of our camels. They sit still in long lines and there is one for each of us. Once we are comfortably on top, they stretch their long, bony legs and jolt upwards.

The camel's back is stone hard and we have a three-hour ride to our campsite. I'm placed at the front of my train, and spend the ride talking to Agmar. His English is not very good, so we stick to simple subjects. Like the desert and our families and our favorite things. When I tell him I love to listen to the blues, he stops the train suddenly and several camels back run into each other.

"You like blues?" he asks, wide-eyed and smiling.

"I love the blues," I say.

"I have blues band!" He reaches underneath his bright blue kaftan and hands me a business card. Agmar plays the electric bass in a band called Sahara Blues. They take their inspiration from the electric scene of old Chicago and the pining acoustics of the Mississippi delta. He rattles off his favorite artists—Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, Robert Johnson, B.B. King.

"The king make me cry," he says. He talks for the rest of the journey about his music. He flails his arms in excitement and speaks with the most enthusiasm about the blues I've ever seen. I cannot understand most of what he says, but I listen and relish in the bizarre and heartwarming fact that we share a similar love. Though we live thousands of miles away from one another and cannot speak the same language, we both cry when the king sings a sweet soul song.

"Sweet girl, you look so pretty," says a younger Moroccan man with spiky hair and a popped yellow collar shirt. I am walking home alone from the taxi stand, like every other day, and he steps closer as I walk by. I recognize this one, but I don't make eye contact. I simply stay quiet and look straight ahead, like every day. Like every other hundred times this has happened.

When I am not in class, protected by the safety of school and among familiar faces, I have to live like a Moroccan as a light-skinned, female American. I decide early on to defiantly ignore the looks and the comments, and instead live in a Morocco where Berbers sing the blues and women cover their hair with beautiful *hijabs* and men face east with closed eyes and murmured incantations I hope to someday truly understand. And, to this end, I begin to live in a comforting new rhythm. I wake around seven to the stifling morning heat of a summer morning in North Africa. I eat a modest breakfast of extra-sweet mint tea, bread and homemade jam with my host mother Attika, and greet the “security guards” outside the front door with a modest *salaam*. Peace. They do little but sit, smoke cigarettes and stare as I walk away.

At lunchtime, the women stare too. I sit stark naked with them and their children at the local bathhouse, and they stare and we laugh at my awkwardness as an equally naked woman scrubs the pale dead skin off of my arms. At the height of the day’s heat, I hide under the shade of café awnings with the men and sip bottle after bottle of Fanta Limon. They stare, and I stare back. I lay alone under the cool shade and greatness of olive trees and practice the loops and turns of the script over and over again. There is an inviting rhythm to the script. A trilling hush to a woman’s whisper on the street. A dissonant, yet beautiful, cadence to a group of children singing songs on the playground. A soulful swing to every yelling merchant in the medina.

The sound is of chaos—cars honking, people yelling, wheels screeching. I have to catch a bright red taxi every evening at the large intersection near the Institute. There are stoplights and some crosswalks, but neither are very often obeyed. Red taxis and loud motorbikes and small trucks carrying fruit from the country move in complete chaos. There are no lanes or laws here. And, it is nearly impossible to cross the street without any too-close calls.

On one particular evening, I am following a friend across the street, looking one way and not the other, and something sideswipes me. At first, my gut drops and I'm sure I've been hit by a taxi. The impact felt as hard. As I lift myself from the ground and move towards the curb, I check all of my body parts—especially a sorely bruised face and bloody nose. It was only a bicyclist. But, the stack of Arabic homework I was holding is sprawled everywhere, my scarf is floating off into the distance and the entire street has stopped.

Everyone begins flocking towards me, yelling and screaming in Arabic. Women are holding my arms, others are shoving their handkerchiefs in my face. One child brings me a bottle of water, though I'm not entirely sure what to do with it. I am a bit shaken and trying to hold my nose as blood drips all over the front of my white dress. I see a group of older men chase after and then reprimand the bicyclist down the street. He is very young and his head drops in complete defeat.

I cannot understand anything that is going on. They speak too fast in words I have not yet learned. The women are trying to comfort me, though I don't know what they are saying. They talk amongst each other and to their children, in what I assume to be an effort to clean up the spilled blood and catch my Arabic homework floating off into the distance. The men pull the young boy who hit me by the sleeve of his shirt, and I think they are telling him to apologize. Though, I am not sure. And, even if he did, I would not understand.

My first instinct is to run away from all the unfamiliarity. I imagine Attika—someone I know and can occasionally understand—cleaning the blood from my face and feeding me her sweet tajine. And, for just a quick moment, I imagine my real mother kissing my forehead and wiping my tears. I imagine my father dropping the needle on a Louis Armstrong record and it rocks me into a deep sleep. For just a quick moment, I want nothing else but to be home.

But, once the shock wears off and the overwhelming feelings fade, the sound of home drifts away and I begin to smile at the entire situation. I do not know these strangers or understand what they say. I do not know why they scream so hysterically or are so adamant in reprimanding the young boy. It was only an accident. But, they protect and care for me like I am their child. They give me their worry and tears and handkerchiefs. Although I am not a true member, they treat me like I am one of their own and lend me their own blue and soulful song.

St. Andrews

I have spent the last hour walking across the Moroccan port town of Tangier. From the steps of the train station, I get lost more than once, find myself in neighborhoods I should have probably thought twice about, ask without much success for directions in my terrible Arabic, and finally find a cheap bed and breakfast a friendly man on the train had recommended. It is hidden on the very edge of the old medina, right next to the Mediterranean looking north towards Spain. I walk through its unmarked and unassuming door and drop my giant red backpack with a thud onto the marble lobby floor. The inside is surprisingly beautiful. Intricately carved white marble covers walls rising three floors upwards to an open, glass ceiling.

I am greeted sweetly with a kiss on the cheek by the owners: a gay British man and his Moroccan partner. They offer me hot, sweet mint tea and a plate full of cookies, which my empty stomach welcomes happily. As they leave to make up my room, I sit down on embroidered cushions next to an older man, donning a great white beard. He holds a wooden cane loosely in one hand and a wide-rimmed brown hat rests on his large belly. He is a guest as well and I quickly learn he is a priest visiting from London. He asks me about my travels and my studies, compliments me genuinely for traveling on my own. He is kind and humble, and we joke about how tired we both are of hot, sweet mint tea. The owner returns to lead me to my room, and the old priest lifts himself out of his seat with much effort just to lend me a handshake and a farewell.

The next morning, as I wander the sprawling medina of the city—one that looks very similar, albeit more modernized than the one in Fez—I come across St. Andrews. It is a lone place of protestant worship amidst a country that is overwhelmingly Muslim. The church itself is

a small stone building surrounded by lush green gardens and an ancient graveyard, protected from the rest of the city by a tall white-wash wall. I haven't been to church since Christmas. I rarely have time when I am away at school, and have been living in a Muslim household for the past six weeks. But, something seems oddly alluring about an Anglican church in Morocco, so I decide to attend the morning service.

I walk through the gardens and am greeted at the bright red door of the church by an old Spanish woman speaking broken English. To me, she says *salaam*, and I step inside the humid one-room chapel. The decor is modest, but beautiful. The walls are white-washed, the pews built of solid wood, and along the arches reminiscent of those protecting the ancient medina of Fez are detailed and elaborate designs of Arabic scripture. They are so intricate, I am unable to make out but a few familiar words. *Allah*. God. *Talib*. Student. *Salaam*. Peace.

Classic hymns are being played from a small organ on the back wall of the church, hymns I recognize from the Episcopalian church my family used to attend every Sunday. The man hunched over the keys looks familiar, and it occurs to me he is the British owner of my bed and breakfast. We make eye contact, he nods his head and I wave. His partner is kneeling in the first pew, in prayer.

I take a seat near the back of the church and watch as the rest of the pews fill up. Many of the first arrivals are older and well-dressed, and I assume they are European expats. They greet each other like old friends and speak English in a variety of accents. But most of the rest are Africans. I assume they are not Moroccans either. They have dark skin and most of the conversations I overhear are in dialects I am unfamiliar with.

The organ begins to play more triumphantly than before, the congregation stands in song and the priest, in his long red and white robes, walks down the center aisle towards the pulpit. It is the priest I met at the bed and breakfast. He looks my way and nods his head. I smile in return.

The service is like every other I attended as a child. I have not always necessarily believed, but have always reveled in the comforting routine of church on a Sunday morning. The hymns. The organ. The Nicene Creed. The Lord's Prayer. The communion, which invites everyone to break bread. The sermon about maintaining faith, despite all ends. The triumphant poetry in all of it.

The final hymn is "Thine the Amen Thine the Praise," the jubilation of which gave me goosebumps as a young girl. The short, plump British man in suspenders standing behind me is bellowing the words from the core of his giant belly. The young couple in the pew before me hunches over a hymnal, following every verse with their fingers. The tall African in the back is carrying the entire chapel, singing loudly and confidently without a hymn. He says *tine* instead of *thine*, and *yamen* instead of *amen*. As goosebumps make their way to the surface of my arms once again, I feel oddly at home.

"Do you know what the words on the walls mean?" I ask the priest, on my way out of the chapel.

"No," he says. "Unfortunately I cannot read Arabic. But, I do know it is scripture from the Koran."

"In a church?"

"Yes," he says with a smile. "Beautiful isn't it? We aren't so different after all." He rests his hand on my shoulder and thanks me for coming. I am then shuffled out of the chapel by churchgoers wanting to migrate into the garden to escape the stifling heat. They mingle in the

shade of great olive and fig trees that I imagine have been rooted for centuries. Expats and Africans, Spaniards and Brits, those who know what exactly the words on the wall mean and those who probably do not. But, to them, it does not matter. Together, they are refugees finding solace amidst all of the unknowns.

Sunken Treasure

The Mississippi. That great river, Itasca to La Balize, brown waters, flood plains, mosquito banjo-picking, delta foot-stomping. You and me swimming, can't see our feet or the ground beneath them.

To naked eyes, it is a soup of syllables without meaning, a flea-market oil on canvas, a line that once divided one world with another. It speaks a language we cannot understand. And, silenced, a river is just a river.

But, give it a voice and it can tell the story of a people who talk fast and walk hard, cross-eyed drifters who turn their noses wayward from all that is good and moral and wholesome and true, who look for answers to their dust bowl blues in orange horizons of silos, scarecrows and sunken, coal-ashed mountaintops. In bottles of whiskey too brown to take lightly. But we do anyways.

Give it the words we can grasp and it becomes a labyrinth of veins connecting one narrative to another, one set of memories to an open gulf mouth that sighs in depression over failed levees and shattered daydreams.

Give it the chance and it will pull us to its basin and swallow us whole.

And, blinded, we get lost in its depth.

I don't know the great river like anyone else does and nobody knows the great river like me. Only in passing glances, in quick peeks of understanding, do we become acquainted. Its murky waters glisten only in the corner of my eye. I look straight ahead, too afraid to take a

breathe, too terrified to take a longer peek for fear of spinning out of control, in endless circles, into a current that only pushes down. South.

Sometimes, as I pass from one bank to the other, from one home to the next, when the windows are down and the radio is off and the freshwater breeze sings its own humbling song, I dare glance longer than the flash of an eyelid. I dare glance long enough to see that, in both directions, the river does not end. The current does not stop. It sweeps slow and steady, waiting to carry what may come. It's hard to imagine the river ever losing its shape, ever wandering from its path. The rapids take their course out of habit, in an unwavering rhythm and flow. It is right. It is nature. It is terrifying, yet I am humbled by it. It flows from my right to my left and keeps on flowing. And, it is in this direction I left home and all that I loved for the first time. West.

We drive from one side to the other in a matter of seconds.

Hot feet on the dashboard and cold coffee between us. Your bright blonde, greasy hair waves like the remnants of an Illinois harvest, and a cigarette dangles dangerously from your fingertips as you reach your arm up towards the clouds, grasping for something that isn't there. At one time, I would hold out my arm with you, reach for the clouds, and search desperately for sunken treasures, like a broken child digging dry dirt to China.

But, this time, I don't.

You talk to the empty sky about nothing and barely notice the river, that great river with its brown waters and flood plains and mosquito banjo-picking and delta foot-stomping - everything about it I haven't known yet. You don't hear the stories because they're not what's on the radio. You doesn't sneak a peek because it's not what's right in front of us.

But, I do. I swerve a bit, but I also feel the river's sweetness, follow its soiled banks, and hold on tight to the sodden echoes of everything that once was. And, they tell me, quietly underneath us, what it means to live and love and leave a home. It tells me, in a silent scream only I can hear, what it means to sing a song I don't know the words to.

And, like an infant hearing the world's trickling melody for the very first time, I listen.