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## A Spectre in Polished Obsidian

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A Spectre in Polished Obsidian

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Nonfiction Writing

by

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B.A. Centenary College of Louisiana, 2002

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## Abstract

The author joins the Peace Corps in the hopes that he will discover who he really is yet he only finds frustration. Upon returning to the States he has a daughter and finds peace. Within this peace, as he types up the life history of a friend, he finally makes a breakthrough, yet the answer he finds is not to his liking.

New Orleans, Peace Corps, East Timor, gardening, fatherhood, childbirth, life history, anthropology, homosexuality, Ecuador, personal quest

## Preface

Who is it looking back at me in the mirror? I see a long face, lots of stubble on the head and chin. A large nose, round-framed glasses, a mole. A dumb expression. It is a reflection of me, but *who is me?*

Well, it's taken me a long time to figure that out, but I think I finally have an answer, and it's in the following chapters – though when I started putting this body of work together I didn't really know what I was going to end up with. I had some essays from the last few years that I thought were decent. I put them together. But together they didn't look right. Like a putting together a puzzle with pieces from different puzzle boxes.

So with some help I took the puzzle apart, looked at it from a different angle and tried again, this time with the right pieces. I think.

Actually, I should back track a bit. I started this writing program because I had the idea of writing a book about my experience in the Peace Corps. I already had some pieces written. I had gathered a lot of research material.

But when it came down to workshopping my pieces, I wandered off the path. I wrote about other things, things not related to my Peace Corps experience, things that would not go in that book. I wrote about what was happening at the moment, what was happening at home. I wrote about my relationship with my wife. I wrote about frustrations I felt regarding the way my life turned out. I wrote about how it felt to be an expectant father, and then what it was like to be there for my first child's birth. I followed that up with pieces about being a father.

At times I asked myself what I was doing. "Why aren't you writing about the Peace Corps?" But I never really answered my own question. I just moved on to the next piece.

When it came time to put my thesis together, I gathered my Peace Corps material, took a deep breath, and got to typing. Days went by, then weeks. I looked at what I had written. I compared it to my outline. I opened a planner, looked at the number of days I had left. I did some calculations.

I panicked. There was no way I was going to get what I wanted to get done in time. No way. The problem wasn't only that I hadn't written

anything for workshop; I also had a project in mind that would take years to finish. I wanted to interview all my fellow volunteers, to read everything I could about my host country, East Timor, and anything about the Peace Corps I thought was interesting. I wanted to go through all of my journals and those of my wife.

I let my thesis advisor, Randy Bates, know I was not going to finish anytime soon. Calmly, like a patient father, he assured me that perhaps there was another option. What about all those pieces I had written over the course of the program? They were already written and critiqued. Put those together and see what you get.

I calmed down. I sorted through my files and came up with a list.

I hated the list. Precious few of the pieces were to my liking. So I tinkered with them.

The collection I sent to Randy was not great, I knew that. And he agreed. I took his notes and tried again. What can I do better, I asked myself.

Then something happened.

I don't remember what spawned it, but I got an idea. I figured out how to tie all the pieces together. It wasn't too hard, especially since all the pieces I had written were about my life while I was in the program. So there was the chronological framework and the unified subject matter. But the pieces went all over the place. Part of the reason I had trouble liking them was because I could never nail down a theme. It was as if the entire time I was chasing the theme but could never catch it. It always slipped around the corner and out of sight.

Yes, finding the theme was my weakness. I may have had strengths, but they were sparks of light in an otherwise chaotic depression.

Until now. By some miracle I have finally formulated and followed through with a theme, a universal chord, as I've heard it called. It took long enough, but like a child who finally learns to crawl after months of just lying there, or like grandma's recipe you can never get to taste right until one glorious morning a decade after you first tried it, I have reached that place.

And the theme is this: after spending too much time and effort trying to discover who the real me was, all I had was a belly full of frustration. It wasn't until I forgot about the quest and was finally in a state of peacefulness that I began to see, unexpectedly, what I had been seeking. The truth all along was that there was no me to find.

I write about looking up at the billions of stars in Timor's night sky and wondering if I was looking at a painting, only the painting was so huge I could not make it out – I was looking at only a tiny part of it. The same went for me. I was looking for something that was much bigger than I could have imagined. The truth was I was part of a whole, a tiny piece of a whole that was all mankind for all ages. More, it was all life *and* all non-life, all there is to see and all that is hidden. I was no longer an individual, a special entity. It was as if I had discovered that the earth was not the center of the universe.

I think of Adam in the Garden. He bites from the Apple of Knowledge. Did he see what I now see? Could it be that what he saw was that he was not the center of it all, the nucleus, the king? That he was no less or greater than the snake, the tree, the stones? I imagine him

fleeing in horror. Then perhaps he was not banished after all but ran off on his own accord, tearing at his hair.

Likewise all I wanted to do was run. I didn't so much care where as long as it was somewhere else.

In this thesis I have separated my chapters into two parts. The first has the story of me in East Timor and begins with "No Fanfare." I begin the journey as my wife, Bekah, and I wait to board a plane bound for East Timor, just north of Australia. We are going to training to become Peace Corps volunteers. My goal is to figure out who I am while I'm there. I wrote that short chapter to set up the rest. The tone is positive, optimistic. I do not go into the details of the trip over but focus on what is going on in my head. Earlier versions of the chapter are much more detail-heavy, showing what each step of the journey was like. But I realized as I wrote my thesis that much of that was distracting, not to the point. The title refers both to the lack of attention we volunteers received and to the lack of attention I wanted to draw to myself: I was on a personal quest that I wanted to keep personal.

The next chapter, titled “*Istoria Timor*,” goes into the first weeks of training. I find I spend so much time trying to get to know my new community and lifestyle that my quest for truth is set aside. I go into detail about what I see and do until I find myself at a prayer group one evening. There I remember that I am looking for something. The people I am watching are praying, but for what? I realize I too am praying, in a way, for some guidance. I find hope in the dawn and darkness of night. It is the beautiful sunrises and the vast star scenes that make me think that I must be close to my answer.

*Toss Nain* is a key chapter in Part 1. It takes place after training is done and I am at work in another village. I am frustrated because I am no closer to my goal for truth. I put all my hope into a new project – a garden. Perhaps a successful garden, something that I imagine is so easy to make, will lift my spirits. But it fails completely. And with it hope vanishes. This chapter is mostly my thoughts as I struggle inwardly. The garden is a symbol for my lost hope.

Part I concludes with the end of my assignment in Timor. The program is evacuated to Bangkok. Our projects suddenly end. We leave

everything behind. It is a short chapter, which reflects the way I felt about the situation: I didn't want to linger any longer. I wanted to move on quickly, leave behind my disappointment.

In Part II I have begun a new life with a growing family. Our first child is born, something I marvel at. I pay close attention to the details because it fascinates me so much. The pace is fast because it all happened in a blur. I pay no mind to my old quest. It never comes up.

“Blowing Raspberries, Part I” is where I realize I am finally at peace. I walk with my daughter on my chest through Mid City New Orleans, exploring. I am learning how to be a daddy and that suits me fine. And in that happiness, in that peace, I see something I never saw before. It is only a glimpse, but I know what it is: the truth of who I am. But I move on, knowing I will face it when the time is right.

“A Specter in Polished Obsidian” is the crux of Part II and the entire thesis. It is a life history, written about a lesbian friend, for an anthropology class I was taking. I began writing it hoping it would help me write the story of my Peace Corps experience, give me some insight on how to shape my book. I did not think, at first, that the process

would return me to the question of who I was, but I soon found out that indeed I was on that path of discovery.

At the end of the life history I am finally hit with it. As I write, “It was like a blow knocking me clean off my high horse.” I was not ready to deal with the idea that I was both as insignificant as the smallest molecule and as beautiful as the rings of Saturn.

I refer to the title’s specter in polished obsidian because it was as if I had seen the most awful ghost – my own ghost. And as obsidian mirrors were once used by those who spoke with spirits, those who used magic, so too my experience was magical, otherworldly. My hope is that the lead-up to the discovery, that being Bibi’s life history, is a kind of lull, a calm before the inevitable storm.

“Blowing Raspberries, Part II” is my dismay, my bitterness after the shock. I did not know what to do with myself now that I possessed this new knowledge. I needed a reason to leave, to go someplace where I could calm down. I use the story of another walk with Juliet to show the contrast to the stress-free walk from before. I can no longer find peace in the walk. The blow was too much.

“To Juliet on the Imminent Arrival of a Special Guest” is the next big moment in my life – a second child is coming. I temporarily forget my troubles and look to the future. It is hopeful. I am on the verge of being a father of two. The feelings I have are of joy and I look to preparing our home for the child.

“Detachment” is where I decide what I need to do next – flee. Bekah and I have worked out the details and have committed to the journey across the country to Portland, Oregon (though I do not name the destination in the chapter). We get rid of most everything, like a shedding, a molting. For me it is like washing my hands of the past. I am then ready to face the truth; I am clean, pure. All that remains is the final journey, the path that will lead me away as the past vanishes in the rearview mirror.

My hope in this thesis is that my chapters, which started as separate pieces, come together to tell the story of how profound this discovery of mine was to me. I had been looking for answers to the big questions long before I went to join the Peace Corps. I think everyone

asks those big questions at some point: Who am I? Why am I here?

What should I be doing with myself?

A month before Juliet's birth, in August 2008, Bekah and I evacuated to Russellville, Arkansas to escape Hurricane Gustav. Bekah was very pregnant, of course, and we worried that the stress of the trip would induce labor. Plus we were worried being so far from our doctor, in case anything happened to Bekah or the baby inside her.

We watched the news coverage from my mother-in-law's living room. We saw Geraldo running around, running to touch creaking levees. We listened to WWL, New Orleans' dependable disaster radio station, online. The storm mostly passed New Orleans and did a number on Baton Rouge instead.

When drove back home with tanks of gas strapped to our roof and we surveyed the damage along the highways. Toppled trees, limbs strewn about. When we got to our apartment there was no power but it soon came back on. We survived unscathed and still pregnant.

That night I could not sleep. I don't know what caused it but all I could think about was what happens when we die. Without warning my

mortality hit me in the face, all through the night. I was physically sickened, trying to come to some peace, at least for a few moments, so that I could fall asleep. But I could find no peace. I only found despair.

In the morning I told Bekah about my sudden depression. I blamed it on the stress of evacuation but she said it was probably something else. It was probably the impending birth. I cast the idea aside. But that was silly. I had no problem with becoming a father.

Right?

But in time I understood she was right. The source was deep inside me. Having a child, I saw, meant more to me than anything I had ever encountered. I already loved my daughter with all I had. And it hurt to give that much. At the same time I would both die for her and would do absolutely anything I could to live a long life so I could protect her and watch her grow.

The realization I come to in these pages was what finally got me to relax. Yes, I wanted to run and hide when I saw the truth, but that was a knee-jerk reaction. I knew, above all, that I needed a place where I

could start over. A comfortable place where I could live with my newfound beliefs and find peace once again.

The overall tone of this work may be anguish, or despair, or panic, but I hope a little hint of peace comes through as well. My realization that we are all one human kind, and more than that we are all part of one universe, has opened my heart in a way it has never been opened before. I really see myself in others. I am much quicker to dismiss judgments I pass on others. I can much more easily see the beauty in passing gray cloud formations, in naked trees, in red-faced toddlers, in a friend's tired smile. I can relax more easily when my work schedule begins to wear on me. I can breathe. I can take that breath and know that in that one breath, in that one moment, that expanding of my diaphragm and the release from my lungs, I am one with all.

## Part I

## No Fanfare

On the evening of July 8, 2005, at the Los Angeles International Airport, in the waiting area for the fourteen-hour flight to Sydney, my wife Bekah and I bided our time with the rest of the thirty-four Peace Corps Invitees on our way to East Timor. Some people ate. We chatted. Some slept. One guy talked on a pay phone the entire time. Even when our seats were called and we joined the line to board that guy was still on the phone, as if he was going to finish his conversation whether we waited for him or not. He wasn't so sure about going, it seemed, but I was.

We boarded and the plane took off.

I didn't know the real reasons the others had for joining. When I asked, some said they wanted to see the world, or to learn a new language, or to do some good, but the truth, the real reason they had for joining, was something each person kept secret. The truth could be a girl, who was devastated after a break-up, wanted to get away. The truth could be a lonely guy was looking for a bride.

The plane cruised high above the Pacific Ocean.

My truth was that I was on a quest, a personal quest to discover who I really was and who I wanted to become. I wanted to find myself, as they say. I was a twenty-four-year-old newlywed who thought it was about time he grew up.

In Sydney we caught the connecting flight to Darwin, Australia, across the Timor Sea from our destination.

I had this strange idea that I could discover who I really was if I put myself to the test. Meaning I had to do something really difficult, really next to impossible, to see what I was made of. Living in a third-world country for two years, trying to improve the lives of people I didn't know, adding in the language barrier, and the culture barrier and that they didn't know me from Adam either, sounded like just that kind of test.

It was about damn time, too, I told myself. I mean who was I? What should I be doing? I needed these answers. I was married now. Bekah, my wife, was seated next to me, a constant reminder. I couldn't dawdle any longer, working at Smoothie Kings and sandwich shops. I

needed to know who I was so that I could decide what to do next, how I wanted to earn a living, how I wanted to spend my life.

The third and final flight took us to the Presidente Nicolau Lobato International Airport three miles west of East Timor's capital, Dili.

I read somewhere that in the first days of Peace Corps, upon disembarking the plane in Ghana, volunteers sang the country's national anthem to the waiting crowd. The event was played on the TV and radio over and over. They were not only a hit in Ghana but the news spread across the globe. Our entry was nothing like that. As we came off the plane a few staff members and volunteers cheered and draped traditional weavings called *tais* on our shoulders. Few people knew we were even arriving that day. The people of Timor went on with their business without any knowledge of us. No fanfare. What with all the country had seen in its recent past, thousands killed over decades at the hands of the Indonesian Army, a few Americans on a plane was no big deal. And besides we hadn't learnt the national anthem of Timor.

No matter. I had another thing on my mind. I needed to discover who I really was.

## *Istoria Timor*

I imagined there would be loads of down time in which I could reflect on who I was. Boy, was I off. That down time proved as elusive as Sasquatch those first three months.

In 1968's *High Risk/High Gain: A Freewheeling Account of Peace Corps Training*, Alan Weiss and his group at Columbia University could never relax because they were constantly threatened with expulsion as the final cut loomed. It was a psychological nightmare as the recruits passed from one shrink to the next for testing. But by the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century that kind of training had been long since abandoned for slightly more gentle prerequisites. In other words, we were sent to live with the locals.

Of course some would argue that being thrown into the depths before you even knew if you could swim, so to speak, was even less humane.

The Pereiras' roof and walls were made of sheets of corrugated metal. The walls were rusted orange, brown and black. Beyond the two

cement steps, there, in the darkness within, we met *Senyora* Madeleina and her eight children, though my mind was spinning so fast and my Tetum was so bad that I didn't understand then who was who. Then *Senyor* Afonso led us to our room. A curtain covered the door, a door that the Peace Corps had them put in: for our safety, each volunteer had to have a door with a lock (ours was a latch and padlock). He tied the curtain in a knot and we followed him in. There was an empty wooden bed frame and a covered table that was much nicer than the dining room table (a table, I noticed later, after I checked to see what I was banging my knees on during meals, which was actually a desk with drawers). We set down our bags and supplies inside the room.

As the Peace Corps staff had prepared us, back in the living room our host father asked us to sit, as it was their custom to relax and chat with newly-arrived guests, and he directed us to two green plastic chairs, the kind of chair I was used to seeing on a patio or beside a pool back home. *Senyora* Madaleina held her baby in a *lipa*, a multi-use blanket that could also be worn as a skirt or jacket, and occasionally nursed. *Senyor* Afonso had a thin and almost fragile-looking body, and as we

tried to communicate with the little sentences we had learned in our language classes back at the hotel – *Obrigado barak* (Thank you very much.), *Hau naran Travis* (My name is Travis.), *Ita naran saida?* (What is your name?), *Nia naran saida?* (What is her name?) – he smiled and laughed, rocking back in his chair with what appeared to be delight.

I scanned the room as we sat there. The eight children moved in and out of sight, like lively shadows come to see the new guest before vanishing again. The youngest was an infant not yet crawling. That was Aniceto. Olga was the eldest, about eighteen years old. Natalina was next, then Paulina, Silbino, Isaias and the twin girls who never parted, Isabelita and Selena. A single light bulb hung from the roof, glowing a dim dark-yellow, even in the daytime. There was an empty wooden bed frame behind us and a statue of the Virgin Mary on a high shelf next to our new bedroom door. There was a cupboard crowned with a radio next to the entrance to a little hallway that led to the primitive kitchen.

This was not a visit, a one-afternoon hello. The bedroom with its padlock was for us to stay in, the bed for us to sleep on for many days to come, starting that very night. This family was taking us in. Bekah

shared my anxiety, sometimes looking to me for reassurance, sometimes reassuring me with her laugh and grin.

Soon we communicated that we were quite tired and excused ourselves. That's where we faced the moment all volunteers faced, the moment where we sat down on the edge of the bed and asked ourselves whether we wanted to stay or to go. This was the first big test.

*Awkward* could describe how I felt but *scared*? No, not scared. We were staying.

\*\*\*

Bekah and I spent our time, when not in training sessions, trying to figure out what the hell was going on all around us. This is sometimes called “adaptation to a new culture.” But what it meant was we had to relearn the basics of living. Using the bathroom for example. Our host family had built an outhouse just for us. And somehow they acquired and installed a western-style commode, where all the other host families provided squat toilets. Ok, so sitting on the can was nothing new but the bathing, which took place in the same outhouse, was indeed something that needed practice. It involved a plastic tub of water and a ladle for

pouring water over ourselves, a process we would refer to as a Bucket Bath.

More complex was washing our clothes. Our host family volunteered to wash our clothes but we had the idea that if we did it ourselves it would show them that we did not think ourselves better than they. But in the end I'm pretty sure we offended them because in their minds we were turning down their hospitality. At any rate washing involved walking to the waterhole, soaping the clothes in a bucket, scrubbing them by hand and finally lugging the soaked mass back to camp to set out on a bamboo pole to dry.

Even sleeping was a challenge as we were not used to the din of the night. Roosters crowed at all hours. They never punched the clock. Livestock and people made so much racket as they passed our corrugated metal bedroom walls as to make us think they were at our bedside. Rats scurried around the room. Tree branches beat the roof like a drum. We lay restless under our mosquito net listening to the third-world nocturnal symphony until the Peace Corps medical officer suggested we take Benadryl before bed. We slept well after that.

As for food, it wasn't hard to like what we were served. It was vegetable stir fry or bean soup usually. But one day, my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday in fact, the family served us a salty fish dinner we will never forget. Something was off about it, we could tell. I didn't know what it was that was not quite right but as the fish lay before us in the semi-darkness of the living room Bekah and I sat there summoning up the courage to take a bite. The problem was that in the culture of the Timorese to not eat what had been served was disrespectful. We were painfully aware of that. And offending our hosts was the last thing we wanted to do. I mean, we *depended* on these guys. Or at least that's what we told ourselves. In reality Peace Corps was a cell phone call away. They'd scoop me up and fly me back home in a second if I asked them to. But it was more fun to pretend that we were on our own. That we were *roughing* it. Anyway, offending someone was not something I liked to do.

Finally, I went for it, trying to get down as much fish as I could before tapping out. Yes, it was as bad as we'd feared. Bekah got only one bite. When the family came to collect our plates they saw most of

the fish still there. We told them we were full but after the looks on their faces I went to bed sick to my stomach. And it wasn't because of the fish.

\*\*\*

One evening a man wearing a *lipa* came to visit. He greeted us then spoke to our host parents for few minutes. Then our host mother addressed Bekah and me: would we like to join them for an evening of prayer?

Peace Corps had told us during training that the people of Timor were traditionally an animistic people but most of the country practiced Catholicism because it was forced onto them by the Portuguese who occupied the land for hundreds of years. The result was that the Timorese participated in the Catholic traditions while holding on to animistic beliefs. A Catholic church existed in every town but so did an *uma lulik*, a holy house where the people went to appease spirits. The people went to the priest on Sunday and the holy man, the *liu rai*, every other day.

At the prayer gathering that night members of the community sat along the walls. Our host mother took the lead, reciting a prayer which the people in the room responded to in unison. The call and response continued. I had no idea whether this was the Pope's idea or the *liu rai's*. Then suddenly it became clear to me. They were praying the Rosary, something I had done in my youth. So familiar yet so unlike what I'd known. It was bizarre and comforting all at once.

As I thought about what these people believed, I looked to myself. What did *I* believe? And wasn't the answer to that question the key to who I was and wanted to be? Wasn't that the whole reason I was in Timor?

But the answers did not come. I asked but did not receive. I did not believe in the Catholic dogma anymore. At least I wasn't sure if I did. There was so much to question, so much that went against what I thought was right. I no longer knew what I believed so I sat there dumbfounded as the prayer ended and the man of the house brought out sweet tea and crackers. A consolation, I guess.

\*\*\*

I tried to write about as much of what we experienced as I could. I hoped by writing about my experiences I could unravel the secret that was the elusive *truth*. I used a blank-paged sketch book to capture different scenes. For example, I wrote about a time when a fellow volunteer and I found ourselves eating coconut with an old farmer who had just chopped down a bamboo tree and cut it into five-foot long sections within a few minutes. That was just before he peeled the coconut with his machete as easily as I peel a potato.

Another time I described a night in our living room when I joined a few members of our community, our *aldeia*, to pray the rosary, and *Senyora* Madeleina came in from outside, smiled at me and went to the shelf up high on the wall where there was the statue of the Virgin Mary and a crucifix. Her baby sucked her breast as she reached above her head and pulled down a rosary and then a small plastic-covered prayer book.

Another time I recounted how Silbino made a pair of dirty glasses he fixed with rubber bands for earpieces. A hen and her four growing chicks had seized the glasses and were dragging them away when

*Senyor Afonso* sent them flying with the wave of a stick. Natalina then put on the glasses and we all laughed when her mother said, *Hanesan Maun Challes*. Just like Brother Travis.

Another time, I wrote how as we brushed our teeth we watched a faraway mountainside slowly burning in a mysterious, crooked ring of fire.

*Senyora Madeleina* saw me writing one day on the front bench. I tried to tell her what I was doing but the best I could muster was *Hau halo livru kona ba Timor*. I'm making a book about Timor.

*Istoria Timor*, she said. A Timor story.

But there were many things I didn't write down.

All I have is the memory of the time we played Uno with the kids, no written story. We practiced colors and numbers that way, and learned how to say "reverse" (*fila*) and "choose a color" (*hili kor*), when they put down a wild card. And I never wrote a story about the time I heard singing somewhere behind the house, and when I followed the noise, I found Isaias squatting over a hole on the roof of a pig pen, defecating. I never wrote a story about the time I found a pair of

Bekah's underwear, tangled in sticks in the backyard. The Victoria's Secret band proved it was hers. We're pretty sure the rats were responsible, just as we're pretty sure it was the rats that planted another pair of her panties around a nail near the ceiling.

The old farmer, *Senyora* Madeleina, Silbino and his glasses, the burning ring, the kids playing Uno, Isaias, the panty-thieves. Good stories, but what else? What was I missing here?

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In the mornings we would wake to one of our host sisters calling us to coffee: *Maun Challes, Mana Bekah, hemu café lei!* We'd rouse and if we were lucky we'd catch the show outside our window. The sunrise and the earthen mountains burning red. In those moments any worry was lost. Any pressing matter squelched. I was on a mission, sure, but I was not too busy to pass up a good performance.

Before bed we would take our tooth-brushing supplies outside to clean our teeth. There we would brush and spit onto the ground. But between spits we would stare up into the night sky where there were more visible stars than I had ever even imagined could be seen. It was

like a painting, like a pointillism painting, though the canvas was so wide I could never decipher what the painting was. Was it a picture of God himself? Was the truth out there, spelled out in letters as large as the galaxy? In those few minutes I was humbled. In those few minutes I could say, as frustrating as it was not getting any closer to answering my deep questions, that the whole trip was worth just that sight of the heavens. Perhaps my truth was indeed to be found there, I would think, in a land where at dawn the sun clothes the mountain tops with fiery satin robes and at night the starfield is vaster than my imagination.

## *Toss Nain*

Every day the market street at our new site was lined with pyramids of potatoes and buckets of green beans, bunches of carrots and water spinach, or some other in-season produce. The sellers spread their goods into ten-cent piles and fifty-cent bunches on blankets and tarps, side by side. Sometimes, when it was dusty out, they'd sprinkle water over the vegetables.

Though the market was open every day, and though we had more than enough money to buy food and our host family fed us well, I wanted to grow my own vegetables. I had no real knowledge and no experience growing food, but that wasn't going to stop me.

Not knowing where the locals got their seeds I shopped for some in the Westernized supermarkets in the capital, finally finding packets of carrots and green beans from New Zealand. Back home I told the host family what I wanted to do and they blessed the idea. In their overgrown backyard I measured the plot, marking the corners with large stones.

*Fila rai*, they called it, *turn the ground*. I tore the earth with a rusty pick ax. My hands grew blisters, which I was proud of but had to keep clean to prevent from becoming infected. I bought *lutu*, boards of palm spines latched together, to build a fence around the garden. And a volunteer friend helped me put it up. With an amused little grin our host father, who rarely spoke to me, began to call me *toss nain*. Farmer.

With the ground turned I collected cans from around the yard. They were not hard to find. The trash-filled cement pond in the front yard was particularly fruitful in the tin can department. I filled the cans with dirt, planted the seeds, labeled the cans and set them next door, under the awning of a nearby shed. I watered the plants, watched them. And they began to grow. Green buds at first that I couldn't distinguish from grass, then tall, thin stems, frail, with two little leaves sprouting like arms. When I thought they were strong enough, I planted them in the garden.

Our host family didn't need a garden. Maun Leo, the father of the house, held a government position that provided more than the average Timorese family earned. In fact the family was so well off they had

taken in four other people, besides us – two young girls, a young man who worked in the clinic next door and Amoo, a Protestant preacher. We always had plenty of food to eat but the family grew none of it. It all came from the market, except for mangoes from a tree in the yard and the occasional chicken that, the night before, roosted in the same mango tree. The back yard where I dug my garden was overgrown, unused.

This was a dramatic contrast to the host family we lived with during training who did have a garden, though I never actually saw it as it was not near the house. Their meals were simple, comprised of carrots, green beans, water spinach, cabbage, beans. The meals were served with ramen noodles or rice, or both. I could have learned about gardening from that family but didn't. It hadn't even occurred to me to ask. And now here I was trying to plant a garden no one needed.

A few days after they were in the earth, my plants withered, fell over, browned and died. It was a pathetic sight. Only the watermelons remained. Unlike the New Zealand seeds these were from Timor, from watermelons we'd eaten. In a panic, fearing for the watermelon plants' lives, I built a little tent over them with sticks and an old discarded net (I

know how ridiculous that sounds now), after reading somewhere that they might need shade. I hoped for the best. They died, too.

There was more at stake here than the lives of assorted vegetable plants. I was losing faith in the prospect of discovering anything worthwhile about myself. Worse, I was beginning to see myself as a fool for traveling so far for nothing. My plan bore no fruit. And I was only four months into a two-year commitment. What the hell was I going to do with myself for the next twenty months? My garden had died, and with it my purpose.

A few days later, with little hope, I revisited the garden. I had some beans from the market. I don't know why I bothered but I planted them directly in the garden, in one long row. I watered them and walked away.

A week later, having forgotten about the beans, I wandered into the back yard. I strolled up to the garden and looked in over the fence. It was like receiving a letter saying I won a contest I had forgotten I'd entered. The beans had grown into thick, leafy, healthy plants, stronger than any of the others had ever been. I ran to get Bekah.

Was this a second chance? My mind raced, trying to comprehend what was happening. Was I really doing it? Was I really gardening? I didn't know what the plants would look like when they were mature. I didn't even know where the beans would appear. Underground? Did they hang off like peppers? I didn't know how or when to collect them. But I had at least grown something here. I could show my host family, I could show the community, that I could at least grow my own food. Here are my beans. In my eyes, my stock rose that day. If only a few points.

Bekah and I woke a few days later to find an enormous white cow tied up in the backyard. We had no idea where it came from, but the family told us they were taking care of it. It was tied up to a tree near the house and grazed on the high grass. I didn't think about it much until I walked out the next day to admire the bean plants. As I turned the corner from the house I found the hefty bovine leaning over my garden's *lutu* fence. I didn't need to go any farther. I knew what the cow was doing. Eating my heart. I turned and went back inside.

## Evacuation

They told us before we joined that in cases of emergency our program could be shut down and we could be evacuated. Of course, I thought. But that won't happen to me.

The night before we were flown out of Timor, Bekah and I and all the other volunteers started drinking in the restaurant of the Hotel 2001 and then the whole gang moved next door to a discotheque.

Though no one was exactly sure what was going on – *civil unrest* was all they would tell us – we all knew that the next day we were going to be flown to Bangkok. At that point no one knew the future of the program. We were going to Bangkok to either wait it out or to say goodbye.

There were nearly fifty of us. Some volunteers were just short of completing their two years and others, like Bekah and me, had been in country ten months. The volunteers who had been in Timor the longest had close friends they would be leaving, if this was indeed the end, and projects that would go unfinished. The volunteers who entered with us

were just getting started. Some had only just begun projects, which, we feared, would never go any further.

Bekah and I would be leaving behind a girls' soccer team we coached. Bekah was just getting started with an orphanage that needed help fixing up its building. I had just befriended a *xefe*, a community leader, who had some ideas on how his people could make some more money, namely by fattening cows and growing rare trees. And of course there was my quest. My sad quest. The only truth I had uncovered was that I was utterly frustrated by my failure to uncover the truth about myself.

If this was the end, it was all right by me. Of course I felt guilty about feeling that way. So I drank with the rest in the discotheque, for my own reason. With the rest I joked and laughed and said goodbye to the host country nationals who were staying.

## Part II

## To Juliet on Her First Birthday

I was standing behind your mom, stroking her hair, as she was resting between her doctor-directed pushes, her head to the side, her eyes closed, and at the foot of the bed the doctor, in blue scrubs, arms crossed, was saying to the resident, “Yeah, in these natural births you just let them do the work,” and three or four nurses were standing around the bed when I noticed I was barefoot and my jeans were rolled up to mid-calf.

“Okay, when you’re ready,” the doctor said. Your mom took a deep breath and pushed and I could see the strain in her face.

“Right here, push here,” he said, his fingers at the bottom of your mom’s vagina, at the perineum. I caught myself leaning over, on my toes, looking at the swollen vagina, looking for your head, then I focused back on your mom, who was straining and holding her breath as the resident counted to ten. Then she gasped and fell back, resting again.

“You’re doin’ great, just great,” the doctor said.

I stroked your mom's hair some more. It was wet from the shower she had just taken, a coping tool we learned in our birthing class. It was there in the shower that her contractions got stronger and her moaning got louder. *Mmmmm, mmmmm, mmmm*, she moaned and squatted, under the shower head, holding the railing, swaying in the steam. That was when I'd taken off my sandals and rolled up my jeans. "You're doing awesome, you're doing so good," I'd said, like I'd been saying all day, but this time she shook her head and looked up at me.

"No," she said. "I can't."

She was back in the bed when the contractions got stronger. "You're doing good, doing good," I'd said and she was moaning and shook her head, "No, no," she said. "I can't do this."

"Here, break my hand," I said and put my hand in hers and she squeezed and at one point even put it in her mouth. I was afraid for a second she'd actually bite my fingers off.

Then a nurse came in to do her hourly fetal monitoring and I'd asked her if your mom could get her cervix checked again because she was asking for medicine now and we'd learned in our birthing class that

you should get checked first before getting drugs to see how far you were along. The resident came in and checked between contractions and your mom was eight centimeters, a huge jump from the four centimeters an hour before. There were only two centimeters to go and the resident said, “I’m gonna call Dr. Morris, this baby’s about to come out.”

And that’s when the nurses came in a gush, pushing carts and rearranging tables and tearing open sterile bags. We had dimmed the lights in the room and when they came in they turned on all the bright lights. They filled the room and I found a spot at the head of the bed, with my bare feet and rolled-up jeans, stroking your mom’s hair and saying, “You’re a champ, you’re almost done, she’s right there.”

That’s when the doctor burst in, saying, “I’m here,” like a super hero and the nurses helped him put on his scrubs and other nurses removed the lower third of the bed and asked your mom to pull up her legs so that she was in a sort of squatting position and then they laid down a sort of plastic slide between your mom’s legs to catch the blood and other fluids.

The doctor checked and your mom was at ten centimeters, fully dilated, and that's when he told your mom to push, which she did, straining, for ten seconds at a time while the resident counted. I leaned over and saw your head was not out yet but then after the fourth or fifth push one of the nurses said, "Look, look," and I leaned and saw a pointed head with dark, matted hair.

"I saw the head," I said to your mom. "She's right there."

"Now, Rebekah," the doctor said, "we're gonna' do this nice and controlled. When you're ready give it a half-push." And when she was ready she gave a half push and I leaned and saw the vagina swell again and the head and then there was your head and face. The resident reached over your head with a rubber aspirator but couldn't reach your mouth so the doctor took the aspirator and sucked out what he could from your mouth and nose.

"Alright, now another half-push," the doctor said and your mom did and you came out all at once and you were long and you started to cry and your mom and I cried, too.

Next I remember trying to help your mom open her gown so you could suck her breast but I couldn't quite loosen it. A nurse put you on your mom's chest and the doctor asked me if I wanted to cut the cord and he gave me the scissors and I went to cut it between his fingers and I tried not to cut him. I remembered hearing once that it was harder to cut than you'd expect and it took me a minute to cut all the way through.

Then I saw your mom kiss your head and say, "Hey, Juliet, hey. I love you, little girl."

## Blowing Raspberries, Part I

Today we leave not knowing exactly where we are going. There aren't too many options anymore, at least for something new. I decide we'll head down Jeff Davis Parkway, see how far we can go.

My baby Juliet is in a carrier on my chest. Her legs dangle, she faces ahead. When I look down I see only the red flowers on the blue of her hat. I can feel her weight on my chest and in my shoulders and back. I feel her body heat on my belly. We play with each other's left hands. In my right hand there's a leash, a small dog on the other end.

We are in New Orleans, in what's called Mid-City. Our apartment complex, which rises above the shotgun houses all around, was once a can factory. A man who grew up in the neighborhood told me that when they were still making cans there a sound like rain falling filled the air day and night.

Today it is quiet. Chilly winter air has recently given way to warmer spring temperatures. I'm wearing athletic shorts and a sleeveless top, a baseball cap. A few days ago I got so excited about the

warm weather that I dressed Juliet in only a onesie, her legs and arms bare. When Bekah got home that night she noticed Juliet's arms were sunburned. So today Juliet has a thin long-sleeve suit on, but her legs are still bare. I notice it's a little breezy so I pull out a pair of socks from my bag and feel for Juliet's feet, slipping them on her before we continue.

Today there are seagulls lining the bayou. I make the sign for bird with my left hand and say, "Juliet, see the birds? See the birds?" She turns her head to see.

We continue along Jeff Davis on the sidewalk in the wide neutral ground. At Canal Street I decide to go left toward the central business district and its tall buildings in the distance. We've never come down this way before. Behind a chain-link fence there's the frame of what will be a bank, and we pass a man who looks up from watering a rumbling cement mixer.

Sometimes I sing to Juliet but most of the time we walk in silence, holding hands. She seems to enjoy our walks. We blow raspberries at times and she'll coo and screech and once even cooed in her sleep. But

most of the time we are quiet as we move slowly along. The first day Bekah left us to go back to work – my first day being a stay-at-home dad – I was surprised at how scared I was. This little one was in my charge, *my charge*. Yet it soon became clear all I had to do was change her, help her nap, and warm up her the breast milk from the freezer. The fear passed along with the days.

We come up to a school, Warren Easton. Three girls in uniform are in front and I see them looking at us and snickering. One waves and another says, “Hey, you the daddy?”

We cross Canal at the end of the block, at the imposing-looking Regional Transit Authority station.

There’s a large church building. It’s permanently closed. I sense the area is familiar and remember that there was a hostel around here I’d seen once. I see flags waving from a house and turn down the street. The India House, that’s it. There’s a van out front with a Penn State logo on it. There’s a young guy on the porch and another across the street, the side we’re on, on the steps of the church. He has earphones on and a stern look on his face. He does not look up.

I walk on and realize we are now in unfamiliar territory. I turn the corner and see a closed elementary school and a teenage couple walking on the other side of the street. The girl smiles, the boy does not. I am uncertain. I should not continue walking into a neighborhood I don't know, I tell myself, but I am curious. I go anyway. This feeling is the insecurity of being a new parent. What should I not do now with my child that I could do before? If I was alone I could walk here knowing if I got into trouble it was my fault, but now what I do impacts my little girl. Am I putting her in danger? What is the responsible thing to do?

Behind the school is a covered basketball court. A lone man picks up a silver ball and bounces it on the pavement. As I move along I see a group of men on a grass field beyond the court kicking a soccer ball. We turn the corner for a better look. Soon the ball rockets over a fence and the games stops.

We turn toward Jeff Davis again. This block is quiet, yet I am still tense. There are cars parked along the street and trash cans along the sidewalk but the houses look unoccupied. There's a door that is too small for the frame. A fallen "for sale" sign on the path to a front door.

A sticker that says “Vietnam Veteran” on the window of another house for sale. We have survived the neighborhood so I relax. Was it worth it? Was satisfying my curiosity worth the stress, the risk?

We turn on Jeff Davis. At Canal we see a statue of Jefferson Davis, the Confederate President. He’s high above the ground. His right arm is extended toward the street in salute.

As I go to cross Canal a black truck zips around the corner towards us. The driver stops and waves me on. When I pass he says out of the window, “You got a baby, baby, I gotta respect that.”

I notice Juliet is less active so I stop and turn her around. It takes only a minute for her to rest her head on my chest and fall asleep.

The bayou, when we reach it, is calm. The seagulls are gone. Some days ducks glide across the water or turtles peek out their heads, but we see none today. People sometimes fish or lounge under the trees, but no one is around, except for one Latino man who cycles by in the grass, his bike clicking along.

I cherish these walks, this time I have with my daughter. Something about walking calms me. Buddhists sometimes practice

walking meditation, where they walk a path in silence. This is my meditation. My easy breathing, my soft smooth rhythm, the love for my child. I find peace.

And in that peace, as my mind clears, I realize that since Juliet's birth I had somehow forgotten my blind questing for self-definition. Then just as suddenly the realization of who I am comes to me, though not clearly. It is more like a vapor, a humidity, with no clear delineation. Curious. Not until I ceased seeking did I find. Though I don't squint into the fog. I don't linger. I am at peace.

It's just me and Juliet, and the dog. The sun is high, the city is bright, the air is warm. We wander longer before we head home, where I will lie back on the couch and fall asleep with Juliet on my chest until she stirs.

## A Specter in Polished Obsidian (A Life History)

A life history, I learned from an anthropology professor, is the mediated story of a person told within the context of a greater culture and, he reminded me, should be a life history of just one person. But after interviewing Bibi and getting started on writing, I could not separate Bibi's story from mine. And so this life history is actually about two people, the researcher and the subject.

Bibi al-Ebrahim is a twenty-eight-year-old, Kuwaiti-born American citizen working toward a Master of Public Health (MPH) from Tulane University in New Orleans. We met through Bekah, who studied with her at Tulane.

The top of Bibi's head barely reaches my shoulder (I'm 6'3") and she has what you could call a bouquet of black curls. Her skin is mocha, her eyes hazel. Nearly every time I've seen her she is wearing a t-shirt and pants and her favorite shoes are a casual-looking hiking boot (she has admitted to me that her fashion sense is no good). Bibi bikes around New Orleans most of the time but sometimes borrows her roommate's

conspicuous white 1980's-era small-bodied pickup with a camper over the bed.

She served in the Peace Corps from 2003 to 2005 in Ecuador. Bekah and I served in East Timor from 2005 to 2006, and because we shared a similar experience I felt at once a connection with Bibi, one that maybe war veterans feel with other veterans whom they've only just met (I don't feel the same with all Returned Peace Corps Volunteers – RPCVs – but with her I did).

Until recently, Bibi and I only saw each other when I was with Bekah though I felt I knew Bibi enough to ask her to be the subject of a life history.

The assignment was for a graduate level anthropology course at the University of New Orleans, where I was working toward a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing: Nonfiction. I had always marveled at the work anthropologists could do, specifically cultural anthropologists who spent time with groups of people, immersed themselves, then wrote beautiful articles and books that made me feel there was so much more to this life than I knew.

Bibi said she was excited that I wanted to interview her and consented to be part of the project. I told her I did not know exactly in which direction we would go with the project, but we'd feel it out as we went.

Bibi is a lesbian. As time went on I would learn that Bibi had been in a serious relationship with a woman she met while serving with the Peace Corps in Ecuador.

The goal of a life history is to reveal some truth about human nature. As I mentioned before, when we started I didn't know exactly what I was going to write about, but as the project moved forward, the more I thought about it, the more I realized there were two stories. The first and most obvious is what Bibi told me about her life. The less obvious story is mine. I was interviewing my friend for a class project, but more importantly I was starting to understand that this was an opportunity to revisit the mystery: who was *I*? That was the truth that I was most interested in.

## Growing Up

Her parents met at the University of Pittsburgh in the late 60's. Her Kuwaiti father, who had come to the States as a high school exchange student, ended up dropping out of the university but stuck around while Bibi's European-American mother finished up. They were soon married.

Bibi confessed that though her mother was open to marrying a man from a far-away culture, she had to check something first.

"It was messed up, but when they got married my mom made sure Arabs weren't considered black," Bibi told me. "She didn't want mixed children. In her mind it's so much harder for mixed children. It's bizarre coming from a white woman." Bibi looked directly into my eyes when she spoke. I notice her complexion is like a stereotypical Latina's, and in fact she is often mistaken for being Latina. "We're not considered white. Yet she tells me to mark 'white' on applications."

This race-related fear would not be her mother's only fear. Even today her mother is unable to accept Bibi's homosexuality. Yet as the

interviews went on I would find that these fears were the small kinks in her mother's armor. Aside from these, she appeared to be a very open-minded and selfless human being. After all, she was an American who married a Muslim from Kuwait, moved there with him, converted to Islam, and lived there for eighteen years. Bibi also spoke of the security in her youth borne from the feeling that everything that was her mother's was also hers.

Bibi's brother was born five years after her parents' marriage, followed by her sister. Bibi, born in 1980, was their third and final child. Bibi's father worked at the airport and her mother taught at a prestigious Primary school which Bibi and her siblings attended.

When she talked about the Muslim aspect of her youth, Bibi described a world where the family's honor falls on the shoulders of the women and the men are there to keep them in line. If a woman does something inappropriate it reflects on the husband.

"There was an adolescent girl in another country who was raped by her brother," Bibi said, disgusted. "Her mom found out and because the girl was no longer a virgin the mom killed her. The fact that her

daughter was no longer a virgin made the family look worse than the fact that one of their sons was a rapist of his own sister. Not to say that my family is like that extreme by any means, but that's how it is."

When Bibi visited her father, now divorced from her mother and living in Kuwait, he inspected what she was wearing before she left the house.

"I feel you know me pretty well," she said to me. "I dress pretty modestly, but even then he'll say, 'Your t-shirt is too short.'"

She then told me of an incident that took place the last time she visited Kuwait.

"It was my third or fourth visit and my aunt finally let me go out without a chaperone. So it's me and my cousin and she's about two years younger than I am and we're driving along and I notice a car is following us. We were just going to the mall, going to a book store or something. This car was just beside us and there were these two young guys. My cousin was like, 'Just don't look at them. Pretend you don't see them.' And I'm like, 'But they're really annoying.'"

“We get to the mall, we park, they park. They’re following us. They’ve now gone out of their way to go to the mall with us. At some point they’re standing right next to us. While I’m looking at the books there’s one on my side and we’re not supposed to say anything to them because we’re not supposed to talk to strange men. The next thing you know, one of these fuckers actually writes down his phone number and puts it in my cousin’s purse and throughout this sort of weird interaction it would be inappropriate for us to say anything.

“It sort of reminded me that I don’t think I was ever meant to grow up in Kuwait. If I was still living in Kuwait there’s a good chance I would be married to a man right now. In that regard it was wonderful for me to leave and be able to express myself in a way that is truly indicative of who I am and not hiding a pretty big part of me, kind of lying for the rest of my life.”

My parents met in college, too, while they were attending McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, in America’s infamously conservative South. In some ways my parents’ union was like Bibi’s parents’. My father’s forbearers, the Acadians, had been in

America since they were kicked out of Nova Scotia in the 1600's but my mother was a first-generation American. Her father is Mexican and her mother Venezuelan. My mother's skin color is close to Bibi's and she has dark, thick hair.

My parents married in 1979 and I was born the following year. My father is an engineer and has worked at one or another oil refinery since my birth. My mother dropped out of school, stayed home and gave birth to two more boys. Unlike Bibi's family, my family stayed in one place. My parents still live in Lake Charles.

Both of my parents are Catholic, as their families have been for generations. In fact, that was part of the attraction, they tell me. They raised me and my brothers in the Church; we were baptized, took our First Communion rights, attended mass every Sunday and Catechism once a week. Our lives revolved around the teachings of the Church in the conservative South.

We were taught to obey the Ten Commandments and to love others. But at the same time I did not feel the same love from my community. While I inherited my father's long legs and strong nose, I

got my mother's complexion and hair. My skin is lighter than hers but, I realized early on, darker than my classmates'. Though I can only remember one instance where someone singled me out for looking different (he told me I was ugly), I always felt like an outsider in a Caucasian world. In that respect, though we grew up in different parts of the U.S. and our parents come from different parts of the world, I feel I can relate to Bibi.

Her family, minus her father, came to the U.S. every summer and stayed with her mother's parents in Pittsburgh. Bibi spent her kindergarten year in Pittsburgh because her sister was getting hospital treatment there.

"That was the first time my mother tried to stay," Bibi said. While she never gave me any details, she hinted that her father abused her mother. "Another time she flew to New York but he chased her there."

The war in Kuwait started while they were in the U.S. The Kuwaiti airports closed, forcing Bibi's family to stay in the U.S. Her mother enrolled the kids in schools. The local media got wind that they

were there and so her mother was interviewed all the time. Bibi's mother made up a story that her husband was in Saudi Arabia.

“I don't know why she lied. In reality all the family gathered in a house in Kuwait. But my father was in London in a Kuwaiti community where men go to gamble and drink and women go to shop.”

Her mom started going to graduate school. Nine months later Bibi's father joined Bibi and his family and moved in with them in the attic. They made plans to open a restaurant (they had owned a bakery in Kuwait). He would manage the restaurant and eventually they'd buy a house. That's when he started drinking. And Bibi said this wasn't the first time. But this time was different.

“My dad ended up pulling a knife on my brother. It could have been so much worse. My mom said, ‘That's it.’ I think it was the first time he attacked one of us so she could no longer justify being with him. I remember he slept on the floor of the restaurant for a while, then left. My mom sold the restaurant.” Later Bibi remembered that her father had pulled the knife because he found out that her brother was dating

and therefore “setting a bad example.” With the father out of the picture, the family was able to start a new life in Pittsburgh.

Bibi talked about being asexual as a teen. She went to high school dances with boys but was never interested in anything more than friendship. She mentioned that as she looked back on her youth, it was clearer to her now the feelings she felt toward girls she knew. But, at the time, she was highly influenced by her mother’s views, including those on homosexuality.

“She never said she was against homosexuality, but she would be very dramatic when she saw it on TV.” Plus there were other random comments. “There was a part of me that agreed with her. I internalized it.”

The first clear memory I have about homosexuality comes from the sex talk my parents gave me when I was ten years old. I can remember they called me after my brothers were in bed and took me to the dining room. At the dinner table they explained the physical act of sex with the aid of a book illustrated with cartoon images. They also added the

Catholic belief that sex was an expression of love that is only right between married people.

At one point my mom brought up AIDS. She told me that it came from a reaction that took place when men had anal sex. So I had the impression that being gay was like being a drunk or a drug user: it was risky behavior that “bad” people did (I had no idea women could be gay, too).

The first person I knew to be gay was a childhood friend. He came out in high school, and though we were more acquaintances than friends at that point, I could only think of him as a good guy. I could not think of him as the bad person I imagined all gays to be. And it is this, I think, that has shaped my view of homosexuality today.

### College and the Peace Corps

“The first time, at college, that I first became aware of homosexuality in general,” Bibi said, “was when I heard that a girl I knew kissed another girl. It was the first time I recognized my response,

which was in disgust, but at the same time I wanted it.” Bibi added, “I think it was the first time I thought about my sexuality at all.”

In high school, she said, she was happy, but at Denison University, just like many college students, she was trying to figure out who she was. She described the time as an identity crisis.

“It was a slow process compounded by the thoughts of being gay. Those were terrible, terrible years. I needed people around me to say it was okay. It was slow going because I didn’t have a supportive community.”

It was made difficult because she was, she felt, in an intolerant place. But she found support in her roommate.

“My roommate had the same reaction [to the news of the kissing girls], and shortly afterward she got with a woman. Being so close to someone who did this allowed me to come to peace.”

Bibi also talked to her sister about these new feelings, and she was supportive.

“My roommate and sister gave me that safe place. It helped to see my roommate in her relationship. It gave me hope. Very few people

knew they were together.” So it was, at age nineteen, her sophomore year, Bibi realized she was gay.

I realized I was hetero when I was fairly young. But it was in college, while Bibi was having her identity crisis, that I began to solidify my view on homosexuality. I had a roommate my senior year who was a Christian (which I had by that time decided meant he made it his charge to judge others while never looking at himself). At the time I was still practicing Catholicism and participating in Christian groups on campus. I can remember talking with him about homosexuality. He brought the same argument I’d heard before, even from my parents and younger brother: in the Bible, God smote Sodom and Gomorrah because they were filled with gays. But I found nothing wrong with a person being gay and was quick to counter. I said that God smote the cities not because anyone was gay but because they were rapists, which is not the same thing. (Since then I’ve refrained from countering Bible-based arguments, letting the other person understand it as he or she wishes – it gets too heated.)

Over time I likened this homophobia to racism and sexism. It seemed that this hate was based on fear which was passed down from generation to generation. But this fear came only from misunderstanding. I'd seen and heard many examples of people overcoming hate after gaining more understanding about the person or people they hated. As for claiming to be following a religion, it seemed to me an easy excuse for being close-minded and stubborn.

Bibi received her diploma having kept her secret from all but two people. What was her next move?

“After graduation, I moved to D.C. and lived with my old roommate. I became attracted to her and slept with her. So we got together but I realized there was a miscommunication there. We ended up having sex regularly and I was sucked in, though she made it clear that she was not interested.”

At the time, she decided the Peace Corps was a productive way out. “I needed a reason to cut off the relationship. That's why I joined, plus I wanted to learn another language and to live in a developing country.” She had been to Haiti in college and seen poverty like she'd

never seen before. “It helped my Peace Corps experience, my adjustment. I had already seen similar things.”

In the Peace Corps, she took the opportunity to come out to her fellow volunteers. She felt they would be supportive, and she was right.

“It was a boost to my confidence because my North American community was super supportive.” For the first time she was able to come out to the community around her, however small her Peace Corps community was. It was a big step forward, but it seemed it would be the last step she’d take for a while: “The Peace Corps kept telling me not to tell Ecuadorians I was gay.” The truth would be hidden away again. She was surrounded by an Ecuadorian community that was extremely homophobic.

## Lucia

Peace Corps volunteers, during their first weeks in-country, go through language training and culture lessons. It was there that Bibi was told, repeatedly, that it would be best for her safety to keep her sexual

identity to herself. It would be like she was back in college; she was afraid to reveal herself.

“There was a fear of rejection and that people would have been disgusted with me,” Bibi said. She did not try to hide in her facial expression how unfair the situation seemed to her.

Unlike in college, in Ecuador she had to be extra cautious with how she presented herself. I know from experience that this caution applies to all volunteers. The volunteer must become acquainted with the local mores in order to find acceptance in the new culture. The constant attentiveness can be quite tiring. But, besides the desire to gain acceptance, the volunteer also wants to protect him- or herself. Should he commit a *faux pas* that insults the wrong person, he could find himself physically threatened. Bibi was especially careful: “In Ecuador, I would totally avoid talking about homosexuality at all costs.”

After training, volunteers are sent to communities, known as “sites,” throughout the host country. Bibi’s site was San Miguel de los Bancos, so named because in the past people moving west would stop there and cut down trees to rest upon (*el banco* is a seat). It lies in the

Pichincha Province, which it shares with Quito, the nation's capital. At first, Bibi lived with her counterpart (a community member who is part mentor, part co-worker to the volunteer). That lasted a month as the two did not form a good relationship. But she found it hard to find another place to live because many oil workers, at work on a nearby project, were living in the community at the time.

Finally she found a couple with a vacant house. Both the man and the woman were mixes of mestizo and the indigenous Shuar.

“I had been living with them for a month or so when they told me their daughter, Lucia, was coming home from Europe. I didn't care at the time. Then one day she showed up. It was no big deal, but I knew right away she was a lesbian. I could just tell.”

Though I served in the Peace Corps with my wife and so was never alone, I know that life at site can be very lonely. Until our language skills were strong we could not easily chat with the people around us, and so friendships took a while to develop. But Bibi found in Lucia a person willing to sit with her and start that friendship.

“So with Lucia, I finally had a friend,” she said. “I taught her English, and she taught me Spanish. We did things together eight to nine hours a day. There was nothing else to do. We were making progress. I noticed she had a rainbow bracelet, and I thought she was making a statement [it was really a traditional Shuar symbol, Bibi found out later]. I felt safe enough to tell her I was a lesbian. I expected her to say she was too, but she didn’t.”

Lucia went on to tell a story of how she was in a monastery on her way to becoming a nun when a Spanish nun came on to her. The Church found out and ousted both of them. Lucia went to Europe to get away. So perhaps Bibi was wrong about Lucia.

Not quite. Not only did Bibi find a friend in Lucia, she also unexpectedly found a lover.

“A month after we met, she came on to me. I don’t know what prompted her. We were spending so much time together, I guess she was curious.”

There were two women in my Peace Corps group who were lesbian. My wife and I became friends with both of them and they were

my first gay friends. We became especially close to Sarah. She was in an off-and-on relationship with a girl living stateside and she talked to us about the hard times she was having with her girlfriend. As first it was strange for me to hear this because I didn't think I knew anything about lesbian relationships. Were they different from my hetero relationships? In time I found out there was very little difference. Sarah and her girlfriend were in a relationship just like me and my wife or my younger brother and his girlfriend. It was love for another human being. They loved, they fought, they supported each other sometimes and were controlling at other times. They had sex and all the emotions that go with it. So when I heard the following story about when she and Lucia got caught by Lucia's mom, I reacted the same way I would have if Lucia had been a man.

“When we got together, finally, communication stopped. We would wait all day in silence until it was clear [to have sex]. A few days later, we started early, and her mom caught us.

“Oh, my God, it was so stressful that night.” Bibi sighs. “So her mom basically walked in and it turned into me and my really bad

Spanish having to lie, to say we weren't doing anything except..." Bibi started to laugh, "doing drugs." I burst into laughter and her laughter rose to a cackle. She continued her story, excited.

"So what had happened is that we were in my bedroom. You can see into my house from one end to the other, it's like a shotgun [house] in that respect, and there are two bedrooms off to the side. Her mom starts knocking on my bedroom window. We're like, 'Oh God,' not expecting it at all. She's yelling for Lucia and Lucia says, 'Don't say anything, don't worry about it, she'll go away in a few minutes then we'll run out of the house and then come down as though we'd gone to the town to get some food for dinner.' At this point we're clothed again and huddling in the darkest corner of my bedroom. So her mom leaves and Lucia says, 'Don't move yet, let's give her a few minutes to walk away and we'll run out the front door.'

"So all I can see is my Peace Corps medical kit and I say, 'If she does ask, is it better that we were doing drugs?' and she says, 'Yes, so much better that we're doing drugs than this. It'll be fine. They know I just got back from Europe and I'll tell them I got into it there.' Next

thing I know her mom is unlocking my kitchen door. As her mom is busting into my bedroom I open it and turn on the lights and she grabs the broom from my kitchen and is about to beat me with it. And she starts screaming, 'I know what you guys were doing. You're dirty, you're gross.'

"And I'm having a heart attack, you know. Lucia stands up and her mom tells her, 'Don't you dare stand up. Sit down, this has nothing to do with you. This has to do with the American. It's the American's fault.' Probably for a good forty-five minutes her mom is straight up yelling and I, in my limited...it had seriously been like a month and I had this screaming woman in front of me speaking a language I don't really speak and she wouldn't let her daughter speak at all.

"She's accusing us of hooking up and I say, 'No, no.' This is the part where I say, 'It's against my religion, I would never, you're really insulting me.' And every time Lucia tried to say something her mom told her to shut up and Lucia is saying, 'But I'm older, this is my fault, I had total control over it.' Her mom's saying, 'It's the American.'

“Finally, I said, ‘Look, I didn’t want to tell you, and I’m really nervous because if Peace Corps finds out they’re gonna kick me out, but we were doing drugs.’

“She says, ‘Well it doesn’t smell in here.’

“And I say, ‘No, we weren’t doing those kind of drugs. We were doing the type that you snort.’

“And she says, ‘Well, let me see them, I don’t see anything.’

“I’m like, Oh God. So I go to the medical kit and open it up and it happens to fall in a way that two pills fall on top and I grab them.

They’re for giardia, right, so I grab them and I say, ‘These are them.’

“And she says, ‘You’re lying to me.’

“And I say, ‘No, no, no, what we do is we crush them up and snort them.’

“And she says, ‘Well, show me.’

“And I was thinking, okay, that’s going too far, I had no idea what they would do to me.” I laughed and Bibi cackled again. “So I go to my bathroom and I have this little face mirror and I say, ‘Look, this is it,’ and I take out my license or something,” Bibi laughed some more. “And

I say, ‘You crush it on this and then you take this and you roll up your dollar bill and snort it.’

“And Lucia is still on the floor and the thing that’s so funny is part way through this I look down and my shirt is inside out. It was so uncomfortable and it got to the point where her mom said, ‘Tomorrow you need to leave and you need to find yourself a new house.’

“She finally left. So it’s two o’clock at this point. That was another issue, like the night before Lucia got home at four AM and I think that was another reason for her parents to be suspicious.

“At that point I was so tired I just needed to pass out. At five AM there was this knocking on my door and it was Lucia and her father. And they said, ‘You don’t have to go.’ And her dad said, ‘I’ve spoken to the misses and it was really wrong of her. You pay rent. We absolutely have no right to just walk into your house.’ Which was true, which I thought was really cool. And he never seemed to care. On multiple occasions he told Lucia he loved her however she may be.”

Lucia’s mom gave Bibi and Lucia rules to prevent the scene from happening again. They could not hang out by themselves and English

classes could only occur in her mom's house. Within a couple of days Lucia's dad interceded. He convinced his wife that she could not make rules for her adult daughter. Lucia was twenty-eight at that point.

“So she started coming back to my house but we were super, super cautious. It was still a month or so before she was moving to Quito and we didn't do anything for that month.”

Once Lucia moved to Quito, Bibi visited her every chance she got.

“I was so afraid of her mother. They almost caught us a few times in Quito.”

Later on in her Peace Corps service, when Bibi was forced to change sites, she requested to work in Quito. But before Bibi left Los Bancos, she had a phone conversation with Lucia.

“I was going to move in with Lucia for a few weeks and I told her she should tell her parents. She called them and her mom asked to see me. She asked me, ‘How did you conquer my daughter? How did you convert her? Maybe that's okay in the States but it's not okay here.’”

“At that point I was much calmer. And I was confident enough in my Spanish to tell her, ‘That’s a conversation you have to have with your daughter.’”

“The next time I saw her mother was when I went to see Lucia when she was getting her lumpectomy.” Bibi spent the first half of 2007 with Lucia in Quito as she went through treatment for breast cancer. “I think she saw how I was loyal to her daughter. Now she adores me.”

### Lesbian identity

“Had I not been with Lucia, I wouldn’t be where I am in terms of my sexuality,” she said. “It was because of my relationship with Lucia that I felt that I needed to tell my mom. Had I not had a girlfriend, I wouldn’t have told her, because I don’t think she would have taken me seriously.”

While serving in Ecuador, Bibi took three weeks to go to Pittsburgh for a wedding. Before she returned to Ecuador, with the aid of a letter she wrote to herself, she told her mom that she was a lesbian.

“I started bawling before I could start,” she said. It was hard to tell her mom, but once she did, to Bibi’s disappointment, the subject never came up again. As I mentioned earlier, this put a strain on the mother-daughter relationship.

“My mom will not respect any lesbian relationship I will have,” Bibi told me. “She is unable to understand love toward a woman, cannot wrap her head around it. She doesn’t understand, then, why I’m looking for work in South America. It would be nice to get some support from her.

“We are rejected by our countries, our civil rights are not respected, but I’m also rejected subtly by my family. There’s a false relationship with my mom. She ignores parts of me. My siblings want the same thing [a family] and get her support. For the four years of my dating Lucia, no one knew in the extended family. I have to tell myself that I’m going to disappoint my mother. I’m an adult but I feel like such a child. It’s a constant conflict. Outright homophobia would be better at this point. It’s hard to walk away because she supports me in other ways.

“I first identify myself as a woman, and then as a lesbian. All my other identities branch off from there. I came out in college on a personal level, but not to my community. I didn’t feel comfortable coming out there, so I didn’t have to face it, the process of accepting myself through homosexuality. I didn’t go through the issues of acceptance of others. With Lucia, I was forced to deal with it.”

After Bibi completed her service in August, 2005, she moved to Tucson where she lived with her sister for six months. In January, 2006, Bibi joined up with Crisis Corps in Ecuador, where she was able to be with Lucia again (Crisis Corps is a Peace Corps program where RPCVs can take short-term assignments). This program ended in June. Bibi had been accepted by Tulane’s School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine in New Orleans and began classes in August. Finally, she was surrounded by many like-minded people her age who supported her.

“In New Orleans, I could finally come out publically and be gay. It was empowering. No shame involved. In Ecuador, it got to me that people kept telling me to keep it a secret. And it lowered my

confidence. Here, I am so comfortable with it that I don't even think about it.

“I came out in an isolated way, not surrounded by other lesbians. Emily [her roommate, also a lesbian], on the other hand, went to a school where it was accepted and so normal. All my lesbian friends I met through her. I do not feel the need to be surrounded by lesbians because I've been in a relationship most of the time and I'm surrounded by very accepting and supportive heteros. It's interesting that I identify as a lesbian but I'm not interested in this greater....” She thinks for a second then says, “But the way I came out was very personal.”

### Beliefs

I wondered what beliefs Bibi held, if any, that she fell back on, that provided comfort or encouragement through the hard times.

“Living with intention is my big belief,” Bibi said. “Do I want to do what's easy and not get what I want? But I know what I want, which is to be with Lucia, which requires I leave my family behind, my culture, my language. But I think I would be selling out if I didn't.

“I can’t get married. That’s abusing a civil right. But it’s more. It’s hindering what someone wants to do. Other people feel gay marriage affects them negatively. Live and let live. Respect what others need to be happy even though you don’t understand it. That’s a big belief of mine. If I let others tell me I can’t get married, if I don’t pursue what I want it says, ‘Yes, you’re right. This is wrong.’ Sometimes you have to fucking stand up.”

“Why do you care about the big picture?” I asked.

“To me it’s common sense. If I crap on you, that comes back to me. Whatever I’m worthy of, you are, too. If I have something why don’t you deserve it? If I have it and you don’t, well that’s not fair, and it’s going to come back on me somehow. Maybe it’s a selfish way of looking at things, but I feel everyone has the right to live with a bit of dignity and to live well. It’s a human right to have good health care. I think it’s a civil right for homosexuals to get married. And it should not be questioned. It should just be done. To not be able to think about the world around me is a foreign concept. I feel I can be convinced of

anything if you can tell me it's for the greater good. If it's better for the nation, I'm all for it. I'll respect it.

“The color of my skin hasn't made me feel like a minority as much as being a lesbian. I know what it's like to be a minority. I know what it's like to hide part of who I am for my physical safety, for job security. Even if I can't identify with someone's minority status, I can identify with being a minority. And all those behavior changes you use to protect yourself, that's wrong. I think being a lesbian helps me to see with a broader perspective. I've had hard times, I know what it's like to have hard times. Experiencing that pain helps you understand the pain of others. It's for that reason that I care for the greater good.”

When I asked Bibi what attracted her to Lucia, her answer had to do with the way Lucia treated others.

“She's extremely non-judgmental. She's capable of understanding multiple perspectives at once; it's attractive. She wants to be part of a community and help it. She's very patient, especially when I was learning Spanish. She's so supportive. She was the one who told me to get my degree from the States instead of Quito. It's almost martyr-like,

though I'd rather have it in the extreme than not at all. Our roles complement each other. It's so nice to be devoted to each other. You're a team – a unit – don't you think that's attractive?"

When Lucia was young, she lived in Quito with her older sister and attended middle school and high school there. She stayed and got involved with the church because she realized it was a way to go to school for free. She received a theology degree with a minor in philosophy. She was on track to becoming a nun and intended to achieve that goal by the age of 33.

"I have a stereotype of what Catholics believe in: anti-abortion, etc. She's not that. Her biggest disappointment when she did come out – what she took from Catholicism was the love aspect like, God loves all and we should love all – was that they dropped her because of the rumors after she learned love from them. They basically told her she wasn't lovable anymore. It broke all the stereotypes for me. Through all of the indoctrination, she was still able to take love from that, which I think is pretty amazing. She felt really betrayed. Though she doesn't practice anymore, she holds on to that important lesson. Her parents and

family are not religious at all. She saw it as a way to get educated and I think a lot of Ecuadorians think so, too, especially women. It's a way to get out. I think a lot of lesbians become nuns."

At the time of this writing Bibi was looking to work in northwestern South America. Lucia was one factor.

"She can't live here, so I'll move there. It's been tiring not knowing when we'd be together. Thinking as a couple, I have to make my decisions with her in mind; with my MPH I hope to get better work there."

Bibi believes in standing up for what she thinks is fair. I have found that living with a solid belief, with guidance, is directly related to a person's happiness. In other words, living without some foundation leads to frustration, to insecurity, to hopelessness.

What did *I* believe? I joined the Peace Corps hoping to figure that out. I tried so hard to see the truth that I only ended up finding frustration when nothing showed. The frustration turned to bitterness. Once we returned to the States I continued with day to day business, working and going to school, but with little enthusiasm. With no hope

there was no happiness. It wasn't until my first child, Juliet, was born that I was able to let the bitterness slide. A sense of peace came over me. I was filled with wonderment as I held my tiny child, as she looked around her, as she gripped my thumb. I no longer needed to know who I was but instead accepted that the most important thing was *this*. This moment. Not only every moment with my child but every moment, alone, with neighbors, with strangers. Having made the discovery I could finally cheer up. I had my base, my rock, my foundation: all we have is the moment. It was with this peaceful disposition that I conducted the interviews with Bibi. I found I was able to empathize with her in a way I could not with anyone for a long time. It was in plain contrast to the time I spent questing for truth – I could not connect with anyone while I was so self-centered.

## Culture

An important issue I did not specifically address is the issue of culture. Which culture or cultures does Bibi belong to and function in? I find this a tough question. Is it the Arab-American culture she grew up

in? Or is it the Peace Corps volunteer or Public Health student cultures of her adult life? Is it the New Orleans homosexual culture, or maybe the homosexual culture of Ecuador?

She belongs to all of them, but for this project I think the first I mentioned is the most pertinent – the Arab-American culture. It was the combination of the strict, family-based Muslim culture and the liberal, individual-centered American culture that produced Bibi and it is in this mixed culture that she continues to operate. It is in this mix that Bibi can pursue her truest, most honest vision of herself as lesbian even though she was brought up in a culture where women follow strict rules to please the men.

The interesting detail that emerges is that Bibi is neither Muslim, like her father, nor does she find homosexuality unacceptable, like her mother. Instead she follows no one religion and accepts all sexual orientations. How can this be?

Before I offer my postulation I want to look at my life, which presents a similar phenomenon. I have neither adopted my father's Church-following tradition nor that of my mother's faith-dependent

Latino tradition. The Church has been a part of each of my parents' families for generations. Why does it stop with me?

The reason Bibi and I have similar views is the same reason we do not follow our parents' traditions: we were raised in a culture much different from our parents'. We were raised in America. The American culture in general was our mother and father. Look to the teachings of the popular culture, to the messages in the wide-spread, mostly non-sectarian television shows, movies and music. *We absorbed all of it.* Is it a wonder that media seen and heard all across the country has created like-minded people like Bibi and me? But the homogeneity is present in millions more than the two of us. The members of our generation, I believe, from coast to coast, are more alike than the members of any before it because we share so much in common. Thank you, cable. Even if this idea is a bit of a stretch, in my case and in Bibi's the relationship is quite clear:

My father's culture, the Cajun culture of Louisiana, was a bubble, a sub-culture up until very recently. My mother's culture is not America's. Bibi's father was twice removed, being Muslim and

Kuwaiti. Bibi's mother was American but of the previous generation. And though I do not know the reason for her views towards gays, it is not the view her offspring share. We are not like our parents. We are a new creation.

In our cases mixing two colors produces a third color. Red and blue make purple.

### Reflection on the Interview Process

So what will come of this project? As I sorted through my notes it seemed to me this interviewing process was strangely like speed dating. What would have taken years for me to learn in the course of our friendship I have learned in a few weeks. In the process I learned a lot about my friend and I think our friendship strengthened as we made time for each other and trusted each other – she trusted I would treat her respectfully and write a truthful paper and I trusted that she would tell me what she truly felt about past experiences, however painful.

For our last interview, I asked her what she thought of the process. Her answer reinforces the “speed dating” analogy: it was nice so far, but

it'll take some more time to see what fruit this encounter produces.

Specifically, it will depend on what she thinks of this paper, but it will also depend on how our relationship grows, or flounders, from here.

Will this draw us closer or push us further apart?

“My sense will totally change after I read it,” she said. “I expect I'll be like an outsider looking in. After the interviews I'd go home and think, ‘Oh my God, I'm so boring,’ or, ‘I was too dramatic.’ I give my oral history all the time. Your wife knows and so do others. The difference is it's never been written down.

“I don't keep a journal. This is the next step. After I read it I'll feel totally different. It's very cool that you asked me. It's an honor. I just hope I'm not boring because you have expectations.

“I'm pretty up-front. I'd be that direct with a stranger, but internally there's a tensing-up thinking about other people reading this. When I realized that, it surprised me. I assume there's lots of judging going on and I'm not there to defend myself. At the end of the day I'm glad it's out there. I think it's important that other people think about gay rights and civil rights and what is taken for granted in the

heterosexual world. It's something people don't recognize until it hits home.

“I'm so sensitive because there are a lot of homophobic people around. It does bother me that your professor, for example, may be disgusted by it and I can't be there...to stand up for myself, to try to have a conversation around it and educate them. All they have is the story you've written. You're not there to put your foot down or to answer questions. If I'd have thought about it in the beginning, would I have been so open? But at the end of the day it doesn't even fucking matter. It's not that it's my personal information, it's that homosexual issues and civil rights issues, something that I'm so passionate about, it kind of bothers me that I can't have that conversation with somebody who is going to be reading about it. Maybe I'd have been a lot more apprehensive.”

I had informed Bibi, before we started, that I would be sharing this project with my class. Perhaps I wasn't clear enough, or maybe Bibi was so invested in telling her story she didn't consider the end result until I was near completing it. Either way, her saying she is now

apprehensive about others reading her story is interesting. I see two issues. First, if I had told Bibi that I was writing her life story for a popular and respected anthropological journal, perhaps she would have quickly understood who the audience would be and so would have adjusted her story to be, as she put it, less “open.” What does that say about subjects who knowingly interviews for a mass publication? Are they less open?

The other issue is fairness to the subject. As Bibi said, she will not be able to stand up for herself if someone who reads this disagrees with her lifestyle, her beliefs, or her view on homosexual rights. By writing this and giving it to a third party to read, I am taking away any chance for Bibi to converse with the reader in order to clear up any unanswered questions or concerns. The idea behind writing life histories, behind anthropology in general, is that one person tells another person’s story to a mass audience in the hope that the audience learns some truth about human nature. But the result is that the subject of the story is left out after the interviews are done; the subject is not speaking for him- or herself any longer once the writer has taken possession of the words.

The final question is this: how near, or how far, will the story travel from the truth?

To try to keep as near as possible to the truth, I have included, in this life history, my own story, in the hopes that the reader can understand where I'm coming from, why I think the way I do. The reader can then judge more accurately what is Bibi's story and what is my interpretation of that story. Also, I have made myself a subject. And as a subject I am exposed to the same problem any subject has: I will not be there to defend myself to most of the people who read this, to clarify anything I think needs clarification. Perhaps, then, that evens the field a bit and Bibi is not alone.

### Afterword

The question remains – did I find some truth here? One notable discovery was how much of an impact the culture of America had on Bibi and me. We became people of our time and place, truly, rather than becoming our parents' children. America triumphed.

As I mentioned, after the birth of Juliet I began to see with more clarity something I had sought in earnest before but could never find: my identity. The interviews with Bibi helped me. It became clear, painfully so, as I wrote the life history, that if I wanted to know who I was all I had to do was look around. I was America. In every direction I looked I saw my reflection. I was the young man riding his bike instead of driving a car, the slow-moving man pushing his possessions in a shopping cart, the woman holding her baby in a car-seat carrier, the man who ignored the plea for some loose change, the woman who organized the Thanksgiving soup kitchen, the lesbian dating another woman from Ecuador. The gutter punk, the hipster, the school principal, the clubber, the irate adult league soccer midfielder, the b-ball player at the public court, the rapper hoping to make it big in New York City, the singer-songwriter from Shreveport, the Down Syndrome man waiting to board the bus as I exited. The good, the bad, the gal with the tattoos on her face. We are all the same product. We all share the same mother and father.

To try to illustrate the effect this realization had on me, I will tell it this way: it was as if suddenly an image appeared in the blackness of my computer screen. I study my reflection only to realize I am looking at thousands of faces all at once. People I envy, people I've judged, people I hate, people I love. We are, I see now, all part of an enormous whole. Yet what appears to me to be the paradox of one person being every person is easily explained: picture a bead of salt water on a beach in California, then another bead on the Oregon shore, then another on a Florida beach and another on Maine's. They are all salt water. They are only separated by space, by molecules. No more.

It wasn't just the common beliefs that bound us, either. It was much bigger than I had even imagined. I was one with my generation but I was also one with all generations. With all mankind. Through all time.

I was not a person to be discovered but an atom-sized part of a vast and perfect whole. All that in a reflection, all thanks to a specter in polished obsidian. It was like a blow knocking me clear off my high horse. And I wanted to run away screaming.

## Blowing Raspberries, Part II

We start up Jeff Davis. I check my phone for the time: 9:00 AM. The day is overcast and humid; it rained hard last night, the grass and streets are still wet. Water rushes down a drain along the street.

We realized that walking in the afternoon, at the peak of the day, was not good for Juliet's skin. It would be better to protect her from too much sun. So we now walk in the mornings. Juliet is wearing a thin long sleeve onsie and thin pants, but no socks. I wear the same thing I wear every day, a sleeveless sports shirt and shorts. The dog is with us.

Juliet is in the new carrier. In this one she can sit on my hip. When she is in that position she leans forward so she can pull her trailing arm free from under my arm. I have to brace her to keep her from spilling out. I imagine she looks like a hood ornament to passersby, or like a figurehead on a sailing ship.

But today she is on my chest facing me because she is sleepy. She sleeps well in this position, as we discovered the first day we bought the

carrier. While we were shopping at Ikea Juliet was able to suckle my wife's breast with no one knowing and soon fell asleep.

Juliet finally rests her head on my chest. I look to see, yes, her eyes have closed. I stop, take off her white, flowered hat and hook the carrier's hoodie over her head. It's supposed to hold her head and protect her from the elements, but as it is it's too loose to hold her head. It doesn't seem to matter.

I notice a park to our right. I've seen it hundreds of times: there's a batting cage in the corner of an overgrown lot. But this time I notice a covered basketball court on the far side. I consider taking a closer look on our way back.

We near Tulane Avenue and cut across the grass to the other side of Jeff Davis. There's a memorial, a pillar, near the street, and I think about taking a closer look at this as well on our way back.

I have been down Tulane many times in a car but never walking. I am acutely aware of everything around me – I am in super-protective mode – and trying hard to look like I live here. A funny thing about living in New Orleans is that though the city has a reputation for

hospitality, as a resident I live almost every minute in fear of violent crime. This is the murder capital of the country. In no part of the city do I feel completely safe, not even here, a few blocks from our apartment complex.

I wonder if the dog would protect us if we were attacked. I lean toward not likely. She'd probably lick their hands.

But a powerful curiosity moves me along for now. As we walk along Tulane there is quiet except for the occasional boom and rat-tat-tat coming from the construction across the street. "We're building the future of Tulane Ave" one banner says. I hope the future is nothing like the present.

On our side of the street is a tax-help business, then a vacant building. We cross a street that meets Tulane at a severe angle. There's a Volvo dealership I've never noticed before. Then a store that sells doors and a bed and mattress store where I glimpse a large man behind a desk through the window. The next street is Salcedo. There's a car repair shop. Then I see something interesting.

The Mid City Community Garden. I'm surprised. Inside a fenced-in parking lot there are three raised plots with healthy gardens growing inside them. There's also a chicken coop at the far end. The gate is locked. A sign on the fence says patrons may buy produce there for a few hours on Saturday.

Happy with the discovery, I turn around and head back along Tulane. I walk up the street that crosses at an angle and see a barber and restaurant all-in-one, then a cab repair shop. My happy thoughts are gone: I think of the article I read just recently about a cabbie on the Northshore who was murdered by his fare. He was stabbed nineteen times in the head.

We head home. Thinking of the cabbie I forget the pillar and the basketball court. I would like to be able to explore the city, to get to know my surroundings without fear. To feel safe enough to stop at all of the monuments and parks, to notice the shops along the hidden streets, to find community gardens in inconspicuous parking lots and be able to linger about them instead of scurrying off. But there is always that fear

that I will find myself in the wrong place at the wrong time and become the next victim of violent crime.

This city held a special place in my heart after the flood, when we moved here to see if we could help. Now it just scares me. We are in New Orleans now, but how much longer can we bear to stay? I heard someone once say he's been here twenty years but still doesn't consider himself a New Orleanian. I've been here just shy of three and I definitely do not feel I am a New Orleanian, nor do I think I ever want to.

Of course it probably isn't all that bad in New Orleans. I'm just in a foul mood because I recently realized I am not as special as I'd thought for so long. No, I'm just like everyone else.

## To Juliet on the Imminent Arrival of a Special Guest

We are preparing for our guest. We must make the bed, dust the drawer tops and the photo frames. Scrub the toilets and tubs, clean the countertops. Vacuum and sweep. Put the kitchen in order.

Our guest will not bring anything. So we will provide clothes and we will share our food. Our guest will not be able to bathe or wash clothes so we will assist. The guest will not be able to walk so we will do the carrying. The guest will be small, it will not be hard to do.

The guest will have trouble sleeping through the night so we will do the rocking. The guest will sleep during the day when we are all up, so we will be quiet.

The guest will not be lonely because we will always be around. The guest will not go hungry or get too hot or cold. The guest will not go with any want unfulfilled.

We will massage our guest's legs and feet and arms. We will massage our guest's chest and belly to aid with digestion. We will keep

the lights low, except for the sunlight, which we will let in when our guest is awake. We will not be too loud or too excitable.

When our guest cries we will respond. Our guest will not be able to speak so we will have to intuit what is needed. We will take our guest out on walks when the time is right, after a few weeks of rest. Our guest will have been through a tremendous journey and will need time to recuperate. We will keep visitors to a minimum and ask them to leave when it is time.

Mother will feed the guest and father will do the holding. You will help wherever you can. The dog will offer protection.

Our living space will provide more than enough room. Our community is safe enough from the outside world, the hot and cold and wet and windy. Our doors will keep unwanted people out.

We do not know the day or the hour or even exactly how the guest will come, but we will be ready. We know the time is near.

Our guest will not have a name so we will offer one.

Our guest can stay as long as is desired. We are happy that our guest is coming. We are preparing for our guest.

## Detachment

The apartment is emptying. Nearly every day something disappears, as we soon will, along with the rest of the stuff we will take with us. First to go was our cd and dvd collection. Then our books, books that not only lined our six-foot-high bookcase but overflowed our closets. We sold all the books we could and all the rest I loaded into a grocery cart and left downstairs outside the lobby. In a few hours all the books, what must have been a hundred books, were completely gone. Then we sold the bookcase. Then a bicycle, a TV wall mount, a desk, a ladder, the TV and dvd player, the computer speakers, the vacuum cleaner, African souvenirs, the desk chair, a baby food processor, a wall clock, an Audubon print of a blue heron and our old hiking packs and sleeping bags. We gave away bags of baby stuff and other things we didn't want but didn't want to throw away.

What remains is a bed for us and another for my mother-in-law. The couch remains, as do three dressers. The entertainment center has

yet to sell, same thing for the baby stroller. The car will go up for sale soon. The small table and chairs for kids will go to our friends.

We will take only clothes, and toys and books for the little one. A few books for us, too.

The boxes of memories from childhood are gone.

It took a monumental leap but we decided it was time to get rid of everything we didn't need right now. Of course we ran across things that we didn't need but could not throw out, mostly photos. But high school yearbooks and prom photos and scraps of paper with little notes and my high school ring and my wife's graduate school graduation gown and the poster, script and the director's notes from the one play I acted in back in college and all the notes I kept from undergrad and most of the notes from grad school have been recycled or given away or thrown out.

I have seen too much. No, I can't blame it on New Orleans, even though it claims the title for most murderous city, a trait no one could blame me for trying to escape. The only thing I can say about the city is it happened to be where I saw the phantom, the specter in the polished obsidian and all I can do, all I can think to do after what I saw, after I've

been knocked clean off my pedestal, is run. When the baby comes we will wait until mom and baby are ready and we will take the few things we need right now and we will drive very far away.

## Vita

Travis Leger was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana. He earned his Bachelor's degree in Communications: Professional Writing from Centenary College of Louisiana in 2002. He joined the University of New Orleans creative writing program to pursue an MFA in creative nonfiction.