

The Best American Travel Writing™ 2014

Edited and with an Introduction
by Paul Theroux

Jason Wilson, Series Editor



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Foreword

TAPED TO MY DESKTOP computer monitor is a yellowing *New Yorker* cartoon from about a decade ago: a chic-looking man and woman sit at a table and gaze at each other over glasses of wine; the woman, her hand clutching at her bosom, says to the man, “Do wine writers suffer and all that?”

I keep this cartoon at my desk because, for years, alongside my work shepherding this travel writing anthology through 15 editions, I have also been writing about wine. Wine writing should, or could, be an adjunct to travel writing: at its most basic level, wine writing takes me on amazing trips around the world. But I’m always surprised how dissimilar the two genres have become.

Part of it has to do with the lack of immediate, visceral drama that happens on my wine itineraries. When I travel to write about wine, I go to some of the most beautiful places on earth, where I drink amazing bottles from some of the world’s best winemakers and dine in some of the world’s finest restaurants. While all this is fantastic and a lovely way to earn money, it does not exactly offer the gripping, universal, ripped-from-experience conflict that is the linchpin of compelling narrative nonfiction. (Please, do not cry for me.)

“Hmmmm,” says the wine writer, swirling, sipping, and spitting in the tasting room overlooking the gorgeous vineyards. “The tannins on the ’06 are a little bit green and aggressive right now. How disappointing. Perhaps it needs a few more years in the cellar. What a pity.”

As the woman in the cartoon asks, “Do wine writers suffer and all that?”

Travel writing, as we’ve come to know, is all about travail. We’ve been told that travel without suffering makes for a lousy story. As Camus once wrote, “What gives value to travel is fear.” Whatever I feel about the ripeness of last autumn’s Gewürztraminer in Alsace, it is far from fear.

Now, I am certainly not complaining that I do not suffer sufficiently. I can’t think of anything worse than a whining wine or travel writer. But when I sat down to write my first wine book last year I thought a lot about what made my wine writing so different from my travel writing.

All genre writing has certain generic conventions. Travel writing, for instance, has a convention called the “why I went.” I saw the “why I went” defined in L. Peat O’Neil’s book *Travel Writing: A Guide to Research, Writing, and Selling*: “The writer’s ‘I’ has one specific place to appear after the reader is grounded and gives the ‘why I went’ signal for the trip’s purpose . . . Explaining why you are there may give readers their own motivations to travel to the same place and certainly a reason to continue reading. Share your travel motivation to heighten identification and gain reader sympathy.” The “why I went” that O’Neil describes is well established, almost strictly enforced within travel publishing: “Since I have been nomadic my whole life, I decided to go on my very own Australian walkabout.” Or: “My marriage ended, so I bought a farmhouse in Tuscany.” Most loyal readers of travel books know the drill.

Wine writing has generic conventions similar to the “why I went.” Wine books, for instance, almost always begin with a lighthearted tale of the author’s initiation into the world of wine via some crappy bottle of plonk. This is where you’ll normally read an anecdote of misguided youth involving, say, Thunderbird, Sutter Home white zinfandel, Boone’s Farm, Lancers, Mateus, Korbel, Bartles & Jaymes wine coolers, or—for the generation of wine books soon to be written by millennials—boxes of Franzia. It’s sort of an immutable law.

I began my own book by describing a period during my senior year of high school when I was very enthusiastic about Mogen David’s flavored and fortified wine MD 20/20, otherwise known as “Mad Dog.” MD 20/20’s Orange Jubilee was my particular tippable of choice, and the reason had more to do with how much easier it was to hide in the woods than a six-pack of beer. I vaguely remember it tasting like a mix of chalky, watered-down SunnyD and grain alcohol, but I’ve mostly tried to cleans

that memory from my mind, along with numerous other suburban New Jersey public school rites of passage.

My MD 20/20 connoisseurship ended soon after I left for college in the big city. During the first week of college, I professed my enthusiasm for Mad Dog and shared some Orange Jubilee with the new friends on my floor. After gagging and spitting out the MD 20/20, they laughed and gave me the ironic nickname “Mad Dog,” which stuck until I transferred to a new school at the end of my freshman year. It was an early lesson in how fraught it can be to express a wine preference. It was also a lesson in how it feels to have one’s taste disapprovingly assessed.

In reality, there was no reason my first “wine” had to be MD 20/20 Orange Jubilee. My father was of the generation that, in the late 1970s and 1980s, leapt headlong into an appreciation of Napa and Sonoma Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. There were often bottles of Kendall Jackson, Robert Mondavi, Grgich Hills, or Beringer opened at dinners and parties. I occasionally had a taste, but back then I had little interest in drinking what my parents drank.

So it wouldn’t be until the summer after my sophomore year, when I was 19, that I first truly *experienced* wine. I was studying abroad in Italy, living with a family in a village called Pieve San Giacomo, near the Po River in the province of Cremona. Every night, Paolo, the father, sliced a plateful of prosciutto and cut a hunk from a wheel of Grana Padano. Then he uncorked and poured a fizzy red, chilled, from an unlabeled liter bottle he’d fetched from a dark corner of the barn—the same barn I’d wandered into one morning and there saw him butchering a cow. Paolo didn’t go for fancy wineglasses, but rather used what we would have called juice glasses back home in Jersey. Beyond retrieving the sliced meat, cheese, and wine, men were otherwise forbidden in his wife’s kitchen, so while Anna busily made us dinner and the television blared a soccer game, Paolo and I would sip our cool, fizzy red wine from our juice glasses on those hot evenings.

I had never tasted or witnessed a wine like this. The liquid was bright purple, with a thick pink foam that formed as it was poured. I knew enough to know that the Napa Cabs on my parents’ table back home didn’t foam. Paolo’s wine certainly tasted fruity, though it was more tangy than sweet, and what made it strange to me was the aroma. Whereas my father’s wines smelled like identifiable fruits—plums, cherries, berries—this fizzy wine was a little stinky, to be honest, but in a pleasant way. I didn’t have the language back then, but in my memory the aroma is earthy, rustic, fertile, alive, almost like the essence of the farm and the dusty streets of the village. Back then, it simply smelled and tasted like the Old World I had hoped to find.

Of course, being young and naive, I never bothered to ask Paolo anything about his wine—the grapes, where it was made, who made it. I kept in touch with the family, but Paolo died a decade ago, and since neither Anna nor his daughter, Daniela, drink wine, I never did learn the fizzy red’s provenance. Over the years, though, as my wine knowledge grew, I hypothesized that what I’d been imbibing on those summer evenings long ago had been Lambrusco, mainly since Pieve San Giacomo is just over an hour’s drive from Modena, Lambrusco’s spiritual home.

As I moved further into drinking and writing about wine, I occasionally told Wine People I met at trade tastings and industry events about enjoying this fizzy red wine as a 19-year-old, and it never failed to draw a chuckle. “Lambrusco!” they’d say. “Riunite!” Cheap, sweet Lambrusco had, of course, had its heyday in the 1970s, just like the leisure suit and swingers and fern bars, and I can remember seeing those cheesy “Riunite on ice. That’s nice!” commercials when the babysitter let us stay up late to watch *The Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island*. But as Americans’ knowledge increased during the 1980s and 1990s, budding wine connoisseurs didn’t want to hear about fizzy red wine anymore.

So even though the stuff I used to drink back in Pieve San Giacomo was neither sweet nor cheap, I just stopped talking about it, or even thinking about it. Like so many other aspirational Wine People

my age, I dutifully learned to appreciate Serious Red Wines, which in the early 21st century mainly meant Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir from various pricey bottlings. I studiously pursued an education in Bordeaux and Burgundy and all those big California reds that my father appreciated. Instead of rustic Italian wine, I delved deeply into Barolo and Brunello di Montalcino.

I filed my old “unserious” fizzy red alongside my youthful Orange Jubilee. I was being schooled by wine educators and sommeliers and wine critics that, as a knowledgeable wine drinker, a Wine Person I should be moving beyond things like fizzy reds. That is, after all, what usually happens next in a traditional wine education. You’re told that wine is a ladder, with the student constantly reaching upward, leaving behind so-called lesser wines and climbing toward greatness, toward the profound, toward—inevitably—the expensive.

This is why, two decades after my summer abroad, I found myself in Italy’s Langhe region, in Piedmont, visiting a bunch of producers of Barolo, the complex, elegant wine made from Nebbiolo grapes—the epitome of a Serious Wine. I tasted dozens of amazing, and often profound and transcendent, Barolos, which convinced me, once again, that Nebbiolo grapes grown in this corner of northwestern Italy create one of the world’s greatest wines.

My visit culminated on a sunny Sunday afternoon with an auction called the Asta del Barolo, inside the famous castle in the town of Barolo. Collectors—some from as far away as China, Singapore, and Dubai—purchased bottles from prized vintages for thousands of dollars. One acquaintance, an Austrian banker living in Hong Kong, paid 3,000 euros (about \$4,100) for three magnums dating from the mid-1980s. I sat next to a charming producer, whose family’s elegant, silky Barolos annually receive high scores from critics, who call them “genius” and “breathtaking.” During lunch, we tasted about 15 examples of the 2009 vintage. Later, there was talk among the younger winemakers about Jay-Z’s recent visit to Barolo, where he supposedly dropped \$50,000 on wine and truffles.

I won’t lie: it is sexy and exciting to be part of an afternoon crowd like that. And I cannot state clearly enough how much I enjoy Barolo. Perhaps it is geeky to say, but sipping it can be like listening to a beautiful, challenging piece of music or standing before a grand, moving work of art. I love it so much that when people ask what my favorite wine is, I often exclaim, “Barolo!” And they nod and say “Ah, yes. Barolo, of course.”

But that afternoon at the castle was total fantasyland. When I returned home, would I be drinking very much Barolo? Um, no, not so much. Saying that Barolo is my “favorite” is very much a misrepresentation of my everyday drinking habits. How often do I drink it? Outside of professional tastings, when I’m buying wine to serve at home or when I order it in restaurants, I probably drink Barolo three or four times a year. Maybe five if I’m particularly flush. That’s because the price of a decent Barolo at a wine shop starts at around \$60 a bottle and quickly climbs to well over \$100. Double or triple that price on a restaurant wine list. Even though I love Barolo, it will always be a special-occasion wine.

I was thinking deeply about greatness in wines when I decided to make a quick side trip to visit my old exchange family in Pieve San Giacomo. On a whim, I’d asked Daniela, Paolo’s daughter, to do a little research to see where her father used to buy his fizzy red wine, and with some effort we located the winemaker. To my surprise, the winemaker was not based in Modena, but rather a couple of hours in the other direction, in the Colli Piacentini—the Piacenza hills—a region I’d never heard of.

After getting lost, and refereeing an argument between Daniela and Anna, who was almost carsick in the back seat, we were finally welcomed into the garage of the winemaker, 80-year-old Antonio, and his daughter, who was roughly my age. Anna became emotional—the last time she’d visited the winemaker was in the early 1990s with Paolo. “I remember you had a goat, and it used to like eating the grapes!” she said. The goat, of course, was long dead.

From stainless steel tanks, we tasted his crisp Riesling and a strange, straw-yellow wine made from

the local Ortrugo grapes. Antonio told me that most of his customers come to buy his wine in demijohns because they prefer to bottle it themselves, as Paolo did.

“What about the frizzante red?” I asked. “Do you still make it?”

He smiled broadly and retrieved a bottle from a corner of the garage. He grabbed a wide white bowl and splashed the purple wine into it as the wine formed a pink foam. “My customers insist on white bowls for the red,” Antonio said, “to bring out the color and aromas.”

I closed my eyes and took a sniff, then took a sip. Sharp, fresh, tangy, earthy. Wow! The aromas and flavors were like a time machine. I was again 19, dressed in a Grateful Dead T-shirt and Birkenstocks, experiencing wine for the first time. Holding the huge wide bowl to my face nearly brought me to tears in the dark garage. “Ah, Lambrusco,” I said, with a satisfied smile.

Antonio laughed. “Lambrusco? No, no, no. This is Gutturnio!”

“Gutturnio?” I said. What the hell was Gutturnio? I must have said something wrong. Maybe I was having trouble understanding the dialect. “Is that the local name for Lambrusco?” I asked.

He laughed again. “No! It’s Gutturnio. It’s a blend of Barbera and Bonarda.”

Um . . . what? For 20 years, I’d been telling myself that my seminal wine experience had been Lambrusco. Now I find out that it was a wine called Gutturnio? And how had I never even heard of this wine? It’s not like it’s new. I later learned that the Romans drank it from a round jug called a *gutturnium*, from which the wine’s name is taken. Julius Caesar’s father-in-law was famous for producing this wine.

We sat at Antonio’s table and ate cheese and meat with the wine, and Anna and Antonio reminisced about the old days. Antonio said that he now sold about 4,000 bottles per year, about half what he had about 20 years ago. “Ah,” he said, “a lot of my customers, they’re dying.” Meanwhile, the younger generation just isn’t as interested in local wines like his anymore. “Nowadays, people want different tastes. There are a lot of other tastes that people seek.” Antonio shrugged. “There is an end for everything. Everything ends.”

Suddenly, this humble, fizzy, purple Gutturnio that I swirled around in a white bowl—which connected me to my own past, to ancient Rome, and yet at the same time was totally fresh knowledge—seemed more important than even the greatest Barolo. The strange experience I was having in a farmhouse in the Piacenza hills seemed to me to be the very essence of wine, the reason people spend their lives obsessed with it, an example of how wine becomes part of our lives.

As I thought about all this—about wine and Italy and youth and family and revisiting scenes of unadulterated happiness—it occurred to me that this wasn’t so different from how one falls in love with travel in the first place. They might even go hand in hand. And telling this kind of story isn’t so different from telling any other story that one might call travel writing.

Camus and others may have a point—that travel is about fear and suffering and travail. That has become an accepted truth of travel writing. But this truth is only partially correct. Travel is also very much about love and memory. I’m hoping that this anthology shows you that love—as well as fear and suffering and travail.

The stories included here were, as always, selected from among hundreds of pieces in hundreds of diverse publications—from mainstream and specialty magazines to Sunday newspaper travel sections to literary journals to travel websites. I’ve done my best to be fair and representative, and in my opinion the best travel stories from 2013 were forwarded to guest editor Paul Theroux, who made our final selections.

This is the second time I’ve worked with Paul on this anthology (the first was way back in 2001), and it was just as much of an honor today to work with a travel writing hero of mine and a master of the genre. The world has changed a great deal since 2001, but I think you’ll find that the key

characteristics of great travel writing never really change. I'd also like to thank Tim Mudie at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt for his help in producing this year's outstanding collection, our 15th. I hope you enjoy it.

I now begin anew by reading the hundreds of stories published in 2014. As I have for years, I am asking editors and writers to submit the best of whatever it is they define as travel writing. These submissions must be nonfiction, published in the United States during the 2014 calendar year. They must not be reprints or excerpts from published books. They must include the author's name, date of publication, and publication name, and they must be tear sheets, the complete publication, or a clear photocopy of the piece as it originally appeared. All submissions must be received by January 1, 2015, in order to ensure full consideration for the next collection.

Further, publications that want to make certain that their contributions will be considered for the next edition should be sure to include this anthology on their subscription list. Submissions or subscriptions should be sent to Jason Wilson, Best American Travel Writing, 228 Kings Highway, 1st floor, Suite 2, Haddonfield, NJ 08033.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this year's anthology to one of our contributors, Matthew Power, who died tragically in March of this year while on assignment in Uganda, reporting on an explorer walking the length of the Nile. Matt was 39, which made him a contemporary of mine, and he was a true adventurer and seeker of truth whom I admired tremendously. Those who are loyal readers of *The Best American Travel Writing* know Matt's work well, as it has been included here several times over the past decade. He will be greatly missed.

JASON WILSON

Introduction

TRAVEL WRITING TODAY is pretty much what travel writing has always been, a maddeningly hard-to-pin-down form—one traveler boasting of luxury and great meals, another making asinine lists (“Ten Best Waterslides on Cruise Ships”), yet another breathlessly recounting an itinerary of hardships and mishaps, and a fourth (and the most valuable, in my view) holding you like the wedding-guest with a skinny hand and fixing you with a glittering eye and saying, “There was a ship . . .”

If you’re looking for a model, the greatest writer-traveler the world has known is the Moroccan Ibn Battutah, who set as his goal to travel the entire Islamic world, including China, India, Southeast Asia, and Africa, in the mid-14th century. This took him 29 years. He spent a year in the Maldives, that strange scattered archipelago of coral atolls, where he took a number of wives, and then moved on, leaving them behind. Unlike those other long sojourners Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville (who might not have existed), Ibn Battutah wrote his book himself. In the words of one of his early Arab admirers:

All master-works of travel, if you will but look
Are merely tails that drag at Ibn-Battutah’s heel,
For he it was who hung the world, that turning wheel
Of diverse parts, upon the axis of a book.

Ibn Battutah wrote about everything, great hospitality as well as catastrophes, miseries, wars, famines, plagues, pestilences, and xenophobia. Centuries later, what has changed? With—to speak only of Africa—the Ebola virus ravaging Guinea, the fanatical Boko Haram jihadists massacring thousands in northern Nigeria, tribal rioting and terrorist bombs in Kenya, and sprawling squatter camps in South Africa and Angola, travel in some of Africa is as much a challenge as it ever was. And yet in those same countries, there are still safari-goers, bird watchers, colorful dancers, and tarted-up tribal splendor. And there are travel writers reporting this somewhat hackneyed African experience, in pieces published in the glossier travel magazines extolling the spa experience and the cupcake culture in other pages. Some of these magazines are represented here, with more robust pieces, but in general what they call travel is in most cases a superior and safe holiday.

All countries crave tourism, because tourism creates employment, and the tourist makes a brief visit and leaves money behind. By contrast, the traveler is typically a budget-minded backpacker who lingers and is self-sufficient. India beckons tourists to its luxury hotels, but India is a wonderful example of a country full of contradictions, even old-fashioned adventures, if a traveler happens to be willing to take a few risks. The “Incredible India” ad campaign by the Indian Ministry of Tourism was claimed to be a success, but the most incredible aspect of it was that there was no mention of how dangerous India can be—in the so-called Red Corridor of the country, where Maoist guerrillas regularly massacre villagers or set off bombs, and other sporadically reported separatist movements, notably in Assam, cause some roads to be declared off-limits to travelers. Not long ago, I was discouraged from traveling a mere 80 miles by road from Silchar to Shillong in Assam because of “incidents.” In a peaceable tea-growing area, I was warned of dacoits (bandits). It is the situation Kipling would have faced in the 1880s in the same place. In fact, there are 37 named terrorist/insurgent groups in Assam, with colorful names such as Adivasi Cobra Force, Black Widow Liberation Tigers, and Rabha Viper Army. But, of course, bandits are out in force the world over. In many cases, the government in such places doesn’t want you to know that.

I applied for an Indian visa two years ago, paid extra to have the visa approved quickly. When I did

not receive my passport back on the given date or even two weeks later, I inquired about the reason for the delay. The Indian consular official explained that my application had to go to several other officials for approval, and this might take weeks more.

“What exactly is the problem?” I asked.

“On your application, under ‘Occupation,’ you have ‘Writer.’”

“This is a problem?”

“Yes, one requiring higher authority.”

So big, boasting, highly educated, literate, incredible India is as worried by the approach of a bespectacled senior with a ballpoint pen in his hand as a dacoit with a slasher.

China is no different. Write “journalist” or “travel writer” on your visa application at your peril, and good luck if you get the stamp. With its dazzling cities and booming factories, China is still a country governed by a repressive puritanical regime that has infuriated and displaced many minorities, among them the Uighur separatists of Xinjiang, who in March 2014 slit the throats of 29 travelers (and wounded 130 others) at the main railway station in Kunming.

And those bookish travelers hoping to find the literary and biographical landscape of Chekhov in the Crimea will find themselves in a turbulent place today and a potential war zone, poised for conflict, just as it was more than 150 years ago.

But if the traveler manages to breeze past such unpleasantness on tiny feet, he or she is able to return home to report, “I was there. I saw it all.” The traveler’s boast, sometimes couched as a complaint, is that of having been an eyewitness, and invariably this experience—shocking though it may seem at the time—is an enrichment, even a blessing, one of the trophies of travel, the life-altering journey.

Tourists have always taken vacations in tyrannies; Tunisia and Egypt are pretty good examples. The absurdist dictatorship gives such an illusion of stability, it is often a holiday destination. Myanmar is a classic example of a police state that is also a seemingly well-regulated country for sightseers, providing they don’t look too closely. The Burmese guides are much too terrified to confide their fears to their clients. At a time when President Mugabe was starving and jailing his opponents in the 1990s, visitors to Zimbabwe were applying for licenses to shoot big game and having a swell time in the upscale game lodges. This is, to a degree, still the case.

By contrast, the free market–inspired, somewhat democratic, unregulated country can make for a bumpy trip, and a preponderance of rapacious locals. The old Soviet Union, with nannying guides, controlled and protected its tourists; the new Russia torments visitors with every scam available to rampant capitalism. But unless you are in delicate health and desire a serious rest, none of this is a reason to stay home.

“You’d be a fool to take that ferry,” people, both Scottish and English, said to me in the spring of 1982 when I set off at Stranraer in Scotland for Larne in Northern Ireland. I was making my clockwise trip around the British coast for the trip I later recounted in my book *The Kingdom by the Sea*. At the time and for more than 10 years, a particularly vicious sort of sectarian terror was general all over Ulster. It seemed from the outside to be Catholic versus Protestant, centuries old in its origins, harking back to King Billy (William of Orange) and the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, the decisive event still celebrated by marchers in silly hats every year on July 12. Ulster violence in the 1970s was pacified and then stirred by British troops, and the terror given material support by misguided enthusiasts in the United States.

How do I know this? I was there, keeping my head down, eating fish and chips, drinking beer, and making notes, while observing the effects of this confederacy of murderous dunces, the splinter groups, grudge bearers, and criminal hell-raisers of the purest ignorance.

The narcissism of minor differences was never more starkly illustrated than after that rainy night

when I boarded the ferry from Scotland and made the short voyage into the 17th century, setting off to look at the rest of Northern Ireland. What I found—what I have usually found after hearing all those warnings—was that it was much more complicated and factional than it had been described to me. And there were unexpected pleasures. For one thing, the Irish of all sorts were grateful to have a listener. This is a trait of the aggrieved, and to be in the presence of talkers is a gift to a writer.

It was all a revelation that has become a rich and enlightening memory. Nor was it the only time I have been warned away from a place. “Don’t—whatever you do—go to the Congo,” I was told when I was a teacher in Uganda in the mid- and late 1960s. But the Congo was immense, and the parts I visited, Kivu in the east and Katanga in the south, were full of life, in the way of beleaguered places. In the mid-1970s, I was setting off from my hotel in Berlin for the train to East Berlin when the writer Jerzy Kosinski begged me not to go beyond the Brandenburg Gate. I might be arrested, tortured, held in solitary confinement. “What did they do to you?” he asked when he saw me reappear that evening. I told him I had had a bad meal, taken a walk, seen a museum, and generally gotten an unedited glimpse of the grim and threadbare life of East Germany.

Not all warnings are frivolous or self-serving. I have mentioned being cautioned about dacoits in Assam: it was good advice. Passing through Singapore in 1973, I was warned not to go to Khmer Rouge-controlled Cambodia, and that was advice I heeded. There is a difference between traveling in a country where there is a rule of law and visiting one in a state of anarchy. Pol Pot had made Cambodia uninhabitable. I traveled to Vietnam instead, aware of the risks. This was just after the majority of American troops had withdrawn and about 18 months before the fall of Saigon. My clearest memory is of the shattered Citadel and the muddy streets and the stinking foreshore of the Pearl River in Hue, up the coast, the terminus of the railway line. Now and then tracer fire, terror-struck people, a collapsed economy, rundown hotels, and low spirits.

Thirty-three years later, I returned to Vietnam on my *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star* journey, which was a revisiting of my *Great Railway Bazaar*. I went back to the royal city of Hue and saw that there can be life, even happiness, after war, and, almost unimaginably, there can be forgiveness. Had I not seen the hellhole of Hue in wartime, I would never have understood its achievement in a time of peace.

Just a few years ago, Sri Lanka emerged from a civil war, but even as the Tamil north was embattled and fighting a rear-guard action, there were tourists sunning themselves on the southern coast and touring the Buddhist stupas in Kandy. Now the war is over, and Sri Lanka can claim to be peaceful, except for the crowing of its government over the vanquishing of the Tamils. Tourists have returned in even greater numbers for the serenity and the small population, and travel writers have begun to explore Jaffna and the north of the island, which was for so long a war zone.

The pieces this year ably illustrate the defiance of the traveler who, against the odds, sets off to find something new to write about. I can imagine some chair-bound geek advising against going to London or Venice or Las Vegas; but here is a refutation—strong, well-written accounts of London, Venice, and Las Vegas. Another warning finger might be wagged in the face of someone on his or her way to the remote parts of Brazil or the back alleys of Somalia, but here is an account of a confrontation in the Brazilian rain forest and an amazing experience in Somalia.

Around the time I was reading, with pleasure, Matthew Power’s piece, marveling at yet another of his exploits, I learned of his premature death at age 39, apparently of heat stroke, in Uganda, on an assignment following a man who was walking the length of the Nile. I am delighted to include his story and regret that it is his last. He started young—he was a mere youth traveling in and writing about Afghanistan and the Philippines. This recent piece is in the nature of guerrilla travel, a portrait of disapproved and frequently arrested “space invaders”—the so-called urbex movement—who have a passion for infiltrating off-limits sites, gaining access to locked sewers and forbidden cathedrals.

Matthew Power both observed and participated; his writing is vivid and memorable. He will be greatly missed.

In such a collection as this, the truly horrible experience can be found next to the mildly annoying incident: the kidnapping in Somalia of Amanda Lindhout (a joint credit with Sara Corbett), with—in sharp contrast and in another mood—Harrison Scott Key's reflections on riding by Greyhound bus, with his helpful observation, "Bus People are nothing like Airplane People." And in yet another paradoxical pairing, Alex Shoumatoff writes about one of my favorite subjects, the first contact between highly cultured, self-sufficient indigenous people in the Brazilian rain forest and desperate, rapacious savages—loggers in this case—from the outside world. Elsewhere, Michael Paterniti immerses himself in Guzmán, Spain, and Julia Cooke makes good friends in Havana. Some travelers are compelled by daring, others by dilettantism.

To see a familiar place in a new way is the mission of Sean Wilsey among the gondoliers of Venice, Peter LaSalle peregrinating Paris, Peter Selgin in New York, Colson Whitehead in Las Vegas, Stephen Rinella in the Alaska wilderness, Gary Shteyngart in a more-salubrious-than-usually-depicted Bombay, Andrew McCarthy negotiating Calcutta, and Bob Shacochis on a fishing trip in remote Argentina. Thomas Swick, in his shrewd essay on the nature of travel, suggests what motivates these travelers.

The earth is often perceived as a foolproof Google map, not very large, easily accessible, and knowable by any nerd drumming his fingers on a computer. In some respects, this is true. Distance is no longer a problem. You can nip over to Hong Kong or spend a weekend in Dubai or Rio. But as some countries open up, others shut down. Some countries have yet to earn their place on the traveler's map, such as Turkmenistan and Sudan, but I've been to both, and although I was the only sightseer at the time, I found hospitality, marvels, and a sense of discovery.

Distance was once the problem for the traveler to overcome. How to get to the Indies, or cross the Taklamakan Desert, or navigate the Sepik River? When Chekhov traveled to Sakhalin Island in 1887, it was as though he was heading for another planet. In my lifetime, Albania and Cuba were once forbidden and inaccessible countries, but these days you'll find them full of tourists sunning themselves on the beaches and windsurfers offshore.

The problem of distance has been solved. There are good trains through the Taklamakan Desert and tour boats up the Sepik. You can get yourself to the Highlands of New Guinea or the foothills of the Himalayas, or to Timbuktu, without much trouble. But access is still a problem in those, and in many other, places: in the fractured countries of Africa, in quarrelsome Pakistan, in the disputed parts of India, and in the nations that have emerged from the old Soviet Union—Dagestan, Chechnya, and now Ukraine. And there are the inner cities of the United States, many of which pose challenges to the curious visitor with probing questions. In writing this, I am betraying my love of reading about adventures and ordeals—the traveler's baptism of fire. These places that defy many travelers are opportunities for those who are willing to take a risk, for the reward of making a discovery and then writing about it brilliantly.

PAUL THEROU

FROM *The New Yorker*

LAST SEPTEMBER, at a hospital in eastern Croatia, my father and I visited a collection of some 400 human kidneys. Most had belonged to the victims of a mysterious, fatal kidney disease, which occurs in agrarian communities on the Danube River and its tributaries. Some villages have it; others, seemingly identical in every way, do not. The onset of the disease, which is known as Balkan endemic nephropathy (often abbreviated as BEN), takes place in middle to later life, after the patient has lived in an affected village for 15 or 20 years. The first symptoms include weakness, anemia, and a coppery skin discoloration. The kidneys begin to atrophy, and about half of patients also develop a rare cancer of the upper urinary tract. Without a kidney transplant or treatment by dialysis, death usually occurs within a year.

At the kidney collection, a pathologist took several formalin-filled jars out of a cabinet and lined them up on the counter. Inside were kidneys riddled with holes, misshapen kidneys with visible tumors, biopsied kidneys sliced in half, and atrophied kidneys, ghostly pale, some as small as walnuts. My father, a nephrologist, says that he has never seen kidneys as tiny as those removed from BEN patients.

BEN was first described in the 1950s. Over the years, many theories have been proposed to explain the disease, from cadmium poisoning and hantaviruses to toxic molds and chromosomal mutation. Uncertainty and controversy surround the most basic data, such as the number of people with the disease. One doctor I spoke to puts the figure at a hundred thousand. A recent Croatian study found that the incidence of the disease is declining, while a Serbian study found that it isn't.

Because BEN takes decades to develop, investigators are always following a cold trail, and this makes the disease a particularly intractable puzzle. Animals don't live long enough to get it, and respond to toxic substances differently from humans, which limits the possibilities of experimental research. The villages affected are in a demographically fragmented region, fraught with wars, revolutions, genocides, and totalitarianism—all of which have hampered research and medical record keeping. Today, BEN is a budget-straitened side project for most scientists who study it. A disease that affects only middle-aged Balkan farmers isn't exactly a magnet for international funding.

My father began studying BEN in the 1980s, but his work was interrupted by the Yugoslav wars. Last fall, he returned to the Balkans for the first time in years, and I went with him. We began our trip in Timișoara, the largest city in western Romania, where we met Calin Tatu, a researcher who has been studying the disease with the U.S. Geological Survey for more than a decade. Tatu, who is in his 40s, and has a buzzcut and a close-trimmed beard, holds a medical degree in immunology but prefers working in the lab to seeing patients. He was wearing tinted glasses and a cargo vest, and had spent the previous week climbing Mont Blanc. At lunch, over two double espressos and two Coke Zeros, he told us about his research.

For the past 10 years, Tatu has been investigating the Pliocene lignite hypothesis—a theory developed by a geologist who noticed that the map of the endemic villages closely shadows the locations of Pliocene-era coal deposits. It isn't clear exactly how the coal would make people sick, but Tatu believes that toxic compounds may be leaching from the coal into the groundwater. At his lab, he showed us a machine capable of reducing 20 gallons of groundwater to a few teaspoons of brown sludge. He says that he has found unique organic compounds in water samples from the region, but he

doesn't yet know whether they contribute to BEN.

In recent years, Tatu has been testing another theory as well: poisoning by aristolochic acid, a toxin found in plants of the *Aristolochia* genus. This theory, which has recently gained wide acceptance, was formulated thanks to one of those grievous human misfortunes described by scientists as “a natural experiment.” In Brussels, in the 1990s, a number of otherwise healthy young women suffered end-stage kidney failure, requiring dialysis or transplants. It turned out that they all belonged to the same diet clinic, where they had taken a Chinese herbal slimming blend containing aristolochic acid. About half of them later developed the same rare upper-urinary-tract cancer found in BEN patients. Researchers soon made the connection with BEN, particularly since a species of aristolochia—*Aristolochia clematitis*, or European birthwort—is common throughout the Balkans.

In 2007, an American pharmacologist named Arthur Grollman analyzed kidneys from BEN patients and found molecules derived from aristolochic acid bound to the patients' DNA. In further studies, he identified aristolochic acid's mutational signature in DNA from patients' tumors. According to Grollman, these findings prove that the cancers were caused by aristolochic acid, which he suspects was ingested after seeds from the plant got mixed with wheat and ended up in the villagers' bread. Other researchers have built on these findings, and many now favor the term “aristolochic-acid nephropathy” over “Balkan endemic nephropathy.” Grollman believes that the mystery has been solved.

Yet questions remain. Some researchers have been unable to find the same molecules, either in the Belgian women or in BEN patients. Others have drawn attention to the differences between the Belgian women's disease and BEN; notably, the Belgian women tended to become sick within 12 to 18 months rather than 20 years. Perhaps the biggest puzzle is why aristolochic acid would make people sick only in certain areas, given that it grows throughout the Balkans, as well as in much of the rest of Europe and the Middle East.

The aristolochia theory is strong precisely where the Pliocene theory is weak, and vice versa. Pliocene coal is found throughout the endemic regions, but it has no known causal link to BEN symptoms. Aristolochia has been linked to the symptoms, but it grows all over the place. Tatu suggested that aristolochic acid and coal compounds might be working in combination. He agrees that aristolochic acid is a cause of BEN, and thinks that the biggest remaining question is how exposure to aristolochic acid occurs. He is skeptical about the idea that aristolochia seeds get ground into flour, having found no traces of the poison when he analyzed flour from mills in endemic regions of Romania.

We had met Tatu in downtown Timișoara, in the lobby of a vast rectangular Soviet-style hotel, and were joined by his collaborator, Nikola Pavlović, a Serbian nephrologist in his 60s, with mild blue eyes. Pavlović's speech was soft, hesitant yet relentless, each claim accompanied by a stream of qualifications. When the conversation turned to research, he spoke approvingly of almost all the hypotheses. He didn't seem bothered by the fact that a given risk factor could also be found in non-endemic regions, because maybe those regions weren't really non-endemic. “How do you know there aren't two or three cases there?” he asked. He even thought that a BEN-like disease might exist wherever there are lignite coal deposits. Showing us a lignite map of the United Kingdom, he observed that the areas with the most lignites also had the highest rates of undiagnosable renal disease. In the U.S., states with lignite deposits also have some of the highest death rates from certain kidney cancers.

My father objected that in 40 years of medical practice he had never seen an illness with quite the same profile as BEN, with kidneys so shrunken, fibrosis so severe, and such an advanced state of disease with no hypertension. His own hunch is that radiation is involved. He notes that the pattern of BEN distribution resembles that of radon distribution in the United States, and that radiation causes

acute fibrosis in kidneys. If radioactive material were leaching into drinking water in the Balkans, the kidneys would process it in small amounts over the years. There is no hard evidence to support this theory, however. Two Michigan-based environmental scientists working on BEN told me that they think radiation is worth looking into—elevated levels of uranium have been found in the endemic regions—but they haven't raised the necessary funds.

Tatu, Pavlović, and my father exchanged news of BEN researchers past and present: who favored the aristolochic-acid theory and who didn't, who had retired, who had died, who was now producing minerals for laundry detergent. My father had last seen Pavlović in 1988. "I remember him a young man," he told me later. "I guess he thought the same thing about me."

That afternoon, we drove to the endemic region in Mehedinți County, 150 miles southeast of Timișoara. The trolley lines and the churches soon gave way to rolling countryside. Large haystacks stood in groups. Shaggy, hulking, almost shamanistic, they resembled animate huts. There was something mutable and alive about them, the way they absorbed the light. The leaves were starting to change, and the air was exceptionally clear. Tiny horses stood out against a distant hillside.

Along the way, Tatu pulled his car over next to a cornfield. It was overrun with aristolochia. In the golden afternoon light, I saw the famous plant for the first time, recognizing its heart-shaped leaves, narrow yellow tubular flowers, and the round brown pods that have given rise to one of its local names: priest's balls. Tatu broke open a pod. Inside, hundreds of seeds were lined up in two rows, like pupils in a schoolhouse.

I picked a leaf and smelled it. "If you taste it, it's very bitter," Tatu said, chewing on a leaf and immediately spitting it out. "Pah! This is actually not a good idea."

In Romania, as in many parts of the world, aristolochia leaves have been used in folk medicine for centuries. The leaves also contain aristolochic acid, but in a far lower concentration than the seeds. Tatu picked up a pod off the ground. "If you ate this, you would get really sick," he said. "You would have acute renal failure."

"If you want to eat it, go ahead," my father offered. "There are two nephrologists here." Nobody ate the pod.

As we drove through the Romanian countryside, Tatu frequently stopped to collect water and soil samples. Many villagers still don't have plumbing and get their water from natural springs. At one spring, two older women sat placidly on a bench. When Tatu asked them about nephropathy, their faces grew hard. Tatu told me that the villagers generally didn't like to be asked about the disease. They would say the other village had it, the one across the hill.

At an abandoned coal mine nearby, runoff water rushed noisily out of a pipe into a ditch. Tatu said that villagers collected the runoff and drank it. He pointed out where pieces of Pliocene coal lay scattered on the ground: 3-million-year-old chips of cypress. They still looked like wood. Being so young, the coal was of a terrible quality and hardly burned at all, especially since the mines were so waterlogged. "It was pretty much the worst coal you could get ever," Tatu said. Opened in the 1970s, the mine had been closed for some 20 years. A concrete barrier blocked the entrance. It had been erected after a boy and a cow wandered inside and drowned.

Two women came by with some cows. The women seemed excited to see us. It turned out that they thought we had come to reopen the mine and create jobs. The cows lowered their massive, beautiful heads to the water and drank.

"It's amazing how much you can observe just by watching," my father said, paraphrasing Yogi Berra. I was more amazed by how much you *couldn't* observe—how the things you saw seemed to withhold their meaning. The culprit wouldn't be the mold you saw in a granary today but the mold in a granary that had been torn down 20 years ago.

A drunk man arrived. He said that the mine was actually a tomb, and that you could tell this from the configuration of stones. He had been a miner for three years, and had seen many deaths, though from collapsing shafts and suffocation rather than from kidney disease. Twenty meters in, he said, the shaft was all water. The miners used to drink it. There had been a study of those miners. They didn't seem to get nephropathy any more frequently than anyone else.

The biggest dialysis clinic in Mehedinți County is housed in an old villa, with irregularly shaped rooms branching off a central staircase. Under the stairs stood several rows of 10-liter jugs of dialysate, a fluid that flows through the dialysis machine, separated from the patient's blood by a membrane.

The clinic serves 168 patients, more than half of whom have BEN. The BEN patients were instantly recognizable: frail, coppery-skinned peasants with haunted eyes, reclining on white chaises, as blood was pumped into and out of their bodies through tubes. The place where the two catheters punctured the forearm was marked on each patient by an irregular, discolored potato-size fistula, surgically created by connecting a vein and an artery. The fistula made me think for the first time about how much blood has to leave the body during dialysis: not a liter or two but *all* of it, several times over, to the extent that the blood vessels have to be hot-wired in order to get it in and out. Each patient's blood passed through a long plastic tube and around a slowly turning wheel, which pumped the blood through the machine. The machines turned slowly in unison, like mill wheels. A dialysis unit looks precise and powerful, but it can only approximate the intricate function of a human kidney. For patients with atrophying diseases like BEN, dialysis rarely buys more than 5 to 10 years.

"Dialysis creates essentially a new kind of human," Pavlović whispered.

In one room, we found two aged sisters, 79 and 80, delicate women wearing headscarves, pajamas, and thick woolen socks. The elder, tiny and emaciated, lay with her eyes closed, resembling a dead pharaoh. The younger was watching a television broadcast of Romanian folk dancing. She said that they had lived all their lives on a farm nearby, and that their father had died of BEN. She added that they knew what aristolochia was but had never taken it as medicine. The pigs, she said, wouldn't touch it, but goats ate it sometimes, and then the cheese came out bitter.

Outside, the sun shone through a white haze. Tatu was on his cell phone trying to set up a house visit, but everyone he could think of was dead.

When scientists started investigating BEN, they thought that it might be a gradual, cumulative form of lead poisoning. Researchers working in a Serbian endemic village found high levels of lead in patients' blood and hair, as well as in the local flour: the miller had been using a lead-based grout to repair his millstone. The government duly dismantled 36 water mills in Serbia. Further investigation however, revealed that BEN patients in other villages didn't have high levels of lead in their blood, and many had never used water mills.

My father compares BEN research to the story of the blind men and the elephant: everyone noticed something different and built a theory around it, and nobody saw the whole picture. Data from one village, or the expertise of one specialist, or the aftereffects of one environmental trauma, would indicate a solution, only to crumble in light of other data. Virologists, studying a village where all the BEN patients had hidden in an oak forest during the Second World War, attributed the disease to a virus native to oak forests. A Serbian geochemist, citing the low selenium content of soil in Serbia, suggested that BEN was triggered by selenium deficiency. In five villages in Kosovo, Muslims, who made up half the population, were found to be 25 times less likely than Christians to get BEN. Virologists argued that the disease was a virus transmitted by pigs, and that Muslims were spared by their avoidance of pig husbandry. Geneticists, believing BEN to be hereditary, saw the same data and ascribed the lower incidence among Muslims to their ethnic makeup. Confusingly, the Muslims in

Bulgaria, known as “white gypsies,” often did get BEN, though actual Gypsies did not, and was that because of their genes or because they didn’t work on farms? A Bulgarian researcher claimed that he had identified a chromosomal marker, but nobody else could find it.

In the 1950s, the Bulgarian village of Karash was hit particularly hard by the disease. The communist government, having decided that the problem lay in the village itself, shut Karash down and relocated the population to Sofia. Twenty years later, some of the Karash exiles began to develop BEN, but those who had moved as children never got the disease—only those who had lived in Karash for 15 years or more. BEN, it seemed, was a super-slow time bomb. Fifteen years of exposure would sound like the clock ticking.

A shift in BEN studies came in the 1970s. A charismatic Danish veterinarian named Palle Krogh had been studying a strange outbreak of kidney disease affecting pigs in Danish slaughterhouses. There were no obvious differences between the lives of the sick pigs and those of the healthy ones. The only clue was that the disease seemed to worsen after rainy summers. Krogh eventually determined that the pigs’ grain had been contaminated by a fungal toxin called ochratoxin A, which produced effects not unlike BEN: the kidney damage was similar, and both were aggravated by wet weather. Sure enough, when tests were run in Yugoslavia, ochratoxin A was found in the blood and the urine of BEN patients as well as in their grain supply.

Continued research, however, revealed that ochratoxin A was far more common than initially suspected: it appears in grains, coffee beans, wine, and other stored substances all over the world. Some of the highest levels of contamination have been recorded in countries with no known BEN-like disease. The story of ochratoxin illustrates the fundamental challenge in epidemiology: proof of exposure isn’t the same thing as proof of causation. Every day, we’re exposed to countless potential pathogens and toxins, most of which don’t make us sick. Identifying the “right” toxin is particularly difficult when the disease affects the kidney, an organ whose main function is to clear the blood of toxins.

Oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, Palle Krogh himself died of kidney cancer, in 1990. Krogh’s tumor was later dissected and analyzed by a group of his colleagues, including Tatu. Tatu suspected that the cancer had been caused by ochratoxin. My father pointed out that Krogh had been a chain smoker—smoking is a leading cause of renal carcinoma—and Tatu conceded that he could remember Krogh waving a cigarette in excitement at his latest findings. Nonetheless, it was difficult not to be struck by the death from kidney cancer of a scientist who had devoted many years to the study of nephrotoxic and possibly carcinogenic mold.

Two days later, in a high-ceilinged coffeehouse in Zagreb, my father and I met with Bojan Jelaković, mild-mannered Croatian nephrologist who has worked closely with Grollman on the aristolochic-acid theory. He took us on a tour of an endemic region two hours southeast of Zagreb. We passed the towering grain silos of an industrial-looking mill. According to Jelaković and Grollman, such mills are eradicating BEN, because they combine wheat from so many different farms that the aristolochic acid is diluted. Patients we spoke to at a local dialysis clinic confirmed that they had once ground their own flour from their own wheat, but had switched to bigger communal mills after the war.

In the village of Kaniža, Jelaković showed us two churches standing face-to-face: one Croatian Catholic, with a white pointed steeple, and the other Ukrainian Orthodox, with an onion dome. These churches have come to stand for another famous “natural experiment” from the annals of BEN. Around 1905, a community of Ukrainian immigrants settled in Kaniža, having been offered free farmland by the Austro-Hungarian emperor. Although the Ukrainians kept their religion and did not intermarry with the Croats, they ended up getting sick just as frequently as the native villagers. The case proved that the disease isn’t inherited in the classical Mendelian sense.

In a nearby village, Jelaković showed us a so-called black house—left empty and gone to ruin after its occupants were stricken with BEN. He told us that a household of around a dozen people had died here in the 1970s. Next door, a boy and a girl watched us through the front windows, then pulled the curtains closed.

Like most BEN regions, this one is prone to flooding, and we had parked our cars by a monument to a 19th-century deluge alongside the Sava River. Across the river was Bosnia. There had been a bridge here before the war. “A wooden bridge,” Jelaković said. “A very beautiful one.”

We parted with Jelaković and drove across the river into Bosnia. At a hospital in the city of Odžak we were given the use of an ambulette and a driver, so that we could visit BEN patients in nearby villages. We sat in a sunny garden with an elderly husband and wife, both of whom had BEN. They had heard of aristolochia by one of its local names (wolf’s paw), but they didn’t know what it looked like. We showed them photographs, and they said they might have seen it around but they didn’t pay much attention to weeds. When asked what they thought caused the disease, they immediately said water: more people got sick in the parts of the village that were prone to flooding, and fewer people were getting sick now, because of improvements to the water system. They noted that the disease didn’t affect anyone who lived in the hills, with the exception of women who had grown up in the lowlands and had moved to the hills only after getting married. We heard something similar in another village where a man with BEN, who had lost his father, his aunt, and three siblings to the disease, told us about a neighbor who had no BEN in his family. “You see, he comes from the other side of the street,” the man said. It emerged that every house on one side of the street had one or several cases of BEN, but the other side, which was on slightly higher ground, was almost completely free of the disease. Annie Pfohl-Leszkowicz, a proponent of the ochratoxin theory, has cited similar patterns as evidence that BEN is caused by a fungal toxin: the healthy side of the street, she proposes, gets direct sunlight, which discourages the growth of mold.

In Odžak, my father and I met with Enisa Mesić, a nephrologist from nearby Tuzla. A magnetic presence, with a large head, copious dark hair, a deep voice, and piercing gray eyes, Mesić told us about the bureaucratic obstacles faced by BEN researchers. After the war, political power was decentralized in order to preserve equilibrium among different ethnic groups. As a result, Bosnia-Herzegovina now has no fewer than 13 ministries of health: one at the federal level, one for each of its 10 cantons, and one each for the self-governing Brčko District and the Republika Srpska. The two major centers for BEN research, in Tuzla and Sarajevo, are in cantons outside the endemic region, which means that before researchers can actually study any patients, they must submit requests to two different ministries.

Because of the war, nearly every patient’s file is missing at least four years. There is no central BEN database, and establishing one would require the cooperation of all 13 ministers of health. The municipalities used to have local databases, but these were discontinued after the war. When asked what had happened to the databases, Mesić ticked off their fates: “In Bijeljina, the archive probably still exists, but it’s difficult to access. In Šamac, it probably doesn’t exist anymore. In Odžak, it was destroyed in 1992, together with the hospital.”

Early in the 20th century, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the ensuing chaos in the Balkans, a new verb entered the English language: “Balkanize,” defined by the OED as “to divide (a region) into a number of smaller and often mutually hostile units, as was done in the Balkan Peninsula in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” Most European languages have an equivalent: the French *balkaniser*, the Italian *balkanizzare*, the German *balkanisieren*, and the Russian *balkanizirovat’*—attesting to the special relationship between the Balkan Peninsula and the human tendency toward division and faction. It’s an apt word to describe the study of Balkan nephropathy, and its

fragmentation along geopolitical, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and even disciplinary lines. Researching the disease requires expertise in a wide range of fields—nephrology, epidemiology, genetics, oncology, microbiology, hydrogeology, botany, toxicology, biochemistry—each of which can be as hermetic and insular as a tiny country, with its own language, customs, and sovereignty.

The basic philosophical question surrounding BEN is whether it's a big problem or a little one. For Arthur Grollman, BEN is part of a worldwide crisis of aristolochic-acid nephropathy: a story in which the true culprits are government agencies that fail to regulate herbal medications. When I met him later, at his apartment in Manhattan, he assured me that BEN was a closed case, and that a greater source of concern was the public health risk caused by the use of a variety of aristolochia in Chinese herbal medicine. He described his recent collaborations with researchers in Taiwan, where aristolochia is a commonly prescribed remedy, and where the reported incidence of upper-urinary-tract cancers is the highest in the world. Whereas a hundred women got sick in Belgium, Grollman says, millions of people may be at risk in Taiwan and China.

Researchers like Tatu, on the other hand, think that BEN is unique: although its causes may occur individually all over the world, their combined effect is specific to the endemic regions. For my father, too, the disease is defined by a set of particular locations. He thinks it's significant that patients speak of doomed houses—that they feel it's the places and not the people that are sick. He often quotes a remark by an old colleague, now deceased: "I could live in this town for twenty years, and I'd know which house to live in, to not get sick."

On our last afternoon in Bosnia, the driver drove my father and me around the countryside to look for aristolochia. We stopped at a swamp overgrown with creeping tendrils, trembling fronds, and strange, earlike formations. We did not find aristolochia. We stopped by a cornfield, and walked along the perimeter and down one of the rows. A sudden commotion broke out among the cornstalks, a violent rustling and shaking, as if from the thrashing of some hidden beast. A moment later, the source of the disturbance revealed itself: a glossy, compact pheasant, running through the corn.

We got back into the van. The sun hung low over the late-summer fields. The cornstalks seemed to be standing around chaotically, like skinny, crazy people, their arms flung in all directions. As we drove past, there was one magical moment when they arranged themselves into rows and it was possible to see clearly all the way to the end, before they dissolved back into disorder.

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IF THERE WAS ONE THING Sandra knew well, it was hair. She knew hair from root to split end. In beauty school, she had learned the shape of the human head and how the best thing to do when trimming its hair was to section the skull into eighths. Her long nails shone red as she held her soft hands in front of her to demonstrate on an imaginary client. Her gold rings glinted. When she tired of haircutting techniques, she waved her hands quickly and her fingers sparked through the thick night like fireworks.

Sandra, like other girls who hung out where we sat on Havana's waist-high seawall (*malecón*) when it hit Paseo, wore fashionable clothes of the barely there variety: diminutive shorts with interlocking C's on back pockets, glittery heels, bras that peeked from tops, halters leaving midriffs bare. She dyed her own long, straight hair blue-black and lined her lips with the same dark pencil that she used around her eyes because shops hadn't carried red in months. Her plastic nails were thick and whispered along the tips; she grabbed my forearm as we crossed the street on our way to the bathroom at a nearby gas station, dodging the cars that sped around the curve at Paseo. We went the long way to avoid the police who hung in the shadows on the intersection's traffic island, keeping an eye on the strip. "The cars here, they'll hit you. And if it's him"—Sandra flicked her chin and pulled her hand down to mime a beard, the universal gesture for Fidel Castro—"they won't stop. They'll run you over and keep on going."

There were clubs and bars at the hotels that hulked over the crossroads—the mod Riviera, the shimmery Meliá Cohiba, the Jazz Café—but since few locals could afford drinks there, the tourists who wanted to meet real Cubanos hung out by the sea. Everyone, Cuban and foreign, loved the *malecón*, to sit facing the ocean and Miami and feel the spray on bare shins, or to turn toward the city and watch old cars roar slowly by, or, after a long night at the bars, to see the brightening sky pull itself away from the sea. On nights when there was no moon, you could nod approvingly at the fish that men in mesh tank tops caught on sheer line stretched from coils on the sidewalk. On hot days, you watched kids who leapt from the wall into high tide, their arms pinwheeling past the rocks that cragged up from the ocean.

So young men toted bongo drums and guitars, imitating the Buena Vista Social Club for a few dollars' tip. Gentlemen in frayed straw fedoras asked tourists to pick up an extra beer at the gas station kiosk. Tired-looking women in Lycra shorts sang out the names of cones of roasted peanuts, *cucuruchos de maní*, and popcorn, *rositas de maíz*. Nonchalant girls cocked hips at the foreign men who walked past. Sandra had been taught the art of artifice to serve the Cuban Revolution through its beauty parlors, but she'd given up on hair. By the time she was 21, she'd been working as a prostitute for around five years. The dates changed every time I asked her. Either way, she made about three times in one night what she'd have been paid monthly at any of the government-owned salons.

In November 2011, when Cuban first daughter Mariela Castro Espín was in Amsterdam in her capacity as sexologist and director of Cuba's Center for Sexual Education, she was interviewed on Radio Netherlands Worldwide. Castro, prim and deliberate in a turtleneck and tweed blazer, sat in a room with draping red curtains and feather boas and effused about Amsterdam's red-light district. "I've enjoyed seeing how they do it," she said. "What I admire is that they've been able to dignify and value the work that they do—because yes, it is a job." She enunciated her Spanish so translators didn't

miss a word for the televised interview. Castro went on to explain how, as she put it, the principles are the same in Cuba as in Amsterdam, but the circumstances are different. She talked about how the *malecón* is a place of pride for Havanans, and she smiled broadly until she mentioned the people who sell sex there. “Some people go there to practice prostitution in a way that is bothersome for, above all, the tourist or foreigner,” and her agency is in close contact with the police to decrease the *malecón* prostitution, she said, without drawing too much attention from said tourist or foreigner.

This is what the Cuban government usually highlights when it talks about women and prostitution. Before Fidel Castro’s revolution in 1959, women had represented only 13 percent of the workforce, and many were domestic servants. A large number were prostitutes, too—as a port city with a sexual liberal climate and a U.S.-backed puppet government, Havana was where *yanquis* had gone in search of louche, uninhibited nightlife from Prohibition on. In 1931, after the Volstead Act had tripled the numbers of tourists who visited the country in under 15 years, 7,400 women officially stated their professions as prostitutes. The city formerly known as “the Pearl of the Caribbean” was soon referred to as its brothel. Eradicating prostitution and increasing women’s rights was one of Castro’s stated goals. Forty years after the 1959 revolution, long after literacy drives had enabled the island’s rural residents to read and prostitutes had been trained as seamstresses and given jobs and day care for the children, 51 percent of Cuba’s scientists were women. Fifty percent of attorneys and 52 percent of medical doctors, too. Everyone was paid nearly equally—a doctor, male or female, made marginally more than a seamstress, around \$20 a month in Cuban pesos.

Then, 20 years ago, the USSR fell and Soviet subsidies disappeared, and with them more than a third of Cuba’s GDP. The value of the peso plummeted, and rations of food, clothing, and other necessities that removed pressure from monthly stipends dwindled. Increasingly, women, and some men, began to trade sexual favors for, say, the fish that a neighbor caught or the bread that only a well-placed state employee got very much of. When the government pushed to increase tourism and Cuba drew closer to the global capitalist marketplace, those activities again had cash value. By 1995, around the same time that studies on gender parity in the workforce came out, the Italian travel magazine *Viaggiare* had given the island the dubious honor of being the number one global “paradise of sexual tourism.” The government, broke and desperate, did little to contradict this image. And though the economy lifted as Cuba rounded into the 21st century, and though the new decade saw police tossing the more obvious prostitutes into jail, sex was something that could be easily bought and sold in Havana.

But one key fact still sets Cuba apart today: there aren’t many pimps or third-party intermediaries in the sex trade. A police state with tightly restricted access to weapons and severe penalties for drug creates an underworld more seamy than overtly violent. And few romantic liaisons between locals and foreigners are deemed prostitution; rather, most fall under the banner of relationships with *amigos*. Any non-Cuban is eligible, and what locals want from *amigos*, foreigners like me, is neither finite nor clear, a mix of money, attention, and the possibility linked to anyone with a non-Cuban passport.

In the way that the language of a city fills in the blanks of what its people want to name, sometime between the early 1990s and today the word *jinetero/a* became the catchall to describe Cuba’s hookers and hustlers, or any person who seeks foreign currency or CUC, the valuable tourist cash, rather than the pesos in which government salaries are paid, via foreigners. The word’s provenance isn’t clear. *Jinete* in Spanish is a horse jockey; whether this means that women hold the reins of the “horses” is unclear. Today, the masculine *jinetero* refers insultingly to a man who caters to tourists in any questionably legal, hustlerlike capacity. *Jinetera* means “a Cuban woman who trades sex for money.” I’d avoided them whenever I’d visited Havana, until I met Sandra that night with a mutual acquaintance on the *malecón*.

The European and American media erupted into a mild frenzy in the weeks after Mariela Castro’s

remarks, given that the principles of prostitution in Cuba aren't at all like those in Amsterdam. But her comments pointed toward something that was still unsaid, something essential about the country that was both hers and Sandra's: *jineteras* are indicative of contemporary Havana's frustrations, opportunities, dreams, history, and ennui. Remittances and tourism are Cuba's top two sources of income, and the inevitable process of aging has shoved the country, with less fanfare than anticipated into a post-Fidel era. The inheritance of the Castro revolution is hinted at every day in how Cuba interacts with an ever-encroaching world. Sandra, a small symbolic representative of communism's struggle for relevance, is both admired and reviled within her society.

Then again, that might be too much weight to put on her; she's also just a girl surviving Havana, using what's put in front of her to get by.

Sometimes it's hard to discern who's selling sex and who's just trying to wear as little fabric as possible in Havana's oppressive heat. The mainstays of *jinetera* fashion—miniskirts, transparent fabrics, cleavage- and shoulder-baring tops—appear on most women, including foreigners, who feel freer to be sexy in permissive Cuba than at home. At clubs, I saw foreign women with bikini-strap marks sunburned around their necks look left, right, then pull their necklines down before dancing with slim Cuban men in tight jeans and big silver belt buckles. These women lapped up the sensual aura, as if just breathing would send tiny cells of sexy through their bodies, the infusion pushing and pulling hips back and forth, transforming walks into sashays, planting dry one-liners in mouths.

Sandra had long since mastered these feminine tricks. Everything about her physical appearance was calibrated to entice: the tops that looked almost about to slip off, the hair that twisted around her neck, her long, soft, red nails. I had just five years on Sandra, but I felt large, clumsy, and dusty around her in my flats and loose dresses. I was a tattered stuffed animal next to her as we sat, the second time we met, in the back seat of a cab that took us from the *malecón* out to her house.

She'd met me downtown because she said I wouldn't find her place on my own. Sandra had recently moved from La Corea, one of Havana's few slumlike outlying neighborhoods, into a closer but smaller dwelling in San Miguel del Padrón. Her home was in a cluster of blocks between a fetid stream and the main road that linked downtown Havana with outer boroughs like San Francisco de Paula, where Ernest Hemingway lived. San Miguel was a place of contrasts: a street began with a few freshly painted houses near the road to San Francisco and faded into cinderblock shacks with stretched-out oil barrels for fences closer to the stream. Egg cartons, plastic bags, the rusted skeleton of metal chairs, and fruit rinds bobbed in the water.

The shiny taxi slowed as we pulled onto her street, dodging potholes. A couple on the corner stared at us, and Sandra waved. A few feet away, an old man in overalls, a burlap sack of oranges slung over his right shoulder, stood to attention and saluted. Sandra dissolved into giggles, slapping the vinyl seat. "What a *loco, loco loquito*," she gasped. "*Viste?*" She jumped out as soon as we pulled up to her building and leaned against the car's trunk, picking at her nails as I paid the fare.

Years ago, Sandra's mother had kicked her out of the house. She now lived with her grandmother, Aboo, and her half-brother, Gallego, in a two-room apartment in what had once been a yard at the center of a block, down an alley and behind a single-story home with neoclassical columns and a street-side patio. Aboo didn't approve of Sandra staying out for days on end, but Sandra's father was in Florida and her mother had a new husband, a nice house in suburban La Lisa, and a set of twin toddlers. And the money Sandra brought home supported the household.

For every woman supported by foreign men, I'd heard it estimated that three more Cuban citizens got by on the money, whether directly or not. Sandra, Aboo, and Gallego, at least. The government didn't do much beyond tossing a too-blatant hooker into Villa Delicia, the nickname for the women's jail. Sandra had spent four days there when she was 19 and had eaten so little she'd come out "like

this,” she told me, holding up her pinkie. If men stopped coming to the island, tempted no longer by images of scantily clad mulattas on white-sand beaches and bodies pressed together in crowded bars, hotel rooms would languish unvisited, taxis would have fewer fares, and restaurants more empty tables. So policemen, Sandra said, were eminently bribable, for the right price.

Just inside Sandra’s door, a small table and two matching chairs were piled high with folded clothes. The room also held a wooden armoire, a stereo, and a refrigerator near a small kitchenette. Sandra poked around for a box of photos. When she found it, we returned to the central patio, where we sat under the laundry lines that the three families who lived in the middle of the block used on alternating days. Sandra set the box on the ground and sorted through pictures. I pulled out a pack of cheap, unfiltered Criollo cigarettes, which I favored for their clean tobacco and sweet aftertaste. Sandra wrinkled her nose but took one anyway, and used it to point out the Spanish guy who’d asked her to marry him two years ago. He’d walked in on her a few weeks later with someone else. She still had the ring.

Sandra was 11 when she had sex for the first time (the average in Cuba is around 13), with a man whose name she’d tattooed across the small of her back, MUMÚA, above an image of two doves entwined with scrolls. He was 32 then, and even now he was “crazy for me,” she said, waving her cigarette, though he was in jail for selling stolen motorcycle parts. What had begun as nights out slid quickly into prostitution; government salaries paled next to the \$50 she could make on a night with a man, nearly always foreign, nearly always Spanish, Cuban American, or Italian. So she quit, never finished her certificate course.

The gate at the street end of the alley jingled as Gallego walked in. After introductions, I picked up my bag to leave. Sandra asked me where I was going. “To meet some friends downtown,” I said. There weren’t many decent restaurants in Havana then, and I had no kitchen in my rented room, so a generous cast of friends, Cubans and expats, regularly invited me around to eat during my three-week reporting trips. Sandra gave me a once-over and pushed me toward the floor-length mirror in her living room. If I’d just do my hair *like this*, she told me as she reached into my curls and flipped them into a messy, voluminous updo, I’d look way sexier. A red wash to make the dull brown more interesting would do me good. And my shorts could be shorter, too. I should also line my lips—you know, show off contours, make them inviting. I handed her bobby pins for my hair but liked my shorts the way they were, midhigh. She looked skeptical, the pins between her lips as she styled and then hands on her hips once she’d finished. It did look better.

I saw Sandra one last time on that trip to Cuba, a quick visit on the *malecón* again. She’d come up with a plan: when I went back to Mexico, I should get my company to write her a *carta de invitación*, an invitation letter that she’d use to get an exit visa. “You work at a newspaper or something, right?” she asked. “They wouldn’t have to offer me a real job, just do the *carta oficial*. I can take care of myself once I get there.”

I explained that I didn’t really work for anyone, at least not like that, and some of the magazines I wrote for were actually based in Europe. She looked at me coyly. “Whatever,” she said. “Wherever.” I paused, uncomfortable, and then smiled a little and said that I could hardly get them to do favors for me, much less for an *amiga* in Cuba. Sandra shrugged. She began to gossip about a neighbor of hers who’d come over the day I’d visited her house. There was no change in her demeanor, as if the desire to go to Mexico or anywhere else had dissipated as soon as her shoulders had moved.

The big turquoise Habana Riviera hotel was originally commissioned by Meyer Lansky’s men to be his mob’s Havana gambling hub, an extravagant high-rise with sophistication unrivaled in the Caribbean—Manhattan on the Florida Strait. Architect Philip Johnson did initial designs until he realized he’d be working for the Mafia and passed the job along. The building opened in December

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