

2007 International Writing Contest Winners

First Place-Lauren Jennings '07

"A Broad I'll Never Forget"

Study abroad. My boyfriend at the time wasn't too keen on me going 3,000 miles away, but he said that as long as I studied a "broad," and not some Czech guy, he could get use to the idea. I relate this joke not because it's worth retelling, but because it ended up being true. I went abroad, and I met someone. A woman. And her name was Prague. Well actually I should say Matika Praha, for the Czechs know her as "Little Mother Prague." But don't let the mother part fool you, as she is the sexiest woman I will ever meet.

She was stunning. She always looked amazing, regardless of what she wore. A graceful dusting of snow on her endless parade of spires, a cloak of rain that made tears on the statues of Charles Bridge, or just a few fair weather clouds crowning the castle with its due mark of royalty. I would meet her for coffee in little cafes, or open the door for her when peeking into almost forgotten churches. But wherever we were, she looked fabulous.

And she had curves. Beautiful winding streets that I took great pleasure in exploring. And a grand, sweeping river, the Vltava, that invited you to play on paddle boats and river cruises. She had the most amazing voice, and she would sing me the operas of the great masters for less than a song. She was more cosmopolitan than I could ever dream to be, and she introduced me to people from all over the world, people who I still write to regularly.

But Prague was more than a pretty face. She loved to have fun. She would huddle up in a pub on cold nights and laugh the night away with strangers-turned-friends. She would enthrall me with amazing conversation, and I learned about myself and my world from debates with people who saw things differently than I. She liked to stay out late, and she taught me the pleasure of dancing past sunrise, of riding home on trams with people in business suites. She knew how to have a good time.

But perhaps what really made her irresistible was her darker side. She would talk to me in a language I could not understand, regardless of how hard I tried to learn. She would have me yelling "Nerozumim!" – I do not understand! – but she would never explain herself. Yet this only made her more mysterious. She was moody. She could be charming one moment and bitter the next, and I was never sure if she would take me to a palace or a communist-era dive. But this only made her more interesting. And she loved to be difficult. To burry me in bureaucracy. To make me pay for things without giving a reason why. But this only made her even more worth it. She stole from me when I let me guard down. She turned her back when she brought me to tears. But she would always apologize with a stunning vista. Or introduce me to another fascinating person. Or at least pass me a glass of really good Czech beer.

When I returned to the States, my boyfriend told me he was relieved to hear that I had not spent my time "czeching out" the guys over there. Instead, I had spent my time studying a woman, the greatest, sexiest, most frustrating goddess I will ever meet. I went to Prague not knowing what to expect, but I came back hopelessly, helplessly, head-over-heels in love... with a broad.

Second Place-Mariela Rich '08 "Scavenger's Delight"

Ow, mai?

Mai ow. A big, brown, glass beer bottle. I guess it's not recyclable.

Ow, mai?

He nods. *Ow, ow.* P'Poh loves the small yogurt containers. I wonder how much he gets for each one. It's two a.m. and the smell of the landfill no longer seems to bother me. I puncture another garbage bag with my two-pronged scavenging tool and someone's leftover rice and vegetables spill out the holes in the black plastic.

Most of the Khon Kaen University students are blind even to the existence of this, the Khon Kaen municipal landfill, and even more so to the fact that a community of two to three hundred live here and make a living from these rolling hills of trash. The community members themselves were wary when the CIEE program staff, interested, first entered the landfill territory and asked them about their lives. They were skeptical that someone was acknowledging their existence as something other than dirty or even despicable.

But they have built a strong relationship over the years, student groups have come in for home stays for several semesters, and here I find myself, queen of the dump for a night, looking for yogurt bottles and cardboard, as P'Poh, a professional scavenger, works by my side and guides me through the process.

Now P'Poh has found five or so blue ink pens in his messy pile. He tests them on the back of his hand and gives me the two that write well. I save them in my back pocket as a gift from mother landfill and a souvenir of the experience.

I wear long sleeves and gloves, and it may be the only cold night I've known in Thailand. But the brisk chill is what made the pre-scavenge worth it. As we waited for the midnight dump trucks to deliver their massive loads, we gathered discarded wooden basket parts and built a fire on the mountain. We sat around the circle, students, community members, and an NGO organizer, staring at the flames and preparing for the coming hours. Our task was to scramble through the trash, looking for anything that could be sold by the pound to the resident recyclables middle man.

Earlier that evening we had dinner with our host families, and then held a community gathering in the middle of the street during which we heard the landfill's story, as well as the story of the community's thirty years of scavenging. With the help of Kowit Boonjear, who works with the local NGO, things have been improving for the scavengers in recent years. They are learning to claim their rights as Khon Kaen citizens. They have started a savings group by raising pigs together, cleverly named the "piggy bank." They have asked the municipal government for a plastic covering as protection from some toxic waste, and for a row of trees to separate the landfill visually from their line of humble residences. The local officials met the community's demand for plastic lining, and the trees have already been promised as well. The

community is building confidence that it has a right to exist, and its members work hard to be seen as people rather than merely as trash pickers. The children used to be teased in school, but relationships with the surrounding neighborhoods have been improving, and the kids are able to make more young friends.

It's now 3:30 and my arms are getting tired. Suddenly I find a treasure in the mounds of waste: a sealed package of wafer cookies. *Gin, dai mai?* I ask P'Poh. Can we eat it? Although he has laughed and shrugged off my other food inquiries, this time he nods his head, *dai*. He takes off his gloves and unwraps the packaging. He hands me a cookie and offers one to Long, a fellow student that has been working beside us. We enjoy our late night snack together and stand contemplating our two large baskets of accomplishment. A rewarding night's work.

Some may know exotic beaches and "backpacker's paradise," but this is how I know Thailand, and this - P'Poh, the landfill, the noble struggle of organized communities, and around the clock experiences - is how I love to remember it.