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The Believer, the Traveler and the Storyteller

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The Believer,
the Traveler and
the Storyteller

By Natasha Field-Rahman

ISP for SIT Study Abroad
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Part I: The Believer ........................................... page 4

An account of finding personal belief within the setting of a traditional Balinese purification ritual, this piece tackles themes of hesitation and hope, of past and present time. Beginning with a night’s stay in a hotel room in Singapore before I came to Bali and ending the day after attending a Purnama ritual at Tirta Empul a month later, this personal essay encompasses the first experience I had in Bali of altering my own prior beliefs with that of Balinese religious culture and tradition. Though it is based on real events, all names and characters have been fictionalized.

Part II: The Traveler ........................................... page 25

This short and creative piece describes the overall adventures of one traveling through Bali. It is a humorous piece that is intended to mock and poke fun of Western travelers and their preconceived notions of Balinese culture and life. Drawn from my own personal experiences of having experienced Balinese life through the context of research and education as opposed to other Western travelers who experience Bali through travel, the piece questions the abilities of Westerners to fully understand Balinese life, and resolves by discovering what we take from Balinese culture when we return home.

Part III: The Storyteller ....................................... page 29

This section is a short essay on my experience working as an intern for BogBog Bali Cartoon Magazine in Denpasar and the unexpected inspiration I found when I became friends with the editor-in-chief Dek Jango. The piece briefly discusses how BogBog Bali Cartoon Magazine was formed on the beliefs of Jango to find success in Bali by thinking globally, but acting locally. It also discusses how the cartoon industry has been an effective voice in Balinese culture for telling stories of the frustrations, anguish and routine life of present Balinese.

Part IV ......................................................... page 34

An image collection of three political cartoons that I worked on while interning at BogBog Bali Cartoon magazine, including two images appearing in the December issue of BogBog.
Part I: The Believer

The lights from the buildings in Singapore create a landscape of flickering stars on the balcony of my hotel room. I’ve been trying all night to disassociate the calendar date with the real time that I’m living but it’s hard not to think back to a year ago in my life. In less than seven hours I will be waking again to the sound of a piercing alarm. Bali is my next destination- a place that I will attempt to call home for the next three and a half months. I try to forget- an evening spent by myself reminiscing on a place that I used to visit once a year to see my father. Hours ago, on the streets of Singapore, I searched for Chili Crab and Tiger Beer to distract myself, to force myself to think forwards instead of backwards. Hunger has always been a misplaced emotion for me- an unsatisfying desire to fill the absence of human touch. The stream of traffic below whistles through the open balcony doors. It’s August 31st and without wanting to, I remember it all.

A year ago I was sitting in the front seat of a detectives car outside a small house on Long Island. The scene has replayed in my mind over and over again in shattered fragments. He was a fat man, a detective with no credibility other than his beer belly- a complete contradiction to the strong, good-looking men who appear in his role on crime TV shows. He asked me the same questions again and again and I lost the words inside my mouth, syllables getting tied around my tongue.

“Now,” he said slowly. His voice changes every time I remember, a detail that I choose not to keep. I looked at my nails while he spoke, the chipped pieces of paint, jagged and sharp in the dim light of the Toyota sedan. I had a masochistic urge to rip them off. The seats smelled like must, like body odor. “Now tell me again what happened.”

It’s the fifth time he’s asked me this and each time I remember a different story.
“I was upstairs,” I said. My voice sounded foreign, as if it didn’t belong to me. I wondered how old I looked to him- a thousand years, dead and cold. “He went downstairs when he heard the knock on the door. I thought it was fighting. The man, a tall man. Maybe he was black- I thought he was wearing a police uniform and I believed him when he told me it was a raid. I saw the shot gun, no- I felt the shot gun first. Then he brought me downstairs.”

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It’s almost midnight and I can hear the celebrations from the streets below when the flow of cars stop at the traffic light. Big plastic lanterns light up the river in gaudy colors for the Malaysian New Year. Red and Gold- my favorites.

I remember red. I saw it when I was walked downstairs that evening a year ago with a shotgun forced into my back. There were two men, one holding my ex-boyfriend down on the ground, his face turned sideways in a pool of blood. The other was pacing, jerking, twitching. They were screaming and I hear his voice too well inside myself as I sit on the tightly made bed of the hotel room so many miles away. The wind makes the curtains look like they’re shivering- cold folds of fabric in this tropic heat.

“It’s not a raid,” he said quietly. “We’re being robbed.”

I was on the floor next to him, my forehead touching the dark green carpet. The man who brought me from the bedroom upstairs had his elbow forced on my shoulder blade, shifting his weight back and forth between bones.

“I know,” I said. I am crying. Matt, my ex-boyfriend, placed his hand on my shoulder, the edge of his fingers grazing the elbow of the intruder. The other man who had him pinned down on the carpet jerked his arm away. I heard a crack and realized that I couldn’t distinguish tears anymore. I was thankful. I didn’t want his touch.

The three men stayed for twenty minutes while Matt and I were lying face down in front of the fireplace. It felt like hours and the only thought that I could interpret within my mind was that I didn’t want
my mother to find out that I had died there. They took cocaine and weed in big bags from the dishwasher, from underneath the wooden bed planks upstairs and from the torn up seats in the beat up speedboat that sat in front of the driveway.

“I’m sorry,” the man who had his elbow inside of me whispered while the others prepared to leave. I heard the front door open.

“What?” I said. He lifted his arm off of me.

I caught his shadowed face in the dim light casted from the streetlights outside. Dark, thin, hollowed out like some lost boy. He closed the door gently behind him. They were gone. I sat in the middle of the carpeted floor with my knees to my chest. The detectives came two hours later and all I can remember afterwards is how light the rain was that night.

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It’s raining in Singapore- August 31st and it’s the same forecast to break the summer heat. I remember what the rain looked like a year ago as I feel the mist graze my uncovered feet on the bed. I remember looking up towards the sky when the detectives continued to ask questions, when my ex-boyfriend repeated my name over and over until giving up.

“Natasha, Natasha, Natasha,” drifted into the night sky.

I was searching for the moon- for something that I knew I couldn’t find. It came down sideways- the rain- a summer’s wet breath against my skin. This is my life, I remember thinking. Raindrops confused with tears.

• ☂ •

My plane to Bali is leaving in less than six hours. I am hungry but can’t bring myself to pay the exorbitant amount listed above the mini-fridge for an anorexic’s sized portion of peanuts.
He is the absence of touch that I am feeling now- not my ex-boyfriend who lies in a pool of blood in my memory, not the fat detective or the man with the thin and boyish face. He is a man I met one drunken night in New Orleans. He is a man who taught me again how to love.

The digital numbers of the clock on the bedside table twitch. Time is a strange thing- a marker that distinguishes lives. Sam and I met three months ago while we were both traveling down different paths. I wanted a four-day trip in a place “anywhere-from-here.” I wanted to replace the indented memory of my former relationship with a loose string of random and cheap encounters. I wanted to eat fried alligator and sausage Jambalaya without thinking about any form of weight.

We were both staying in different rooms at a back-packers hotel called The India House on South Lopez Street, where the air was thick with over a hundred-degree early summer heat. I spent the first day wandering down Canal Street, sneaking into museums and shops to steal brief moments of cool air from air-conditioners that spat out drops on the broken pavements. On the second day I gave up on the city and spent the afternoon with my legs hanging over the edge of the above ground pool in the back of the hostel. It looked like a swamp- my feet disappeared underneath the dark green depths.

In the evening I sat down next to Sam because it was the only chair left circling a picnic table filled with other travelers. We had bottles of vodka and Budweiser cans wrapped in the American flag. One of us started talking over the music that was being played through portable speakers on the other end of the table and I was still trying to decipher the confluence of foreign accents that met somewhere in the middle. English words that I couldn’t quite recognize. We made our way around the usual conversations that two travelers from different parts of the world have. He was traveling with friends across America, a country that he had never been to before and that I had barely touched. I felt my voice slurring with each sip I took out of whatever was in reach. Then we made our way to talking about love. I finished my drink in one large gulp. I’ll be an alcoholic by the time I’m thirty, I remembered thinking.
Others made their way out to the streets, cheering with their fists in the air with an excitement that is only ever brought on by too many beers. He lingered behind and I kissed him, trying to stay balanced on my liquor-induced limbs. We spent the night wandering drunkenly around the backstreets of the French Quarter. No destination other than ourselves.

Three months from when we first met at the picnic table in the back of The India House, ninety e-mails back and forth, a week and a half during a heat wave in Brooklyn and two days before now, he drove me to Heathrow airport after we had spent ten days talking about everything in Wales.

“You’ll have a great time,” he said to me. A crowd of Japanese travelers carting different colored neon luggage passed through us. “I’ll see you in two months.” I tried awkwardly to move my heavy bag out of the way. He kissed me briefly and said good-bye. I watched him walk away until I couldn’t see his back anymore, until his body faded into the crowds of people standing stagnant, heads up in front of the television monitors announcing the lists of flights- Istanbul, Los Angeles, Frankfurt, Hong Kong, so many places in this world to go.

I wanted to tell him I loved him. But I wasn’t used to the words.

On the plane to Bali a woman sits next to me reading a book titled The Spirtual Search. She looks typical, like somebody who has always felt our shared destination close to her heart. Baggy pants in Batik cloth print and a tight shirt with the Hindu Om sign printed at the chest. A pretty stewardess wearing a tight light green sarong walks by and the woman looks up from her book and smiles quickly before returning to its pages. Bali is a beautiful island and I remember the palpable sense of spirituality that I experienced when I first tasted the place three years before- but it never drew me in because of it’s spiritual pulse.

I want Bali for that different kind of beauty- the kind I know exists. I like the smell of rotting Durian fruit on the side of the road, of fish being dried out in small, dark kitchens and of garbage floating in open sewers in a stream underneath the cracked pavements. The smog of motorbikes that speed around
cliff-top roads that look as if they have been jaggedly cut out from the mountainsides with dull knives fills my lungs with a smell of childhood. It’s the beauty that the woman next to me is hoping to find that I’m afraid of. The beauty that captures your heart and changes it- the hope that you’ll find some aesthetic or principle within Balinese life that will make you a believer. I think about this as I feel the jolt of the plane wheels ripple throughout the cabin.

Am I a believer? Have I ever been? A skeptic is what I would call myself normally but sometimes things happen and it just doesn’t seem like coincidence is a powerful enough word to sum them up. Sam and I happened out of coincidence- two people from opposite ends of the world happening to be at the same place in a fleeting moment of time- two searches seeking to find answers.

One year ago, I remember again when the plane lands. One year ago and this is now.

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For the first two weeks I stay in an old palace complex in Karangasem, a regional district in North East Bali. It’s a location of Bali that is deemed most sacred and I draw a parallel to my home in New York, the northeastern square of America- a place whose sacredness I was still trying to remedy. Sitting cross-legged on the tiled floor, I long to stretch my legs out in the position that reminds me of home. My feet up in front of me on the couch, the television screen turned on with nobody paying much attention to it, just for the purpose of static voices filling up an empty room. In Bali, it’s impolite to stretch your legs out this way, to point your feet at another person. The yoga-like positions made my ankles feel like my body was purposely turning against me - sharp daggers digging further and further into bone.

There are twenty-three of us sitting around in a circle trying to figure out what the hell we’re doing here. Most of us want art, some want religion, others want the warm humid weather and black sand beaches and I want- I want escape.

My belly gurgles from the street food that I ate hours before and I can feel my muscles twitching inside of me. They don’t tell you about this kind of living in travel books, the constant pains in the bottom
of your stomach, the mosquitoes that buzz loudly in your ears late at night and the stale smell of chicken shit
paving the ground. One of the girls beside me begins to tell a story of how she’s looking to find herself here.
All I want right now is to find my stomach again.

“I just always knew that I needed to go here, needed to, I searched Bali in google and the pictures of
offerings on the street, man, they’re just so beautiful.” The others nod while she speaks but I stare blankly at
the green banana peels that are piled next to my ankle on the tiled floor. I pay attention only when I hear
the slip ups of a Southern accent poking through her speech.

“So why did you come here?” someone says to me. I look up. Lucy is a tall girl who used to be a
professional mountain guide in Colorado. She has calf muscles that look as if they’ve been falsely implanted
in her legs and a tattoo of a snake wrapping around her arm.

“I…” I start to say. I don’t have a good answer for her, nothing that matches up with the spiritual
channels, energy lines, Hindu art or tropic paradise that everyone else is using. “I needed to get the fuck out
of New York.” I say to her. She laughs and I’m glad that she doesn’t ask why.

I gather up the banana peels and say goodnight to everyone, making my way through the palace
complex towards my bedroom at the other end. Balinese men smoke clove cigarettes around a card table,
gambling with a deck of cardboard dominoes under a cloud of light grey smoke. They lift their eyes briefly
to acknowledge my sluggish movements across the green before slapping numbers down. I get to my
bedroom- a dark room with large wooden doors and windows opening out onto a white tiled verandah with
beat up velour couch sectionals. I’ve been dripping in sweat all day and can feel the dirt thinly speckling my
face with the façade of a suntan. I peel my clothes off and can smell their faint odor of dried mud and
nicotine. I walk to the bathroom, an outside space with a bucket shower and sad looking blue plastic toilet.
The moon is out tonight. A big moon that I’m watching as I throw bucketfuls of cold water on my naked
body. I’m far away from New York now, far from the rooftops views of skyscrapers and bathroom stalls in
Meatpacking District restaurants. It feels good, the cold water dripping down my body, sending ripples of goose-bumped skin down to my toes.

I dry myself off inside the room while two rats run around after each other in the rafters. It’s beginning to heat up again, the bed that I share with a girl from California is damp and hard. I lie down. I fall asleep.

This night is the first night that I remember dreaming since leaving the hotel room in Singapore. Broken images flash through my body as if they are traveling through my veins, sailing through me like a surge of demonic intoxication. I dream of flight, of speed and flash floods. I see Sam standing at the end of my Brooklyn apartment, a dark shadowed man against the backdrop of a brightly painted turquoise wall. There is a knock on the door- an axe coming through.

I turn around and the image of Sam disappears from the back of my head. The walls crumble, the hanging pictures drip onto the floor. The axe continues to chop through, shards of wood fall like flurrying snow to the ground in a slow and static motion. The axe is loud, large and crusted in blood. The door opens. A man walks in.

I wake up in a pool of sweat next to Rosalina who is twisted up in a sarong beside me- faintly smelling of Bintang beer. The rats are making nesting noises up in the rafters and a loud mosquito buzzes inside my ear. I’ve had this nightmare before, when my ex-boyfriend was the man standing against the turquoise wall at the end of my Brooklyn apartment. I’ve never given much credit to dreams, to trying to decipher what psychological meaning they might have. I’ve had the typical nightmares before of teeth crumbling inside my mouth, fingernails snapping in half on the floor- but they’ve never felt as real. I want to hear Sam’s voice, to tell him that I can’t sleep and have his words soothe me back to some semi-conscious state. I reach for my cell-phone at the side of my bed. He’s somewhere in a car traveling through Europe, somewhere in a different time zone, in a place far from the tropical land of Bali. I dial my old New
York cell-phone number- an expensive call just to hear my voice as the voice-mail recording instantly picks up. “Sorry I’m not here. Please leave a message.” I hang up.

Two weeks later I move into a spare bedroom of an Indonesian family in Bedulu village and fall sick with the flu. Chickens and roosters run around outside as I sit with my laptop out at a small table under a large verandah. Ibu gives me food every night, lately just a bowl of salted porridge with chicken meat to nurse me back to health. It’s never what I want to eat but I devour it every time, trying to mask the flavors of Indonesia by pretending they’re something else.

I’ve been in Bali now for about a month. In two minutes time takes on completely different forms. In the first, I’ve just arrived the day before in this foreign land, and in the second, I’ve had this life for years. Smoke from an incense stick that burns down to the center of an offering on the floor swirls into the early night sky. My sister-in-law comes out of her bedroom carrying a tin tray of more offerings on top of her head. Tomorrow is the full moon, purnama, and the ritual celebrations have already begun. She smiles at me and I force a smile back. I’m getting more and more used to these exchanges, using every ounce of energy to be consistently positive, masking my broken bahasa Indonesia with innocent smiles. I want to write about everything that I’ve experience so far, put these situations in between pages. I blow my nose and crumble the tissue, adding it to the pile on the ground. An empty Word document flushes bright white on the computer screen. There’s a million things I could write about, motorbike tires, trash fires, roosters, cremation ceremonies, volcanic sand, but there’s one story in particular that needs to leave my fingertips first.

Fred Eismen’s book Niskala and Siskala sits on the small wooden table splayed out in an almost obscene way. The binding is strained and rippled grotesquely. This book was where I first learned about Niskala and Siskala, the Balinese belief of two realms, that which they can see and that which they cannot. In Balinese culture, the tangible and the intangible live side by side, a concept that falls far from the Western
dichotomies of good versus bad, evil versus godly. Instead it’s an understanding that both exist within the same moment of time- that there isn’t a binary opposition but instead a necessary cohesion- a part of routine life.

I’ve asked many of my Balinese friends to tell me stories of their experience with Niskala, the unseen realm. Most describe their accounts within the simplicity of wandering down alleyways at night and getting the feeling that somebody is following them for the entire length of the street. Some talk about lights flickering on and off, dreams filled with ghosts and images that move them in sleep. Others talk about curses, bad luck and the inability to shake that off. Most of the stories I heard seemed to always have a logical explanation; Dee told me she once dreamed of being picked up by her dead grandmother and woke to find herself on the floor of her room and all I thought about was how deep of a sleeper she must have been to not notice rolling off her bed. Yet, even the Balinese that I talked with, who were skeptical of Niskala experiences such as these, still believed that this force existed in the world. I had begun to relate it to my own life, to my own dreams- the nightmare I had in the first week after arriving in Bali taking over my body as if some evil force had tried to prevent me from putting the past behind.

Earlier in the day, I sat down next to Pak Nyoman, another one of our language teachers and asked him if he could tell me a story of his own experience with Niskala. I had become obsessed with the idea, the concept of godliness and evil struggling to find a meditative ground.

“I really don’t believe it,” he told me in English; he pulled smoke from a Garam cigarette and the paper around the burning ember crackled. “But I have one- one that I can’t deny.” I put my legs out in front of me, getting comfortable and pulled out one of my own cigarettes. He drew in smoke.

“Tell me the story,” I said to him. He closed his eyes. He opened his mouth.

Pak Nyoman’s wife died in a motorbike accident six months before I met him. She was walking home in their village on a cliff top when a young man riding recklessly down the hillside paths hit her and killed her
instantly. After the news of her death he spent weeks of sleepless nights in his bed next to his children, too afraid to fall asleep for fear that he might see her mangled body in his dreams. He spent his days exhausted, trying to get to work on time, trying to navigate through the blocked roads of the city through bleary eyes. The only solace he found was in the body of his wife’s second cousin, much younger but with the same almond shaped eyes.

His family urged him to see a Balian, a traditional Balinese healer but Pak Nyoman never considered himself much of a believer before. To appease his family he went with his mother and children to the local healer in his village and sat playing with his fingers while the old man told him about how he felt his wife’s happiness somewhere within the dingy room. Nyoman felt nothing other than the sweat that was beading at his brow. He went home to Denpasar that night by himself and out with his friends to seek his own remedies in Arak and smoke. They told him about Western medications- anti-depressants and anti-anxiety pills, but he wasn’t a believer in those either.

A week later, he decided that he would try the traditional way again, this time with a Balian in another regency in Bali, far away from his home where everyone knew about the death of his beautiful wife. He rode his motorcycle by himself to Tabanan and met with an old Balian woman. He sat down beside her and she opened her mouth to speak.

“It was my wife,” he told me. “It was her voice, her mannerisms, the same way her fingers bent slightly as she touched the side of my face.” The Balian woman, fifty years older than his wife and much uglier had become her somehow- had filled herself with his dead wife for the ten minutes that he sat talking to her. She told him not to worry, not to be afraid of sleeping with her cousin, not to be afraid to dream of her. “She told me she was happy that I was falling in love, happy that I was moving on.” The strangeness of the situation made his heart beat in a way that was almost painful, as if the blood had overfilled it, swelling up inside his rib cage. He had a desire to lie naked next to the old and ugly Balian, to feel his wife’s breath again on his skin.
“I couldn’t not believe it anymore,” he told me, “the Balian used all the words that my wife used, she had all the pauses and little bits of laughter in her speech that my wife used to have. She knew things that nobody would have known unless they knew her, unless they were her.”

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Storm clouds are gathering and a clap of thunder breaks through the silence of the early evening, drowning out the tapping noises of my fingertips on the keyboard of my laptop outside. I want to believe Pak Nyoman’s story, the incredibility of it, the haunting romanticism of being reconnected with the past. The chickens, getting wet underneath the thatched chicken coops, are quiet in their stone-like sleep. The geckos are climbing the walls towards the ceiling underneath the verandah, four of them lying still, pointed towards the fluorescent bulb that flickers as the thunder continues.

The screen on my laptop flashes with the sign of a dying battery. My body feels lethargic, my mind pulling the last bits of energy left in my limbs. I turn the computer off and pull out a cigarette from the pack of Marlboro Lights next to it. I’m supposed to quit soon, but there’s not much that I can think of being better right now than smoking underneath a tropic storm. The smoke is white, curling out from my nose and lips. The lizards begin to chirp and the rain falls down heavily, quickly flooding the small alleyways formed between the different rooms on the complex grounds. I watch the rain, my cigarette burning towards the filter between my fingers. I forget to smoke and it burns to the end.

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I wake up somewhere in the middle of the night with my head on the opposite end of the bed from where it started off. I’ve had the same nightmare again, the demonic possession of my dreams that occurred my first week in Bali at the palace in Karangasem. Except this time I remember words.

Sam stands against the turquoise wall of Brooklyn, the axe coming through the front door sends gurgling noises of choked wood through the railroad style apartment. I’m facing him and he opens his
mouth. I tell him I love him, my mumbled voice getting more and more fragmented by the sounds of the axe as I repeat the word.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry…” His voice trails off into the apartment, but it’s not a voice that I’m used to. It’s someone else’s, it’s the voice of the thin, and hollowed out lost boy who once held me down on the ground with an elbow and shotgun to my back. It’s a sad voice, a low and pathetic beg. “Forgive me.” He says. He crumbles, the wall behind him melts and the axe breaks through the door.

I try to close my eyes again but the images keep reappearing. The past is unforgiving as I try to persuade my mind to meet me in other places. The thunder outside has softened and I lie awake at the other end of the bed and listen to the beating of rain hit the white tiled floors outside. Soon the roosters will wake and begin to caw on and off again until the sun rises. The stray dogs that pack together on the alley behind the compound walls howl, the younger ones whining as the older ones bite.

The rain stops. I want to get up and smoke a cigarette to ease my mind, to distract myself away from those thoughts that I’ve tried so hard to ignore. But my body aches with the longings for sleep. My eyes feel heavy.

Perhaps this is Niskala, I think, as I lie with my legs heavy over the pilled sheets. This is my failure to remedy my intangible past and tangible present. My unwillingness to acknowledge that one can’t exist without the other. I think of the old Balian woman in Pak Nyoman’s story, how in that present moment the room and woman were filled with everything that he had struggled to forget.

From outside the large wooden doors and windows I hear the rain picking up again. A gecko hiding underneath the sill makes loud click-clocking noises and somewhere in between the fat drops hitting the ground outside, I sleep.

I spend the heat of the following day walking along the polluted streets looking for internet access- hoping to find an email from Sam that would reassure me, one that is tucked between tens of e-mails boasting free
concerts in New York and Plan Parenthood petitions. I watch as women stand in line at the street stalls, tying sick-looking chickens by their feet to the sides of their motorbikes. Offerings are being made on the pavements that I walk along, families stroll road-side together wearing brightly colored *pakaian adat*, the young girls reaching for the branches of trees to put flowers in their hair.

From Switzerland, Sam writes to me about driving up mountains as snow fell softly onto their window shield- of seeing trees with red leaves as thick and harsh as blood. “I miss you,” he writes, “I think about you all the time.” I leave the blank page of a response on the old computer screen in the small and dingy Internet café with old computer terminals covered in dust.

I can’t think of words and feel that familiar pang of self-sabotage leeching through my veins. Why can’t I look forwards and be happy? Why am I still holding on to obstacles? The thoughts weigh down heavily on me now as I look at myself in the mirror in my bedroom. I tie and then untie the traditional sash around my waist, squeezing the knot tightly so that my sarong lies flat against my belly. Broken segments of gamelan music quivers as the sun begins to set, slivers escaping from the loud roar of motorbikes speeding past each other. The full moon is tonight and I am attending a traditional purification ritual at *tirta empul*, a famous temple placed at the top of a stretch of long and winding roads. I clear my throat, the phlegm unleashing from the back. My head feels as if it’s been stuffed full of cotton and lingering thoughts from the night before, from the past- the bad dreams of it reoccurring- the looming thought that it might never go away.

My Ibu calls out my name, “Natasya, *sudah siap?*” She asks if I am ready and I yell out to her that I’ll only be a minute longer. The complex is quiet. All the others in the family have already donned their traditional clothing and headed to the local, less grandiose temples to bathe under the sacred spouts.

A slightly sunburned face, a body wrapped in Balinese clothing, ten thousand miles away and I can’t get the voice of the man who held me down on the ground inside the drug-house on Long Island out of my brain. This is my Niskala, I think. I’ve never been religious, never wanted to follow scripture or the
guidance of someone who I felt I would never know, but in this moment the idea of being able to relinquish blame on something else is enticing. I pat down the still bulging sarong and open the door to leave.

There is something in the air tonight—perhaps it is the low-lying fervor of ritual in the village or the alluring gesture of a pregnant moon hanging so near and full in the sky, advertising the cosmic infinite. People have always gone mad for the moon. Nights dancing naked outside, drinking, partying, falling in love with souls and bodies under the altered light. I can feel it, as if something strange is about to take place.

I sit in the back of an old truck without any windowpanes as we drive up towards the temple, about thirty minutes outside of the village. The ground is getting higher, the trees taller. I stick my head out of the car to try and see the moon but the storm clouds have blocked it from view. My throat is aching and I cough up mucus when the wheel of the car runs over a large tree branch. It rains lightly, settling on my face in a papery layer.

I see several of my friends from the program once we enter the temple, standing outside the main purification pools hesitantly. Several people sit down on the floor beside the entrance into the pool, already soaked in holy water, already lighting up their cigarettes that burn anxiously against the small drops of rain that are now becoming fatter. We enter together in a single filed line.

Pak Agung, a man from the village, hands me a lit incense stick and points towards a stone platform covered with thousands of canang sari offerings. He is a man who relishes in practicing his English with me in front of the roadside warungs in Bedulu, but now he doesn’t speak. I go over to the area and sit down on my knees, holding the incense stick in front of me with both hands. A young Balinese woman sits beside me. She places offerings on the ground and prays with her hands firmly at her chest. The stiffness of her body makes me envious—a strange desire to fall deeply into some kind of prayer washes over me. I close my eyes and place the incense into a mound of sand on the floor. My ear starts acting up again, blocking out my thoughts.
I follow the Balinese woman, trying to copy what she is doing. We take off our sandals together and head towards the large-stone walled pool that is filled with half-naked men and fully clothed woman. On one end of the pool is a line of heavy flowing stone fountains, water beating down from the mouths of mythical creatures. Flowers and banana leaves from offerings that have fallen off the sides float on top of the water. I watch the woman walk down the algae covered steps. She looks calm. I put my toe in. The water is freezing. I feel it shoot up into my bones. I step slowly in, my sarong feels like a weighted layer of skin detaching from my body as I move to stand at the end of the single filed line leading towards the row of spouts.

I watch as men and woman bow their heads under the first, the water soaking their hair and then their eyes, nose and mouth as they look up towards the sky. They move on to the second, then the third, the fourth and all the way until the very end.

“You understand?” A Balinese man says from behind me. “You come here, you wash the bad.” He smiles at me and I nod, unable to speak as I make sure that my sarong isn’t unraveling out from the haphazardly tied sash that is supposed to keep it in place.

“Yes,” I say, “thank you.” My throat and ears are still clogged and I try to clear out the phlegm by hawking loudly but it doesn’t help. Flowers float on top of the water- pink, yellow, blue and red. My head is pounding; I can feel it beginning at the base of my neck about to shoot up around my skull towards the front. Purification, I think. Let it begin.

Under the first spout I hesitate before putting my head under. The water is thick and white. People talk, rubbing their goose-bumped arms up and down quickly with their hands. I put my hands together mimicking the others who have gone before me and place my face under.

The water feels good; it feels cleansing and smells like mountains. I run my hands through my hair and let the water pour over my mouth. It is quiet now and I can’t tell whether it’s because my eardrums are now completely blocked or whether this really is magic. I follow the line, the second spout, the third, the
fourth, the fifth, the sixth and more. There are three ones left, two at the far end that nobody is under. Those are left for the deceased, the ones we can’t see. The man behind me taps me on my shoulder and I barely recognize human touch.

“Ini,” he says, pointing towards the last spout that I am about to go under. “Untuk menghilangkan energi negative.”

“Ah,” I say back to him, not fully understanding what he has just said. I smile and my jaw aches. The woman in front of me spends a long time running the water from this spout through her hair and over her face. A man squats on the wall out of the pool holding large empty water bottles. She finally finishes, placing her hands together in front and bowing down in prayer. I hesitate to go and the man places one of the water bottles underneath the stream until it is filled.

“Silikan,” the man behind me says, gesturing towards the water. “Go.”

It beats down heavily on me, water pours out from this stream with an intensity that differs from the others. I close my eyes. It is cold but I don’t feel the sting of it anymore. I let it hit my skin.

I spend a good three minutes, letting go of all the thoughts inside my head. There is nothing to worry about, nothing to question, nothing to search for answers to. An overwhelming sense of peace has filled me, of nothingness. I look up, opening my eyes under the water and release myself from it. The line behind me moves quickly up towards the spout, the man squatting on the wall jumps first to put another bottle under. I stand in the pool. It has started to rain again, lightly, coming down from the sky in a slanted direction. I look up. I want the moon, but the storm clouds have blocked it from view. It starts to rain harder, some drops fall down my cheek and drip into my slivered mouth. It tastes salty, familiar- a mix of rain and tears.

In the car ride home I sit on folded newspapers that don’t absorb any of the water that drips off my sarong. Pak Agung sits opposite me.

“Pak,” I say, “that last spout we went under. What was it for?”
He looks at me and smiles.

“Washing away negative energy.” He says. “The most important one.” He turns to look out the window as the car hiccups over rocks and fallen branches. I can hear again, my mind and throat feel clear.

Something has cured me, inside and out.

We get back to the village and I walk to my bedroom after saying goodnight to everyone. I peel off the wet clothes and leave them in a heap on the floor, the water forming a small puddle around them. I look in the mirror, my naked body trembling slightly from the cold.

I cough, trying to release something from my lungs but there is nothing there. My sickness has left my body.

“This can’t be real,” I say out loud. A gecko scatters quickly from behind the mirror, swerving up the wall and disappearing into the rafters above.

I turn off the light and climb into bed.

I meet Sam in my sleep in a restaurant in Brooklyn that I used to go to every Thursday night with my old roommate. I have long hair. The waitress brings us live fishes on plates and puts them onto the table, a never-ending supply. Her hand is large. She wears a glowing ring that holds the moon between gold prongs.

We eat, we laugh and he plays with my hair that begins to grow and grow and grow.

I wake up and it is morning. The roosters caw loudly from the front. The sun filters through the crack in the wooden window shutters.

Something happened at the purification ritual, something that I can’t explain. I get up and walk towards the bathroom, catching myself again in the mirror. Nothing is different. I look at the reflection, catching the pile of now damp clothing on the floor.
Negative energy. Something that I have always succumbed to, letting it drag me backwards with every step towards something new that I have taken. I smile, thinking of Sam in my dream from the night before, his voice and mine curling together on the table.

I feel the tinges of a headache beginning. My sickness remains un-purified and I feel somewhat relieved that I can still confirm my skepticism. Yet, there is something different about this morning, something hopeful that I can’t explain.

In the shower, the water drips from the rusted faucet above slowly. I long for the pressure of the spouts of the ritual, the water heavily beating down, washing away everything, dirt, skin and thoughts—making the past seems so far away.

I may never become a believer in the all-spiritual world. I turn off the shower of the faucet and realize that it doesn’t matter. I feel ready now—ready to let go, ready to remember, ready to realize that there are things in my memories that I will never be able to wash away.

In my bedroom, my cell-phones rings in a bell-chime. I pick it up, one text message. “Made it to Spain—love you,” it says. I press reply and text him back, my thumb working quickly over the pad of numbers.

“I love you too.”

I hit send.

I am a believer now.
P a r t  II: T h e  T r a v e l e r

You chose Asia because you thought it would give you that “authentic study-abroad experience.” Your friends all went to Florence. They came back and the only thing that changed about them was they were now able to pronounce all the menu items at Gino’s Trattoria in Little Italy. They also learned how to chug a pint of beer in less than six seconds.

You went to Bali because you typed “Bali” into a Google Image search, yielding endless photos of beautiful turquoise-green water, beaches with black sand, shirtless Australian surfers and large tropical flowers. There were also photos of Balinese women carrying fruit on top of their heads, temples on cliff tops, tooth-filing, rice fields and brightly painted wooden masks. You took a comparative religious studies seminar your Freshman year and learned about Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Religion and art, you decided, was a better motivation. You told this to your friends and family, and then you packed twelve different bikinis in your already overweight bag.

You arrive in Bali, take a two hour bus ride leaving the other white people at the airport, the English signs on the side of the road and the coast line far behind you. You realize quickly that the island of Bali is not one large beach. You learn that Balinese people don’t care about one way roads, that they’re built to be skinny so they can fit families of six on one motorbike seat and that traffic in Bali most certainly, does not give right of way to your life.

On your first night, you have an epiphany that ear plugs are by far the greatest invention in all of man-kind because roosters in Bali are not morning wake up calls but are instead midnight, one in the
morning, three in the morning, five in the morning, six in the morning and all-hours-after-that-wake-up-calls. You relent and let mosquitoes, geckos, lizards and flies become your friends instead of enemies, coming to the realization with every tokek-tokek and loud buzz in your ear, that for the next three and a half months these creatures will not let you live without them.

In the middle of the night your stomach hurts because you ate street food and you run to the squatter toilet, wishing that you had taken that free yoga class in college so that you were better equipped for enduring what feels like boot-camp for the thighs. You squat or you die! You realize that toilet paper, a solid shit and not having piss all over your feet because you weren’t ever taught to “aim” as a young girl growing up, will become more nostalgic for you than missing Thursday night episodes of The Jersey Shore and your mother’s home-cooked meals. You need to hydrate, but because you can’t drink the tap water and have already finished the four bottles of water lined up on the floor you reach for the next available option- a Bintang beer.

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You want to see all of Bali- mainly because you’re still not convinced that the island is roughly the same size as Delaware. In Ubud, you sit in fancy cafes that only serve raw food and eavesdrop on the conversations of a group of yoga teachers at the table next to you. The cafes are filled with thirty-year-old beautiful yogis, old men with pierced ears and a couple Americans with tattooed chests. You don’t want to be like these people and so you travel to Tabanan and attempt to work in the rice fields, taking a break every five minutes to rip out young coconut flesh with your mud covered hands. You swim in the river naked, and then leave when you see a group of young Balinese children shitting on the riverbank, where you have just swum downwards from.

You leave village life with an affirmation that you will always be a city girl at heart. You’ve watched a chicken be sacrificed, a flirtation ceremony dance on the streets and learned how to gamble with Balinese
men. You’ve changed your cigarettes from Marlboro Lights to Garam Cloves and firmly believe that one day, coconuts will change the world.

You move on from the rice fields and head towards the mountains. Northern Bali feels like a different country, the air is still and quiet and there are two thousand flies constantly fighting for a stretch of your skin. You want to see something magical, and so you get up at 3:40 in the morning and climb Mt. Batur in the dark with a Balinese mountain-goat guide. You realize once again that you shouldn’t have made fun of those yoga girls in Ubud, that you smoke too many cigarettes and that nature isn’t really your thing. You get to the top and want to jump right off it, your muscles burning, your heart barely beating anymore. But Bali is beautiful and the view from the top as the sun rises over the volcanic peaks confirms this. You see the lake, the mountains, the volcanoes, the ocean and far in the distance, Lombok. Another island for another time.

After living in Bali for three months, you feel as if you’ve already mastered enough Indonesian to not be considered a tourist. It angers you when you see scantily clad Westerners and are happy that in Bali most of these people are not American, and are instead Australian. Yet, you go to Kuta when you’re missing home, when you’re sick of communicating in a different language- when you want a Margarita instead of Arak.

You board your flight from Ngurah Rai airport and catch your reflection when you turn your head to say goodbye to the crowd of strangers and brown plastic seats. You’re wearing a sarong because it seemed like the most comfortable thing to fly in. You have the same tie-dyed Barong shirt that four other people in the waiting area have on and your yoga mat strapped to your hiking bag. Your Kiwi surfer boyfriend grabs your hand. “Ready,” he asks and you still think his accent is cute.

You leave Bali, your flight takes off and you’re relieved when the pretty stewardess hands you a cup of Balinese powdered coffee, which you’ve grown to love. You think about what’s ahead of you, clean air,
English and you’re not quite sure you want to leave. Though you’ve complained of the endless Nasi-Not-Necessary meals, the constricting feeling of being sucked into *pakaian adat*, bargaining with Balinese sellers for mangoes, diarrhea and the hot and humid weather, you realize that they are all things that you’ve actually grown quite fond of- perhaps not, however, the diarrhea. You’re not sure what you prefer anymore, an *upacara* causing a traffic jam or an angry New York taxi driver causing a traffic jam, the sometimes frustrating nature of Balinese people conception of *jam karet* or the hustle and bustle of trying to make the 4 subway to work on time. You’ve become used to seeing chickens fighting on the side of the roads. You’re accustomed to being amongst a mix of Western tourists, Balinese youth and traditionally dressed *ibus* waiting in the same line at Circle K’s.

The plane lands hours later and there’s only two phrases that pop into you’re head while everyone unbuckles their seatbelts. You smile. *Tidak Apa-apa. Sing Kin-Kin*, because you know that you’ll be back.
Part III: The Storyteller

I met Jango Pramartha when I showed up at his house on a Monday afternoon, sweaty, flustered, slightly depressed and with all my bags in tow. Renting out a lavish modern apartment on his family’s housing complex, complete with high ceilings and bookcases filled with books on culture and art, I began working two hours later as an illustrator for his company, Bog Bog Bali Cartoon Magazine. Throughout my two week experience working at the magazine and becoming a friend and admirer of Jango, I came to realize how influential the magazine is, not just for pure entertainment, but also for the survival of Balinese culture. Balinese people love to talk, and before coming to Jango’s house I had amassed stories from the most unlikely of places and people. Sweaty bemo ride discussions, conversations that waft through cigarette smoke with local Balinese in the early hours of day and late night Arak-induced rhetoric had given me enough information on Balinese society to write a novel, or at least a very well informed academic paper. Yet what I least expected was for the most influential stories in Balinese society to be formed not by words, but instead, by cartoons.

Charismatic is not a full enough bodied word to describe Jango’s personality. I had yet to meet another Balinese man whom could I could compare to him before coming to Denpasar. His house is a hub of creative activity, a constant influx of contemporary Balinese people and society, who all have the shared motivation of putting the reality of Bali on the forefront of both the minds of Western visitors and Balinese locals. Jango was trained at Udayana University in the school of Art and Design and it was there that he first realized the importance of visual media in concern with maintaining Balinese culture. His cartoons were hugely successful as they toyed with a deeper political and social intent masked by a purely entertaining
outlet. As a student, Jango protested against the Suharto era with his peers and took up a job as a writer for the local newspapers. However, when he wrote about his culture and the problems within the government and society, there was little response from local people. In 1986, he started drawing political cartoons and saw an immediate response from people who felt a kinship with the sentiment within his drawings. Jango discussed this with me one afternoon, saying that although the government may not have understood his work, people who cared deeply about Balinese life and society were responsive to this medium because they shared his yearning for cultural understanding.

“Simple drawings can make a lot of meaning,” he said, and over the years this idea became the premise for the creation of Bog Bog Bali Cartoon Magazine. Between the years of 1992 and 1994, Jango was asked by a cultural observer if he would come to Australia to assist a series of lectures on Indonesian Art and Culture at Murdoch University. These were important years for the development of Jango’s success and it was in one of the lectures that he assisted where he first shaped the initial concept for Bog Bog. Jango was assisting a lecture at the university, and in a slide show, showcased some of the cartoons that he had been working on, political satires of Balinese people and culture. The audience, students and professors, were immediately receptive to these images and began laughing hysterically as each slide progressed. Shocked by the massive response to his work Jango posed a simple question to the audience.

“How many people have been to Bali before?” he asked. Only three people shyly raised their hands and it was in that moment that Jango realized the potential that cartoons have within society. Although the overwhelming majority of his audience had never stepped foot in Indonesia before, the cartoons were universally understood and accepted. Jango understood then that cartoons can go beyond entertainment and that the multiplicity of meaning that they can possess was a relatable way to explore the problems in Balinese society.

When he returned to Bali he began creating Bog Bog magazine. The word “Bog-Bog” loosely translates from Balinese to English as “bullshit”, a title already loaded with the dual purpose of his work as
being comical and yet, simultaneously riddled with deeper intellectual content. (see figure 1) When asked whether he felt that there was any criticism towards his magazine and the way that Balinese people and culture are depicted through the collection of cartoons that compose each issue, Jango responded by saying that as long as there was no problem for the people who love and buy his magazine, he didn’t see anything wrong with depicting Balinese society in this way. Though his magazine deals with the confliction of the modern and traditional in Balinese culture, Jango remains incredibly sensitive to the aspects of Balinese culture that make it such a unique place. Before publishing the first issue, Jango brought a cartoon of his to the Hindu leader in the government known as *peradi persatuan Hindu Indonesia*. The cartoon portrayed Balinese people in traditional clothing praying at a temple, yet tucked beneath all of their sashes and sarongs were buzzing hand phones and other modern electronic equipment. The leader laughed when he was handed the cartoon and told Jango that this was the reality of Bali.

Jango dresses in Western styled clothing and runs his house much differently than other traditional Balinese men that I have lived with. Though his magazine criticizes many aspects of Balinese society, Jango firmly maintains that he loves Bali and that what he is doing is not a hateful critique of Balinese society, but is instead a desire for Balinese people to have a self-awareness of the real situations that Bali is faced with so as not to let traditional culture disappear. In a speech Jango gave to the economic faculty of Udayana University on November 25th, 2011, Jango reiterated the important phrase *Think Globally, Act Locally*. He showed one of his early cartoons, a Balinese modern youth dressed in punk clothing looking into a mirror with the reflection of a traditional Balinese man staring back at him. (see figure 2) As humorous as it was, the deeper social context of the cartoon was easy to see.

When I asked Jango what he feels about some of the critiques of Bog Bog and his work he explained to me the situation of Balinese society being pulled in two directions by people who want Bali to be modern and people who want it to revert back to what it once was years and years ago. He told me, “some people want Bali to be unchanged, they want to go back to when naked women were in the marketplace but that
was a long time ago and it was a primitive society. Bali is part of the global world now, it is part of

globalism, the word “Bali” is in the word globalism and we cannot stop Bali from becoming part of the

world.” (see figure 3) Through his cartoons, Jango hopes that it will make Balinese people more aware of

this situation and how their culture must be preserved realistically by having an awareness of what could

potentially happen to Bali if their own individual sense of culture is forgotten. It is in this manner that

Jango’s cartoons serve not only as visual media but also as important stories that are easily accessible to both

Westerners and Balinese.

“Cartoons explain culture, explain society,” he said. “They are able to predict what can happen in

the future.” Jango told me a story of how 10 years ago he drew a political cartoon of a traditional upacara, a

religious procession, trying to cross the highway but being stopped because the height of their offerings and

traditional towers were compromised by an overpass, making it unable for the procession to continue

across the road. Now, the government is dealing with this exact issue that Jango depicted and an intense

argument has been forced within the Balinese government concerning plans for a large overpass connecting

the airport with tourist areas. When he first started Bog Bog magazine most of his friends thought that it

would fail within the first year. Yet, the recent celebration of Bog Bog’s tenth anniversary and the

widespread popularity of it both within the younger generations and intellectuals of Balinese society attests

to its success and the future success of cartoons and other visual media as a reflection and voice for Balinese

culture.

Though Jango does not consider himself a storyteller, after working at Bog Bog magazine with him

and the team that comprises the company, I realized that in a way these cartoons function as stories

portraying Balinese past, present and future. A more accessible medium than words, the artwork is

dedicated to providing humor and entertainment to a viewing pool that is not restricted by age, race or

cultural background. Reminiscent of the protests that the Balinese youth so fervently took part in during the

era of Suharto’s dictatorship, these cartoons now function in the democratic society as a platform to express
both the frustrations, complacency and mediation between Bali being in danger of having all of it’s tradition swallowed by the Western world while still maintaining itself as part of the larger global context. Being not only inspired by Jango’s artistic work and dedication, I have also been enlightened to a hopeful view of Bali succeeding past the pressures of tourism, and transforming into a modern culture dedicated to the preservation of it’s traditional heritage.
Part IV: Internship at Bog Bog Bali Cartoon Magazine

A collection of three images that I worked on while interning with Bog Bog Bali Cartoon Magazine.

1. Babi Massage?
10 cm x 6 cm
Micron and Prismacolor pen on drawing paper
2.

*A Salon for Every Woman in Bali*

20 cm x 20 cm

Micron and Prismacolor pen on drawing paper
3.

*Bali is Paradise*

20 cm x 20 cm

Micron and Prismacolor pen on drawing paper
4.

“Sacred Banyan Tree”

15 cm x 9 cm

Micron and Prismacolor on drawing paper
THE END