

Waves

by Marla Koberstein

Marla Koberstein is a senior Environmental and Conservation Biology major. She studied in Auroville, India during the winter of 2005, and traveled on her own throughout India during the spring of 2005.

The heat presses its suffocating walls against me, giant trucks honk and brush my arm hairs as they pass me on my bicycle, motorbikes battle goats for road space, a cow and a child defecate on the same side of the street. My senses are maxed out. I am no longer a being that takes up space, but rather mushy tissue stuck on a mosaic where personal space has no business. I am riding my bike back to the guest house, beyond exhaustion and too shocked to give a damn about how tired my legs feel. Day One in India and I have just disassembled a man's roof, made of straw and lying in the middle of the road.

Hundreds of thousands of people were consumed by the tsunami that struck Southeast Asia. Multitudes more still live in tents, contemplating when they will ever again be able to invite a neighbor over for chai in a house with four walls and a roof. I arrived five days after the disaster struck, and in some villages we visited the government had yet to even assess the damage.

The village we worked at was Ganakachettykulam. I couldn't say the name; I could hardly speak enough Tamil to say hello. But whatever words could leave my privileged lips amounted to nothing compared to what the coconut tree lying through a family's one-room home communicated. A woman's wails and a child's laughter hit me from both sides, paralyzing me.

We piled debris onto tarps. Woven coconut leaf shingles, sea-soaked saris, and the miles of fishing net were thrown into the bonfires that speckled the beach, like offerings made to whatever god permitted their village to be leveled and their kin to be washed away. Earth, wind, water, fire. All elements took part. The loved ones were taken out to sea; the belongings joined the clouds as smoky memories. We formed a chain of muscles to remove the bricks that once supported pictures of Shiva and blocked the wind, but now lay idle on the ground of someone's living room. Snakes slithered past my feet. A government vehicle arrived. Its back-up signal was the tune of "It's a small world after all."

I'm lying in bed, it's 4:00 a.m. and music is blaring from a nearby village loud enough to wake the gods. A gecko croaks and bugs munch on my glucose-rich blood. I feel as though my skin has been peeled away, my nerves stretched from their tissues and hooked directly to the environment around me. There is no center for integration, only stimulus upon stimulus. Twenty-four hours ago, I was sweaty palms and anticipation as I stepped off the plane. Now every pore in my body is open as wide as my eyes were the moment they took in an Indian night.

My sense of self and the world has been inverted, reversed. India forces you to question anything you could have possibly learned throughout life, and once you insist you have things figured out, she sets you spinning in an opposite direction. In one day, you can let out a laugh containing more joy than you've known, and be brought to the saddest, most frustrating tears. You are an infinitesimally small spring, oscillating between this country's joys and sorrows, not at your whim, and never within your power.

I am at this country's mercy.

I am exposed.