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Cucumber Island and After: On Trauma, Memory, Writing, and Healing

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**CUCUMBER ISLAND AND AFTER:
ON TRAUMA, MEMORY, WRITING, AND HEALING**

**A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors**

by
Peyton Lunzer

May 2014

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We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: An Introduction

The most important question concerning anything written might be why it was written—not by whom or for whom, not where or in what colored ink, but why anything might be so important as to merit preservation by words on a page. The answer to that question is tricky in regards to this thesis. My reasons for writing were constantly evolving throughout the process. I wrote because I was having panic attacks and I thought it would help; I wrote because I thought I had a story worth sharing; I wrote because I was afraid of forgetting; I wrote because I felt myself falling into a role, this writing life.

And now I am trying to remember all the reasons why and trying to explain them, even though I can hardly explain them to myself. After so many nights and pages of writing, the memories are blurring, the essays are being jumbled, and the reasons behind it all are escaping me.

In the opening lines of her acclaimed collection of essays, *The White Album*, Joan Didion tells us that “we tell ourselves stories in order to live.” This line is as much the reason *why* to this thesis as any other explanation I could come up with. We tell stories – to ourselves and to others – in order to live, and in order to live better. That is the sum result of this writing project. That I had stories to sort through and make sense of and share. That I had a desire, and still do, to live and live better.

Annie Dillard in *For the Time Being* writes about stories: “quizzical encounters cumulate over a lifetime.” This is another way to explain this thesis, as a collection of odd moments and random run-ins with weird characters. As an atlas of quizzical encounters.

More than anything, I wanted to understand the relationship between memory and myself. I wanted to see how stories of days past could inform the present day; how big and powerful characters of yesterday could live on and hold influence today. So I started this writing about encounters. I started with the summer of 2013, when I'd first begun this writing project, when I worked on a farm in southern Colorado. I looked back to the spring before, to the months after my study abroad experience when all I could think about was Chile. And I looked to the autumn before that, the fall semester of 2012, to the six months I spent studying and traveling in South America.

The more I looked, the more I had to look. Because the stories that I thought would be the substance of my thesis turned out to be bigger than stories. They were stories rooted in stories, encounters rooted in the encounters that had made me, *me*.

There were big words in the margins of my notebooks that informed my work: trauma, memory, writing, and healing. I hoped to engage all these in my thesis. I did this by looking back.

I looked to the beginning.

I am a Pacific Northwest girl. I was born in Washington state; I have two brothers, one older one younger, and one sister; I learned to read when I was four; my favorite book was *Harry Potter*; and I grew up on an island. This last detail proved to be an important one. Bainbridge Island, a thirty-five minute ferry ride from Seattle, Washington, is where I spent my days—and “how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” At least, according to Annie Dillard. I don't think it a bad philosophy of life.

On Bainbridge, I grew up in the Grand Forest and on the docks, and I grew up surrounded by kids and playing games. These details are important too. That I have a

permanent crick in my neck from gazing up at the boughs and branches of the magnificent firs that constitute the woods behind my house. That I know that the Eagle Harbor dock has barnacles on the other side, that there are otters in Hidden Cove, that it's safe to jump off Point White Dock only during high tide. And that the games are to blame for my overactive imagination: Roller Coaster Races in the living room, the Animal Game whenever it snowed, Cops and Robbers through the woods with the neighbors, and perhaps the greatest invention of them all: Cucumber Island.

I was seven I dreamt up Cucumber Island, which was a happy blend of names and characteristics of my favorite children books and movies—*Bridge to Terabithia*, *Harry Potter*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Star Wars*. The characters, myself and my younger siblings, Joey and Victoria, as well as Maggie and Richard down the street, who I would nanny for seven years, were some of my first encounters. They included a six-year-old who could turn into a tiger, a pair of giant cucumber guards who could never remember the password to their prison, a rat with a knack for tight spaces and espionage, and a girl who climbed trees.

That last one was me. This is another clue to the stories to come. I was introverted and intellectual, and I processed everything through my own eyes and from where I stood, and I wanted desperately to be a part of every encounter, every story. I wrote myself into every world. I was the leader of the Cucumber Island gang. I wrote everything in the first person. In the fourth grade, I filled a notebook with an ongoing story called “The Year at Hogwarts,” starring the iconic trio: Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and myself. Ron Weasley was mysteriously missing.

I had plenty of stories to work with. I read books like other kids watched television—that is, every morning and afternoon and night, books and worlds consuming my every

thought. I remember the first time I was left home alone. Convinced that the bad guy in *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm*, number thirteen in the Nancy Drew series, was about to break into my home, I crawled under my bed and hid with a stuffed angel, crying. For one week when I was twelve, I spoke only in a British accent and stubbornly refused to call mirrors anything but “looking-glass.” My parents used books as leverage; instead of extra dessert or threats of extra chores, they would take what I was reading and put it on top of the fridge.

“No more reading till you finish eating,” they would say when they caught me reading under the dinner table.

If I wasn't reading I was running and swimming, pounding down the trails of the Grand Forest with our Welsh Terrier every morning before class and floating at all the island hot spots, Fort Ward and Fay Bainbridge and Pritchard Park, with my friends or by myself whenever the tides felt good.

My childhood on the island proves that I was and am a product of place. There are mugs at Winslow Drug, the island souvenir shop inscribed with “B.I. ‘TIL I DIE.” It's close to the same print I have on my heart.

From eleven years of adventure on the island I moved to Denver, Colorado. The move was logical enough; as I poured over a list of potential colleges one afternoon in the spring of my final year of high school, my younger sister, Victoria, looked at the map pinned on my wall. I had stars for all the cities with schools that had accepted me.

“Where you gonna go, Peyt?”

“Not sure,” I muttered, refusing to take my eyes off my countless charts tracking pros and cons.

“What would Arthur do?”

“What?”

“King Arthur!” Victoria lit up at the very name of our latest obsession. Since our introduction to *Merlin*, the BBC show set in medieval England, Victoria and I had checked out and read every book from the Bainbridge Island library on Arthurian legend. She asked again.

“What would King Arthur do?”

“Um.” I looked at my map. There were stars up and down the west coast, as far south as San Francisco, as close to home as a ferry ride and twenty minute jaunt up Capitol Hill. There was a star in Spokane in western Washington, next to a doodle that read “Grandma’s house”, and a star in Portland next to a dog that represented my older brother Martin, his wife Marie, and Joey, their German shepherd.

Far to the right—out East, as I’d always known the country—was a star next to a mountain. “Regis University,” it read, “Denver, Colorado.”

“Arthur would go to Denver,” I spoke slowly, “because it’s the farthest from home. It’s the biggest adventure. It’s strange.”

Victoria grinned and gave me a hug. “Yeah he would!” she squealed. “I mean, I was going to say he’d like to be by mountains, to go hunting. But your reason works too.”

Two weeks later, I boarded a plane for Denver to visit Regis University. I fell in love outside a building that looked like Hogwarts.

My freshmen year, I was introduced to Dillard and Didion, two of the essayists that would influence this thesis. I titled my first paper for my freshmen seminar *Writing Analytically*: “We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to See,” and talked about storytelling and

ghosts in Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. The TA who looked over my paper the days before it was due circled this title, put a smiley face, and wrote, "do you know Joan Didion?"

I didn't—yet. But in the coming months I would know her, and other essayists, too. I read the first three chapters of Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being* on my flight home for Thanksgiving freshmen year. Twice in my battered copy of this text—on pages 172 and 179, to be exact—I have, written in the margins, first in black ink then in blue: "this book calls us to bless what we encounter." I am not sure what I was thinking when I first scribbled this note; I am not sure what I was thinking the second time, either. Most likely I was scribing the wise words of a professor, or TA, or student. But I do think it quizzical that I thought to write it twice, on two separate occasions, in two different colors, six pages apart, without realizing it was a repeat.

I should ground these musings in the text. First, from 172, I have underlined much of the second half of the page: "We live in all we seek. The hidden shows up in too-plain sight ... What a hideout: Holiness lies spread and borne over the surface of time and stuff like color."

Now to 179, and the part I've highlighted: "Checking on the snails, I found under the soil a wet batch of eggs that looked like silver. Some snails bear live young: fully formed, extremely small snails. How many of these offspring—hoopoes, doves, snails, and swallowtails—would develop normally? It is a percentage in the high nineties, normality is. Of course, most offspring get eaten right quick."

How pleasant. Holiness and hide-and-seek with the world and snails. But what does all this mean? How do these pages relate to blessing all we encounter? We live in all we

seek—how we spend our days—and the hidden is in plain sight. Very well, then. I bless the souls and snails alike. This is what I learned in writing. Souls are like snails. Holiness is indeed spread and borne in too-plain sight. And writing is a way to see that.

After reading, I wrote a response to Annie Dillard, one that four years later would find its way into this thesis. I wrote about an encounter with an angel on the island. About starfish and crabs. Souls and snails. Nothing ever doesn't change—but as that snippet of writing shows, carried over after all these years, nothing changes much.

I started keeping journals my freshmen year, a habit that would carry through seven busy semesters of school, fourteen countries of travel, and God knows how many quizzical encounters. They sit on my bookshelf today: the sea blue composition with pressed flowers from Victoria; the bright red, floppy spiral that I carried throughout South America; the light, floral sketchbook with slop stains from the farm; and the rain-stained spiral with a picture of a California Redwood with all the notes for this thesis.

And thank God, thank *God*, for those notebooks and diary entries. They are how, when I started writing about writing for this thesis, I mapped my days.

Memories moved faster starting my sophomore year of college. I went on my first international excursion in March 2012; I spent ten days in the Dominican Republic with Padre Pablo, the retired Vincentian priest who ran cultural immersion trips for the university students.

Pablo is an important character in these stories. When we first met, Padre Pablo was a retired priest working at my university, in the Center for Service Learning, a department that specialized in placing students in communities and fostering communities in students and

making us believe we could do work that mattered. When we met, Pablo was no longer serving as a priest. He'd left the church almost twenty years previously to marry Rosa, the Mexican beauty he'd met on a missionary trip in southern California.

He told me the story once, of deciding to leave. It was not easy. I can't imagine it was easy, what it felt like, turning his back on his Creator, rescinding the vows made to the highest power in the universe, folding up nine years of bushwhacking in Guatemala to deliver the Eucharist and thousands of Spanish masses and all the people who cared, all the souls passed through his care, for one woman.

Talk about love.

He told me the story of when he asked her to marry him, too. On a mountain in California, nearly a decade after they'd met. She was tired that day, hiking up to their favorite spot in Yosemite Park. He dropped to his knees. "I'm not tired anymore!" Rosa sobbed, "I'm not tired!"

Before graduating I would travel with him three times, twice to the Dominican Republic and once through Guatemala. He invited me to accompany him on the first immersion trip; I volunteered for the next two. I'd stumbled into his office at school by accident. I was looking for the summer internship office; I wound up sitting across from his desk. "What kind of internship?" he asked. "One with writing," I replied. Pablo paused a long time. He was nodding slowly, staring at me and then at his hands, spread evenly out on his messy desk. We passed several minutes like this. I didn't say a word. Pablo looked at me, at his hands, at me again.

"Why don't you come with me instead?"

He was staring at his hands when he said this.

I don't remember thinking or feeling a response. I just said, "okay."

Weeks later, on a bus on a Caribbean island, Pablo would tell me a story about his hands.

"They get hot when God's working," he would say, "I noticed it when I first moved to Guatemala. When God is about to work a miracle, or just work something, through me, my hands get warm and tingly. I trust my hands."

Later that day, parked at a gas station buying water and chips for the road, a little Dominican boy came up and gave Pablo a hug. The boy walked away without saying a word. I looked at Pablo looking at his hands, then at the boy's retreating back.

Without a word, Pablo set out after him. I watched him take off his jacket, the worn, forest green corduroy he'd been wearing the whole trip, and give it to the boy.

I held out my own hands, groped at the air. I knew God was present then, and I wanted to catch Him.

This trip to the Dominican was the first time I changed currencies, the first time my sister wasn't a phone call away, the first time I was smacked with strangeness in plain sight, and the first time I truly encountered poverty. It was life-changing.

And it inspired further travel. The day we got home from spring break I bought a ticket for Tokyo. That May I traveled with two friends, from Tokyo to Kyoto, Japan to Seoul, South Korea, Kuta and Unud Indonesia, and the island of Guam. My life could be mapped simply on all the islands I've loved like my home. There are a fair few.

I traveled for three weeks and finally returned to Bainbridge where I spent another summer on the docks, reading and running and soaking in what I would one day identify as

my own soul's essence, before I traveled to South America, to Valparaíso, Chile, for a semester abroad. It was autumn, my junior year of college. I picked Chile because Padre Pablo told me to hang on to my Latin American passions, and because it is the home of Pablo Neruda.

I arrived on July 18th, 2012. In four months I would fall in love with the place: with the country plagued by dictatorship and fake coffee, with the city that feasted on avocado, roasted shish-kebobs, oranges, sweet wine and fish, with the people that greeted strangers with a kiss on the cheek, with friends who would stay up all night for a life talk, and with my Chilean self, white shame and all. I embraced *la vida chilena*. At the end of the program, when I boarded a bus with my friend Brie Mueller on Thanksgiving day—Brie, another central character to this thesis, who in four weeks would be more like a sister than a friend—it was to wave goodbye to the ocean view and graffiti-ridden walls and stray dogs and awkward *cueca* music that had come to constitute home.

There is a saying from this city, one I scrawled in the corners of my notebooks countless times: “Santiago is Chile. Valparaíso is love.” I remember Brie saying that to me as our bus drove away. “Ah,” I replied, “so *this* is love.”

The days that followed were some of the most inspiring, most terrifying, most dizzying days I have ever lived. We spent four weeks on twenty-two South American public buses—that's close to 3000 miles, and 186 hours—and visited seven countries. We rarely slept; some days we didn't eat; some days I would sit for hours in plazas to journal about waterfalls and weird men and watermelon; some days I would sit for hours on a bus and stare out the window, mind as blank as the bare Bolivian deserts passing by.

To this day, I don't know when things started to go wrong or if they were always wrong. I don't know when nervous precautions became nervous habits, when things that startled me seized to be surprising because I was constantly anxious, when the irrational fear for our lives seeped into my brain. Was it the afternoon a fat Chilean man grabbed me on a bus? Or the day a dark kid with dreads followed me on his bike? Or the time I threw up for twenty hours, when I thought it would never stop?

These were memories that haunted me the days to come. They are the encounters responsible for the nightmares and panic attacks, eventually identified as PTSD, which haunted me later. Memories triggered by a touch on the left shoulder, by hot or crowded places, by kitchen knives and any time I was startled or alone too long or heard Spanish.

One thing I do know—the fear never outweighed the beauty. Some days, they were equal. But the good was always there too. I used to tell myself this, on the hard days, after coming back. It was worth it. It was worth it.

The day I flew home was important regardless of the calendar; first of summer, first of winter, end of the world on someone's ancient clock. December 21, 2012. Marked with a star before I even got there, before I even decided which hemisphere to call my own. That morning I said goodbye to my country, to the one place I could stand on two feet, and to my voice. Literally – sick and sleep-deprived from so much travel, I lost my voice, couldn't whisper a word.

After four months studying in Chile and four weeks on the road in South America – after 200 hours on public buses – after one Wonder of Nature, after seven countries, after thousands of pictures – I couldn't cry on the plane home. Takeoff was bumpy. Just twenty-

four hours ago, I'd been alone, hungry, on a bus. The five-year-old Chilean boy sitting next to me grabbed my hand.

“Turbulence!” he cried.

I gave his soft hand a squeeze, blinked back the tears in my eyes, and stared out the window. “Just like my heart,” I mouthed the words.

It was the day when Brie, my one friend who spoke Sign was bus rides, countries away; too far to read the words I mimed with my hands, much less to help translate my solemn farewell.

And it was the day this thesis was born. Or rather, the beginning of a traumatic spring, the spring of 2013. I was signed up for another Latin American trip the coming summer and had to decide, at the very last minute, that I couldn't go. I made the decision in Padre Pablo's office, crying and babbling incoherently about how I was in a constant state of fear.

That was the summer—this past summer, before my final year of college—that Padre Pablo sent me to the farm. It was the Teilhard de Chardin Homestead, located just over two hours south of Denver. It was a farm that recycled waste: food goods from Colorado Springs that were destined for the landfill were redirected to the property and reprocessed into animal feed and compost. It was a land built on broken things. I worked all summer with my hands, with the broken things. For the first time since my South American journey, I was at peace.

I began writing this thesis that summer. I spent every night outside the farmhouse in a makeshift tent, resurrected beams and battered canvas dubbed the Civil War Tent, reliving

the memories and the trauma and doing what Joan Didion had taught me so many years before.

Fifty pages later—fifty bright, loud, bursting pages of waterfalls and tango dancing and buses and lonely walks and fear and food and lyrical, Latino poetry—I'd done more than write the story of my story of a lifetime. I'd done more than examine the relationships between trauma and memory and writing that had had my attention for so long. I wrote in order to live. I found the healing I was so desperately seeking.

I threw out the fifty pages as soon as I was done and as soon as I realized I'd accomplished exactly what I'd meant to. Thus this new writing project, this new thesis, was born. To write about writing. To revisit the places that had constituted my writing self: South America, the island where I learned to swim, and the farm that brought me healing. To examine my writing life, this new writing self that was born because of this trauma and writing and healing. And most of all, to catalogue the moments, the people, the quizzical encounters that in my young adult years were the stories I would come to love, the stories that would become me.

Because that is what this thesis is about. The first themes that directed its creation, are still here—trauma, memory, writing, and healing—working together to demonstrate the creative side to memory, the active, constructive process by which encounters are stored and remembered and relived. This fits with the history of memory. Medieval understanding of the mind and remembering was that memory was like a house. Sarah Wright, of Skidmore College, explained this to me once: medievalists thought moments were collected and stored

like books in a library. Reliving a memory was like taking an old volume off a shelf, dusting it off, and cracking it open.

This is how the visual aspect of memory in my thesis came to life. I started drawing maps. Or rather, I started dusting off old ones, crayon copies of Cucumber Island, diagrams with beaches and tide levels of home, the five foot by five foot road map of South America that Brie was gifted at the Chile bus station.

The more I grounded my stories and encounters in place, the more I realized that my memories are *all* of place, and again, that I am a product of place. I can map memories on literal maps; forget the medieval mansion, I write on hard paper, I trace the paths I've taken and I put stars by important places and everything is color coded.

Now I hang them on the walls of my room, and use them to remember.

The process of remembering is as significant to the construction of personal identity as the events that might constitute a memory. John R. Gillis, in his article "Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship," tells us that memory has gained importance in all notions of knowing oneself because identity is built upon memory. Experiences and how we remember them are the building blocks with which we construct ourselves. The implication of this is that we can shape our own identity if we can shape our memories—in other words, that the act of remembering, of creatively constructing a memory, occurs simultaneously with the act of creating oneself (Gillis).

Literary war stories may serve as a perfect case study of traumatic memory and writing. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a classic example. O'Brien shares his war story in the form of fictionalized, personalized narrative focused on objects and weight, both

literal and abstract. Although what follows is a story of war, the novel is not titled *The People They Killed* or *The Battles They Fought* or even *The Horrors They Witnessed*. Rather, its title suggests an alternative method to addressing these horrors, and the book opens: “First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey” (1). There is no sweeping claim on lives lost and battles survived, no subtle foreshadowing of the hardship and trauma and PTSD to follow. Instead, an image: the lieutenant carried a letter. The list goes on:

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together, these items weighed between 15 and 20 pounds, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism. (2)

O’Brien tells a story here, a story in a list. This move suggests that memory is like storytelling. How we remember the memory, how we tell the story, is different than the memory or story itself. In literary theory, this is the difference between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, the chronological events of the story, and the frame through which the story is told. There is a reason for and an effect when works like *Evelina* and *Frankenstein* are recorded in letters, or told by a third-party narrator like *Wuthering Heights*, or when fictional characters like Billy Pilgrim or Nick Adams or Tim share the semi-autobiographical, fictionalized true tales

of Vonnegut, Hemingway, and Tim O'Brien. Implicit in this plot/story relationship is that just as memory plays a role in the creation of identity, so does the method of remembering.

The details of what is being remembered are significant too. While all short-term memories are initially sent and stored to the same place in the brain, the hippocampus, memories are recalled with synapses in various parts. Memories are stored as neural sequences. Specific sets of neurons fire when specific things occur—and, as David S. Miall explains in his study on embodied cognition, the same neurons fire when these events are remembered. The more neurons that fire during an event, the more fire to recall the memory of the same event. This means that the brain will receive much more stimulation remembering particularly intense or overwhelming events—the birth of a child, the death of a friend—than it will remembering an ordinary one, like what was eaten for breakfast, or what the sky looked like the last time it rained. If memory is the building blocks to identity, it stands that the more intense the memory, the greater the impact on identity. Again in the case of war, traumatic memories leave a lasting impact (Miall).

But when is a memory declared “traumatic”? Jonathan Shay discusses the hero archetype in war—and consequently, patterns of traumatic response to war—in his work *Achilles in Vietnam*. His chapter “What Breaks?” provides an official diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, according to the American Psychiatric Association: a) The person has experienced an event that is outside the range of usual human experience; b) The traumatic event is persistently reexperienced; c) There is persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma; and d) There are persistent symptoms of increased arousal (166). These symptoms often arise as points of conflict in post-war narratives; in another of O'Brien's novels, *In the Lake of the Woods*, veteran John Wade wakes in the middle of the

night and, in something like a trance, pours boiling water over all the houseplants. He chuckles at the hissing noise they make when they shrivel and die. His wife Kathy wants to snap him out of his reverie—calls his name from the doorway, tries to look into his eyes—but he is beyond her help. She panics at the darkness in his eyes, and leaves.

More than persistent disturbance of “normal” human life, however, Shay suggests that victims of PTSD lose hold of themselves at a neurological level, and not just in the hippocampus, where short-term memories are stored. Because memory recall occurs on so many levels—relying on recall of sensory input, emotional reaction, and more—the entire brain can be affected by a traumatic memory recall. This is key to understanding how memory relates to mental stability. Shay writes:

Severely traumatized individuals lose authority over memory. Amnesia is common for traumatic events. In amnesia the trauma survivor has no authority over his memories of events because they cannot be recalled at will like ordinary memory. On the contrary, memory has authority over him. (172)

Among a great host of philosophical questions, this claim puts pressure on the relationship of memory and self. The notion of authority over memory, or even authority under memory, is tricky because memory is, by nature and definition, a dead thing, an event or occurrence of the past; according to the OED, memory consists of “senses relating to the action or process of commemorating, recollecting, or remembering; the perpetuated knowledge or recollection (*of* something); that which is remembered *of* a person, object, or event; (good or bad) posthumous reputation” (‘Memory’). Something that is commemorated or recollected, does

not sound like something that needs to be under authority; and certainly something posthumous should not have power over the present. How, then, can and should one have authority over memory? Is writing the answer?

This helps us draw the distinction between the act of remembering and memory itself. Toni Morrison, in her acclaimed slavery novel *Beloved*, toys with this difference in the narrative and in rhetorical terms. The protagonist Sethe, haunted by the memory of her dead baby, dubbed Beloved, talks about the permanent nature of “rememory,” a name that emphasizes the looking-backwardness of remembering and memory. The result is the return of the past in the literal form of her daughter. The ghost returns to haunt the family. The past, it seems, is not always dead. Sethe and her daughter discuss the often indestructible power of rememory:

“Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.”

Denver picked at her fingernails. “If it’s still there, that must mean nothing ever dies.”

Sethe looked right in Denver’s face. “Nothing ever does.” (41)

So it goes. The dead live in our memories and stories. Tim O’Brien notices the same near the end of *The Things They Carried*. He writes: “we kept the dead alive with stories” (239). He

was talking about the fact that the dead never truly leave us, not as long as there are stories told in their name. And he was talking about the weight we carry, as much as the weight of all the dead bodies buried in this earth. It's a weight that's impossible to avoid.

The relationship between trauma and healing is another that is explored in this thesis. The summer of the Civil War Tent, I spent hours reading on traumatic memory, though the seed for the idea of writing as a means to healing from trauma was actually planted in these authors long before my summer on the farm. The spring of my sophomore year—the same spring I first traveled to the Dominican Republic, and shortly before I left for Chile—I took a class at Regis, *Stories of Wartime*, that would change the way I understood war, trauma, and storytelling. The class met once a week in the largest lecture hall. It was open to the public, and every week the seats were packed with students and visitors from the community come to hear the weekly soldier share his tale of his time at war.

We encountered so many stories in this class—veterans from Vietnam, mothers of fallen soldiers, protestors, troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, wives of soldiers from World War I. And we read their stories too, Terry Rizzuti, *The Forever War*, and Tim O'Brien, and this was the first time I got the idea in my head that words are a way out. Writing saves.

In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien tells us that memory “will lead to a story,” that stories are for “joining the past to the future,” for “those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are” (38). Like stringing together the pieces of a puzzle; O'Brien also writes that “what sticks to memory, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end” (36). This is what memory is:

creating the beginning and the end, or creating the middle in-between. Filling in the gaps. Forging connections with shadows and ghosts.

This makes sense. Memory is a creative process. Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux explains the process in his book *Synaptic Self*: “Memory is a reconstruction of facts and experiences on the basis of the way they were stored, not as they actually occurred” (97). What matters, then, is how encounters are marked on the map, how we choose to draw our stories, because when we revisit them—intentionally or not, happily or no—these will be the stories we hear again and again. This is why I chose to record my thesis as a series of maps, as a collection of encounters in South America, as a list of ‘ten ways of looking.’ In deciding how to write, I decided how to claim ownership.

This is how memory lives today. How it comes to life on paper, in words, shared in stories. How the dead are never dead, as long as we tell their tales. This isn’t true just for dead slave babies or war narratives, but for the stories of everyday men. O’Brien says it himself: “That’s what stories are for ... Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story” (38). This is true for all men. Implicit here is that stories can transcend memory and that the tale— or, perhaps, how the tale is told— lasts longer than true memory. O’Brien makes the distinction here between “story-truth” and “happening-truth;” he even claims that at times, story-truth is truer than happening-truth. How is this possible? How can an individual’s creative telling be more real than the truth?

To make sense of how the construction of a story might be more lasting than memory itself, we must return to the brain itself, and to the process of memory-making and storage. Joseph LeDoux argues that the creation of self on a neurological level is dictated by “windows of opportunity,” periods of time when specific types of information can and should

be obtained and stored. Unsurprisingly, windows of opportunity coincide with significant periods of psychological development, and the brain is most malleable between infancy and young adulthood, around age twenty-five. Language acquisition is one example: as the brain develops and loses its malleability, it loses the ability to move the mouth in certain ways and make specific sounds. By age twelve, the human who was born capable of making 300 sounds has forgotten all but forty or fifty. This is an example of memory foundation and the extent to which what is learned—or, what is remembered—becomes the foundation for future learning and memory-making.

Memory, as LeDoux explains, is a way of returning to past events, to posthumous happenings, and in a sense reliving experiences. It is dictated more by the storage of events, the when and the how they are coded in the brain, than by how things actually happened. This coding process is influenced by all brain activity that occurs as an event is being processed. For example, the emotional response to a situation and consequential concurrent processing in the amygdala, the part of the brain that processes emotion, can change how a memory is stored. As events occur the brain tries to decide what to store and how it should all be organized. Emotions during a situation are one way memories are categorized. A strong emotional response will tag the memory, in a sense, as one important enough to be stored with detail. Later, the event can be recalled with equal vividness (LeDoux).

All this serves to explain why traumatic memories are stored with such clarity, and why they are recurring, and why flashback experiences are often as intense as the first encounter with a particular situation. The more intense a moment is when it is put into memory, the more intense the experienced when it is remembered. Individuals with PTSD experience this “reliving” with intensity and frequency; often, flashbacks are induced by

“triggers,” objects, phrases, sights, or sounds that are similar to or symbolic of a traumatic event and initiate an intense memory recall.

This is how an individual might lose authority over memory: by being unable to control responses to specific triggers. It also demonstrates the importance of place in locating memory. As Miall explains, “the mind extends beyond the self into the environment.” I would argue that the inverse is true: the world we live in has a way of seeping into our brains.

Today, we need storytelling more than ever. In contemporary times, according to Geoffrey Hartman of Yale University, we are exposed to an inordinate amount of overwhelming stimulation. Our brains are trained to seek trauma. We are addicted to intense stimulation in what Hartman calls it a “vicious cycle of escalation and desensitization” that leads to “habituated imaginations that seek out such scenes like a drug,” in the form of an overbearing media, intricate social communities and networking, and highly advanced technology used to mimic life in music, film, and theater (258). The result is a world addicted to trauma. This might explain why war veterans, however damaged or injured or frightened by war they might be, consistently choose to return. Samuel Hynes, in his collection of war narratives *The Soldiers' Tale*, discusses man's desire to return and participate in war time and time again:

For most men who fight, war is their one contact with the world of great doings. Other men govern, sign treaties, invent machines, cure diseases, alter lives. But for ordinary men—the men who fight our wars—there will probably be only the one time when their lives intersect with history, one opportunity to

act in great events. Not to alter those events—no single soldier affects a war, or even a battle—but simply to be there, *in* history (17).

The desire is to intersect with something outside oneself is the common drive. It is almost like confirmation of existence outside one's own head. War also gives the individual a chance to be recorded in collective history, that is, to become a part of the human memory. War makes it so we feel like we're a part of something; trauma, like we are alive.

If war is an example of the experience that makes us alive, storytelling is the means by which we process our aliveness and make sense of our world. This is key, that our identity is a part of the world, and that as such our memories and stories must be linked to specific places.

Humans have a tendency to make such links explicit. Memorials and monuments, for example, make it easier, and the remembering process more appealing, to recall events at times and places of our own choosing. We can create space in our ordinary lives to remember the Vietnam War by choosing to go to the Memorial Wall; we can honor Holocaust victims by going to the Holocaust museum. This is an example of how, in an ordinary day, we maintain authority over the act of remembering. Objects can serve as place markers too. We often use collective ceremonies, souvenirs, and photos to record significance and recall details at later times—later times of our own choosing.

While such tools are useful for memory recall, the methods may also be harmful. Just as we can choose to go to the Memorial Wall to revisit a memory, we can choose *not* to go. Maps and museums provide a space to hide harmful stories. They let us put the memories

away, lock up things we'd rather not think about in little tin chests in our hearts, and ignore their weight in our everyday lives.

Until, that is, we lose authority over the act of remembering—until the memories come spilling out—and then we might do something about it: pull out the maps even though it isn't the anniversary. Flip through old photos. Scrounge up old diaries. Call a friend. Write a thesis.

So. This is a thesis about maps. It is a thesis about memory and trauma, about writing and healing. It is a thesis about islands and overseas adventures and the moments leading to these stories and the stories after these encounters. It is a thesis about me. It is my story. Mixed into the writings I have provided maps, meticulous and starred and as close to the originals as I could manage, with the exception of the five-foot South American travel log, which I sized down to fit these pages.

I still cannot say exactly why this piece was written. The reasons, as I have shared, evolved and changing throughout the writing process. What I can say, so many months and memories and maps later, is why this piece matters to me.

This thesis was my way out, the healing I was looking for. It was my own attempt at telling a story in order to live, my own stab at confronting the past in order to make a better present. It is creative, and it is true. It was born of many late nights, of hours remembering and writing, of countless phone calls with old friends and travel companions in an attempt to piece things together. This thesis is why I cracked open all the boxes under my bed and the old diaries on my shelf. It is how I chose to relive and retell the 3000 mile journey of a lifetime. It is how I confronted memory, how I healed, and how I accessed memories I had

forgotten I had, shadowy faces swept under the rug, brief encounters that, given a second glance, proved transformative.

Cucumber Island

I grew up on a small island off the shore of Seattle, where I learned to read and loved to swim and was always running and decided to write. As a child I knew the taste of coffee, on my lips and in the air and between my teeth. It wasn't until I was older, when I traveled to Latin America, that I could drink it straight and black. But I think that is the way with most coffee kids. You start slow. You mix a little from your mother's cup into your morning hot cocoa. You add cream, you add sugar, you stop mixing it with chocolate but add more cream and more sugar until you just need cream, until it's a little less cream, until someone hands you a steaming cup of it black and the smell greets you and the black grinds when you swallow the last swallow stick to your gums and you are filled.

Many mornings, I woke up to the sound of rain. I loved the sound of rain. Some days I would stay in bed, with a book, and listen to the sound of water pounding on the streets, echoes of the tides that beat the shores around the island. I would kneel in my bed pushed against the wall beneath my window, and press my cheek to the glass. I wanted to be out there so badly—but there were mornings when I had to wait inside, face smashed to a blurry window peering out to the gloom, the wet, the cold, wondering why I wasn't a part of that world yet.

I started running when I was older. On weekends with my neighbor, after school every day with my brother Joey, until halfway through high school when I could say, yes, this is what I want, and I started to go every morning. I went alone. I slept in my running clothes and kept my alarm clock by my running shoes so I would see them first thing. I took the first half-mile slowly, cruising the wet neighborhood roads between my house and the forest on the island that was called the Grand Forest which was a name simultaneously too

big, because there was nothing kingly about the trails I knew like the back of my hand, and somehow too small, because if the tall and green and dripping and snapping in the wind and leaning to the heavens plot of land I ran through wasn't grand, what was?

Some mornings I would take a shortcut through the Grand Forest to the beach, to the shore closest to my house. The waves were only visible from one tree on the edge of my property. I learned this with my sister Victoria one day, when we climbed the Douglas fir just to see how high we could climb the Douglas fir, and over the tops of the other trees, perched in the top of ours, we saw water. There was no dock at this beach. There were the remains of an old birch tree, however, toppled to its side by the wind many years ago. In the mornings, when it was foggy and I knew I couldn't be seen from the neighboring homes, I would take off my shoes, walk slowly and carefully along the trunk of the tree, and lower myself on a branch. I would stick my feet in the water. This was how you learned to swim. Just your feet, at first.

I dreamed about islands all the time. I still do. Islands off the coast of the Caribbean, islands in the balmy south Pacific waters, islands surrounding Africa and South America and Greece. Islands I'd never been to. Islands I dreamed and imagined.

It is like Annie Dillard once described. How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.

I first came up with Cucumber Island when I was seven. The idea came to me around the time I was falling in love with reading—something about an infusion of new worlds in my brain. I made up the rules, drew out maps and character sketches, taught first my brother and then my sister what it was about—and we played it religiously.

The premise of the game was that we—the players, myself and Joey and Victoria—were stranded on an island inhabited by giant cucumbers. Our mission was to fight and destroy them all. Of course, that was no easy task. I spent many of my childhood hours with bubblegum bombers and seed zappers, fighting imaginary beasts in our backyard.

We drew out maps for the game in crayon. I still have old sketches in my notebook from when I was young. The island shores and significant landmarks were related roughly to the edges of our property, and to the bigger bushes and plants. We rolled up the sheets of construction paper and stored them in Ziplocs to keep them safe from the rain, high up in the branches of our tree fort.

The tree fort in question was named Fort Avalon. The name came from book series by T.A. Barron, an adaptation of the Arthurian legend. In the book, its magic is preserved by Merlin’s power. We told ourselves it was preserved by our own power, and protected by our ever-changing password.

You had to tap the trunk three times to gain entrance. “Password?” Someone would call from atop.

“Balderdash?”

“No.”

“New York Yankees?”

“That was last week’s!”

“I don’t—”

“Try again!”

“Kyle smells like cheeseburgers?”

“CORRECT!”

On one of our most dramatic missions, my sister was kidnapped by the Cucumber Queen and dragged into her cave. Joey and I crawled through the blackberry bushes lining our property for twenty minutes in order to rescue her without being seen by the Queen—my mother. We came into dinner scratched and bleeding that night. The Queen was not amused.

“What on earth were you three doing today?”

“Kicking cucumber *butt!*” Joey and I high-fived.

The game would later evolve so we had super powers: we could turn into animals. Joey became a peregrine falcon, so he could fly over the lava pits (our paved driveway) and spy on the “cukes,” as we called them. Victoria was the doe, leaping across the fallen trees (lavender bushes, which our mother planted every spring). I was the monkey, scaling trees and the front porch and the side of our greenhouse, in all my years and all my missions only falling out of one tree once.

Cucumber Island, one could say, was the first time I ever imagined or believed in something beyond reality. Lewis Carroll’s *The Red Queen* says, “sometimes I believe in as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” This is what my childhood was about: reading, believing in impossible things, creation, giant vegetables, new worlds, and eventually, writing.

It’s hard to say how I learned to like writing; almost as hard as it is to say why I prefer coffee to orange juice, or why I like to run my fingers through my hair when it’s curly and damp, or why I always crave that feeling of being surrounded by open water.

Or maybe it isn’t too hard.

The first piece I ever wrote was about Cucumber Island. I still have a copy of that draft, printed and marked with my twelve-year-old editor notes, in a box under my bed. I liked to imagine that someday the first line would be that of a bestselling novel:

“We were arguing, no surprise. It was summer, we had no school and no work, no schedules and no rules, nothing but time and sun and the big outdoors and each other, and we were ready to play.”

In the five-page story, I went on to describe the dismal, dreary, vegetable-infested island where we lived; I gave a play-by-play account of our latest seed-zapping mission; I explained that we often went weeks without showering or seeing family; I wrote myself and my siblings exactly as I wished we would be. “This is who we were, who we are, who we will always be, super hero street fighters, dangerous agents, and fighters of the great vegetables on Cucumber Island.”

I liked writing because I liked the smallness of things. I was a small girl on a small island. The pieces I worked with were manageable, graspable. The control that writing allowed someone with a vivid imagination was appealing. And my imagination was vivid. This would get me in trouble later in life. Just as I believed staunchly, believed fervently, in the stories of giant cucumbers, I would have nightmares about things I imagined were real. I would tell myself stories and convince myself they were life. I could never keep the details of my wild adventures—moving across the country, backpacking in South America, living on a farm—straight. I would confuse fear for things happening with things that actually happened. I would forget where my imagination ended and my life began.

But in the meantime, amidst the chaos of a mother recently diagnosed with breast cancer and a mid-year move from Oregon state to the island off the coast near Seattle, it was

in dreaming and creating and writing about other worlds that I felt any sense of security. I felt safer from giant vegetables than from the real demons of the world.

By writing a reality for Joey and Victoria, I was able to share this sense of being okay. This game was my gift to them; my words that made permanent our identities as a band of brothers, of skilled warriors in some makeshift battles, of heroes on Cucumber Island. At the time, it was the only truth we knew.

But I think the real truth that was born that summer so many years ago was that I was learning how to record how I spent my days; how to write about the encounters that were my life. It was the beginning of my life as a writer—who I was, who I am, and who I will always be.

If I had to compose a list of the literary encounters that led me to writing, it'd look something like this: learning to read in the family library; the Christmas Santa left me fifty *Nancy Drew* hardback books; the time I skipped school to see the new *Harry Potter* movie; the summer we moved to Bainbridge Island and I became friends with the school librarian; the poem about blackbirds that we read in sophomore year English; the time I read Annie Dillard; the time I sat at Pablo Neruda's desk; and the time I wrote fifty pages that I would feed to pigs.

A detailed list of living encounters would include: the three days I babysat my neighbor's week-old chicks; learning to speak Spanish; my first kiss in a tree on an island; the first time I went running on a beach; snorkeling in Guam; the time I was mugged in Paraguay; the time a piglet died in my hands; the angel I met on the docks of an island; driving a car off the road at seventy miles-per-hour; learning to drive stick shift; the coldness

of my grandpa's cheek; the cruelty of my mother's chemotherapy; singing karaoke in Tokyo; learning to knit; learning to think a moment before answering complicated questions; throwing up at my brother's wedding; the time I did slam poetry in front of two hundred Chileans; the first time I climbed a mountain; the first time I killed a chicken; and the last time I was at an airport to say goodbye to someone I love.

A list of encounters of sentiments might say: all the hands I've held that have taught me to love, the salt of all the tears I've cried and all the seas I've swam in, the bubbly feeling when my stomach is sick from laughing, all the love and reality head-butts I've witnessed, and all the times I've wondered what *enough* means.

It is like Simone de Beauvoir tells us.

One is not born, but becomes, a writer.

One time, I was reading in the field behind Fort Avalon. It was one of those rare, sunny Seattle days. The sun was hot on my face. The tall stalks of wheat grass moved back and forth in the breeze. I watched them over the pages of my book. I was reading *The Mysterious Benedict Society* by Trenton Lee Stewart, about a group of clever kids solving mysteries and riddles at a secret school. I wondered what riddles I could come up with to stump the cukes.

I dozed off in the sun, dreaming that the stalks of wheat grass were all bowing towards me, queen of the island. When it started to rain sometime later and I was startled awake, I could not remember for the longest time where or who I was. I thought I was surrounded by real cucumbers. I thought I was on another island, far from home. I was afraid.

I was afraid, and transported. It was like a good read—no, falling asleep is like good writing. It can leave you afraid, and transported. Surrounded by giant cucumbers, on faraway islands, with no sense of sensibility or self. Wake up in a field and stalks blow around you and that's the riddle and stake. Where am I? Who am I?

Virginia Woolf writes about women and writing in *A Room of One's Own*. She also writes about the cukes, the loneliness and madness and money that can hold a female writer back: “as if some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death.” Or, in the case of the cukes: as if an army of giant cucumbers had spread itself over all the fields and hills of the island and could bleed the place to nonexistence.

I would work on a farm one summer and return in the fall, around Thanksgiving, to gut the garden. The cucumber plant would be the last one standing. I would rip my hands tearing its roots.

I wake up afraid in a field. The memory is still there, still real. When I was twenty, I would frighten myself with my own stories, my own overactive imagination, into believing I was more alone and afraid and in a foreign field than I ever was on Cucumber Island. But, I suppose, this is the curse of a cucumber in the garden; and this is the power of an imagination to make monsters real.

Some days, I wish I could go back to those monsters, the imaginary ones, instead of facing the real, waiting world without a bubblegum bomber.

Cucumber Island was real to me until I was almost twenty. This was around the time I stopped babysitting for Maggie and Richard. Before that, I'd been their nanny for seven

years, and during those seven years, we'd played Cucumber Island like Joey and Victoria and I had—that is, like there was an entire vegetable-infested island depending on us for their lives.

Maggie was a most ready recipient of all my dreams and schemes. I wanted to share worlds with her, like I had Cucumber Island, like I had encountered myself, so I started giving her words. I helped her learn to read.

I had learned to read when I was Maggie's age. My own mother was a ferocious reader. One of my earliest memories must be of mom, curled in the forest green armchair in the den's golden lamplight, with a book. It is in observation I learned the value of words.

In observation I learned, and in demonstration I taught Maggie. Maggie had eyes browner than mine and curly, dirty blond hair with ringlets to put Goldilocks to shame. She loved her younger brother like I loved my own: passionately, and with compassion, sometimes violent, sometimes soft. And Maggie is curious, and as the years went on, she was curiouiser and curiouiser. There is no rabbit hole too small to escape Maggie's notice, nor any scary enough to frighten her away. It shouldn't have been surprising, then, when I told her one day that I loved books, and she said *Why?* and I said You have to read them to find out, and she said *Okay*, and started to read.

Maggie read everything I put in front of her and more: Eva Ibbotson, Nancy Drew, T.A. Barron, Lord of the Rings, and my childhood favorite, Harry Potter. When I was eighteen and moved across the country for college, Maggie wrote me letters about the newest book she was reading.

“Started *Percy Jackson* this week,” she would write, “and the girl character, Annabeth, is okay. But she’s not as strong a girl character as she could be. She’s not like you told me to be, when we played Cucumber Island.”

I think Maggie liked Cucumber Island best because every time she played, she was the hero. She always won.

“I like reading,” Maggie would write, “but I like Cucumber Island more. It’s a world that’s better than books. How did you come up with that?”

How did I come up with that? I never know how to answer that question. Where do things come from? Books, babies, marvelous things. Where is beauty born?

When I was sixteen, I started a quote wall in my room. Soon it grew to four walls. I wrote out words I liked and taped them to the light, lime green paint.

Better die on your feet than live on your knees.

It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.

Only God can say what the new spirit forming gradually within you will be.

Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt.

By the time I graduated high school, I had over one hundred quotes on the wall. Chinese proverbs, Markus Zusak, Mark Twain, Benjamin Button, my dead grandfather. When things spoken to me touched me, when words lined up on a page filled me up, I wrote them down. Chicken-scratched names and words on all the margins of all my pages. Sherwood Anderson, Sam Snead, my brother, my sister, John Keats, John Steinbeck, Tod Marshall. I would write them on printer paper taken from my mother’s library, mount the quotes on black construction paper, and add it to the next blank space in my room.

My high school history teacher, my best friend, Otto von Bismarck, Sylvia Plath, the dragon in an old BBC show, Mark Halliday, the lyrics from an eighties power ballad, Ernest Hemingway, and someone named Earl.

I wished words were people so I could wrap my small arms around them, crush them to my chest and heart, take them to coffee or take them swimming or share with them a story of my own or save them from a giant cucumber.

Inside us there is something that has no name. That something is what we are.

What—one hundred sentences, thousands of words, in swoopy, black lettering in a green room?

I embraced the world as constructed by language, where stories were as real as the people and places they preserved in their words; where imagination was God, and I believe.

One night I went kayaking off the Eagle Harbor dock with my friend Wally. We'd taken a few high school classes together, broken island curfew to play Frisbee with our friends, built bonfires on private beaches and spent hours hiking through the forest identifying mushrooms.

It was the last night of summer before my last year of high school. Later that night I would read a book, the second to ever make me weep, and the tears would fall so sloppily I would have to stop reading, unable to continue through the blur of salt water.

Wally lived on the harbor. We carried his parents' green kayak to the dock. My feet tripped in the grass still soaked from an afternoon shower. Squinting through the dark, I could barely make out the waves bumping against the wooden beams of the dock. We'd been

down on the same dock only a few hours before, poking at the rusty red algae floating in the murky waters.

“It’s so ugly,” I’d commented, “what is it?”

“No idea,” Wally responded.

We lowered the boat into the water. Wally put one foot in, leaned precariously out away from the wood, and fell, with a slight umph, into the back. I followed.

Stretching over the edge of the kayak, I placed both hands on the smooth dock wood and pushed off into the harbor. Wally and I sat a moment, floating across the black waters and sitting still in the silence, our own type of prayer, and I thought about catching the dim reflection of the moon, framing it in a picture or putting its light in a jar.

Wally reached to the bottom of the boat, grabbed a paddle, and dipped the rounded end into the water.

The black waters danced violently green, neon stars flashing on the oar, streaks behind the oar’s path through the water, bursts of light. Wally froze; the light stopped. We floated in the dark once more.

“What was that?”

“No idea.”

I picked up my own paddle and dipped it into the bay. Again, flashes of light, like fireflies stuck to the paddle wood, bloomed in the water. I held the oar still. The green stopped.

I sucked in a breath; Wally whispered, “wow.”

Bioluminescence, the emission of light by a living organism, is only one of the more unique characteristics of the phosphorescent algae that plague northwestern shores in the summertime. These are the facts that Wally and I looked up later that night: that the algae only come to life the warmest months of the year, and only when activated, touched or moved; that the algae is a red-orange rust color during the day; that the blue and green light spectrum passes the furthest through seawater; and that algae is unaffected by salt.

Wally and I spent a full hour under the crescent-shaped moon, dipping our paddles in the water, watching the algae dance, throwing the water at each other, at our hands and faces and bodies hunched in the tiny boat. We sat in dark, counted to three, and smashed our oars and hands into the waves to make the light come all at once. We took turns rowing, focused on the movement and motion of our arms, so the other could trail their hand or entire arm in the water. We circled the docks, throwing water up on the wood, watching the planks burst into green flame before falling grayscale under the moonlight once more.

It was more magical than any island or story I had ever imagined.

We swam until we were wet and cold and could no longer feel the water between our fingers. I was soaked through my jeans and purple flannel, salt water smeared in my hair and lips, wondering where on earth a girl was supposed to find the words to explain stars dropped from the sky to black waters.

As we hauled the kayak up over the dock's edge, I looked into the deceptively black water again. I wanted to see the algae. I wanted to take the bioluminescent light and keep it in me, in my chest, in that hallow space between my heart and my lungs so I could be like algae, so I could be brilliant and give off light too, so I could be touched by curious hands and be an old color in the day and blaze at night and steal one person's breath away, my hair

always wet, leave trails behind wood and chase swimmers and stick to the bottom of boats or to the bottom of souls, I wanted to be the bottom of everything and still held aloft by awed hands at night, bright light blinking and flashing in the light of a bright moon.

I made Maggie cry once. Or rather, I gave her a story that made her cry.

We went to see *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part II*, in July 2011, two days after the movie's release. I remember it was raining, which made her curly hair curlier so she looked even more like Hermione Granger, the bookish and brave heroine whom Maggie idolized and that rainy afternoon, copied in dress and manner and hair. Maggie had finished reading the series the third time just two days before, and was squirming and excited beyond words to see the final film installment of the series. We bought popcorn, found our seats, and started to watch.

It was near the end of the film. One of the central characters—mine and Maggie's favorite, played by Alan Rickman—was dying. We knew it was coming. His film fate had been written in the pages of the book. But it was a touching scene nonetheless. He drew a rattled breath. Maggie's hand grabbed mine, and I heard her whisper:

“No.”

I looked over. Tears were streaming down her face. She squeezed my hand, harder, harder, and like she stared intently at the screen I could not take my eyes off her, off this girl who was crying for someone she'd read about in a book once, off this girl I loved like my own who I'd taught to swim, taught to read, and I realized in that dark theater, taught to love. For if she felt empathy for a character on a screen, a character in a book, how could she not love people in real life?

How can a girl who is just starting to write think she knows anything about writing? A girl who only learned to tie her shoes fifteen years ago, who only graduated high school four summers back, who only learned a useful trade six months past, think she has anything to say? And is pig farming even useful?

If you live on an island, you're going to learn to swim. It might look something like this: you can stick your toes in salty water off the ends of trees, or you can wade in icy waves from rocky beaches for days and summers, or you can (God forbid!) go to the pool with your brother and sister and start with floaties in the tide pool, and rope swings, and spinning slides.

But the best way to learn to swim—and especially if you live on an island—is to go to the highest dock on the western shore, and lean over the railing at the lowest tide, and stretch your shadow out over the blue waters and say, “Daddy, a fish! My shadow caught a fish!”

And if he's any true father he'll throw you in, and slimy, scaly, things will brush against your eight-year-old legs, and the frantic dog-paddling choking on salt and seaweed ten minute ordeal back to shore will be your greatest masterpiece.

One time I took a Creative Writing class. This was in high school. The first day of class, Mrs. Polinsky—the teacher, short, flyaway hair, madly in love with Alan Ginsberg—asked us to write on a piece of paper our reason for taking the class. My classmates, hunched in the creakiest chairs in the almost-abandoned, dusty-corner-of-the-school classroom, wrote furiously. My response was simple:

“I want to write things people want to read.”

My first short story for the class was called “Something Spuh-tacular.” It was about a class that, in the middle of a discussion on the Holocaust, is interrupted by a little boy with blond, curly hair. He runs in, begs the group to follow him to see “something spuh-tacular.” After much persuasion, he leads the class and eventually an entire crowd from the small town to a clearing at the edge of the buildings. There’s nothing there. Someone asks what they are looking for, and the boy bursts into laughter. He goes on to describe a hundred-foot-tall, purple and striped giraffe.

“It was spuh-tacular!” he says, “but it’s gone.”

And he leaves the crowd in complete bafflement.

My teacher was equally baffled.

“You have a vivid imagination,” she wrote in her notes. “What was the point of this story?”

I remember clearly what I was thinking. I’d wanted to get as close to the line of imaginative and impossible as I could; I’d wanted to demonstrate the power of belief, and creation, and chasing wild things and taking chances on kids.

And, I guess I thought of myself like the curly-haired boy. Imagining things, giraffes one-hundred feet tall, writing to crowds of people and getting them to follow me.

I could also map the story of my writing life in book titles. *Nancy Drew*, when I learned to read, when I learned to pick locks and learned to tell and detect lies; *Harry Potter*, my first, last, and truest love; *The Book Thief*, the first time I sobbed; *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, the second; *Pride and Prejudice*, when I got a taste of writing and worlds and words

from a woman; *God of Small Things*, when I realized that sometimes anything is possible, but sometimes not; *For the Time Being*, on a plane ride to the island when the words “quizzical encounters” made me pick up my own pen; *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the only book I carried with me for four weeks in South America; and *Cloud Atlas*, the most recent time a book has made me laugh, made me weep, made me bang my head against my bedroom wall and beg for more.

Annie Dillard’s “quizzical encounters” is the summation point. It is only slightly frightening to think that something is building up in me as days go by. Her use of the word “cumulate” suggests that whatever is building up is also building into something, some large and massy thing, with distinct shape and substance. This growing mass begs the question: what is that thing? What are quizzical encounters?

Last summer, my friends and I were dock-jumping from the Hidden Cove floating dock when a stranger joined us on the water. He was pale and average height with messy brown curls, and looked to be in his mid to late twenties. The stranger walked down to the dock with a casual yet purposeful stroll, flopped lazily down on his back and looked up at the sky. He wore blue scrubs. My friends and I continued our diving contests as if nothing had changed, swimming and floating around the dock until the stranger called to us, “look at this!”

He had rolled to the edge and was holding a starfish in one hand and a spider crab in the other. No doubt he had ripped the creatures from the underside of the dock. We gathered around as the man continued: “The starfish and the crab; such crazy beautiful and wildly

unique creatures. But look what happens when you put them together!” He lifted the spider crab to the starfish. In silence, we watched the crab latch itself to the pale star. With a cry of delight, the man dropped the pair to the dock.

“Look! He attacks! He attacks! They just can’t seem to get along together.” The crab refused to let go of the starfish. As the afternoon sun beat down and the water sloshed up to our feet, we stood in a ring around the man and the beasts, staring at the straining starfish and the clinging crab.

When Annie Dillard finds a crab far from its home in the Chesapeake slough or a pot of steam, she shows the creature to a passing stranger. The two speak in their crazy beautiful and wildly unique languages, English and Dutch, in what she assumes is mutual admiration for the king crab. “So,” Dillard writes, “in this queer bare spot, home of nobody under the sky, two humans stand side by side to look at a crab” (112). Her specific placement of the people, side by side, marks their difference, while her description of the places as belonging to no one implies that it could be inhabited by anyone, that anyone and everyone has the potential to have this one queer encounter on this one bare spot.

“We should probably stop this from turning to murder, shouldn’t we?” the man in the blue scrubs spoke after some time. Nobody said a word as he squatted down and delicately picked up the starfish and the crab. With careful fingers he peeled the crab from the star, breaking one of its legs along the way, until he held them apart again, one in each hand. He stood up and took a few steps down the wooden planks towards the shore, then threw out his

arms and tossed the creatures back into the water, one on each side of the dock. “Well then,” he said to us, “goodbye.” And he walked away.

After a pause, someone finally spoke. “Who was that?” The stranger was already at the far end of the dock. I spun around and cried out to him, “Hey! Excuse me! What’s your name?”

The man in the blue scrubs stopped and turned slowly to face us. We looked back, dripping salt water and sunshine, still standing in a circle. The stranger raised his hand. “Gabriel. My name is Gabriel.”

And he walked away.

Gabriel? The Angel Gabriel, perhaps? I think it quite quizzical that on that wet spot, standing on the waters of the Hidden Cove, I encountered a starfish and a spider crab held side by side by an angel.

It is all worth it—swimming, that is—when you see things in the water. Crabs and starfish in a wild dance, kids learning to swim, angels learning to be on earth. Jump from the dock into a school of fish, translucent scales shimmering beneath the waves. Glimpse an otter floating beneath the docks. Catch the crabs and starfish sticking to the bottom. Look for souls on the bottom of things. Goopy ducks shoot from the tide pools that island kids, gooey from mud, romp over.

I saw a seal once. I was swimming from the Hidden Cove dock to the channel marker a quarter of a mile out. Victoria and I liked to swim out when the tide was high, climb up the rotted wood, and jump into water. We were halfway to the marker when I turned to look at

the landscape behind us, towering Olympic peninsula trees lining in a disorderly fashion to the base of the Olympic mountain range. Wisps of clouds moved lazily in front of the sun. A shiny, brass head stuck out of the water, twenty feet away. She looked at me.

“Victoria!” I shouted, trying to keep still while treading water, trying to take in the bright world and the small head floating and the way my heart pounded against my rib cage. Victoria splashed on ahead, unhearing. I pondered the best way to make her catch her, make her notice the seal, make her notice it all, too, but before I could come up with the words the ocean before me was open, and she was gone.

El Conejito

“You will never be completely at home again, because part of your heart will always be elsewhere. That is the price you pay for the richness of loving and knowing people in more than one place.”

—Miriam Adeney

There is a photograph on my desk at home: a white rabbit with a yellow bow sits by a fountain in Mendoza, Argentina. It isn't a real rabbit—it is someone in a mask. It is creepy in the way clowns are. The rabbit's teeth protrude well past his lower lip. The eyes are turquoise blue, and twinkling, and bulging out of his sockets. His whiskers are dark streaks stemming from his nose. His eyebrows are slanted and jeering; his grin, clownish and leering; and his cheeks, slightly puffed.

In the picture, there is a lime green backpack, weighing in at just under forty pounds, on the rabbit's lap. He is in la Plaza Independencia in Mendoza, a small town just east of the Andes mountains. There is a group of schoolchildren in the background, walking home from class in neat, pressed, Argentine uniforms. The photo was taken two minutes before one of the students, a boy, threw one of the girls in her neat, pressed, Argentine uniform into the fountain. The gesture was probably flirtatious. The girl didn't take it well.

When the picture is being taken, the person behind the mask smiles. I know this because the rabbit is me; or, behind the mask, is me; or was me; now I am home, and the mask is gone. The picture of the plaza in Mendoza in Argentina is the first of a series of photos with El Conejito, my eerie travel companion on a month long backpacking trip around South America. For four weeks, I carried the mask with me to every city, to every country, to take a picture. Brie Mueller, my best friend, was the photographer. In every shot, I wear the mask.

What Brie and I didn't know at the time was that the memories we were creating of our time in South America would be locked in these photos. We mapped our journey in a most peculiar fashioned, and so we would remember it this way, too. Not as a series as encounters. Not as a grand, wild road trip in the weeks following our semester abroad. Not as 186 on public buses. But as a series of photos. The stories behind the photos.

The story of our third companion.

I was twenty when I studied abroad in Valparaíso, Chile, the colorful port city exactly midway up the country, home to Pablo Neruda and sweet wine and Catholic pride and slurred Spanish. I lived up in the hills of the city for four months; learned to take the Micro bus, learned to identify a perfect avocado from a not so perfect one; visited all the graves and memorials and museums from the Pinochet dictatorship twenty years earlier; started to dress like a punk skater kid, and started to cover my light gringa hair with scarves. I wanted to be Chilean, and I soaked in the Chilean way of life. My memories of this time in my life are as bright and eclectic as the houses that compromised the 47 named hills that made the city of Valparaíso: people and stray dogs and places and ocean scenery, seared images behind my eyes.

My study abroad program ended a month before my flight home. Young and enamored with the idea of simple living and the sport of backpacking, I decided to travel.

Brie Mueller and I met on the 504 bus, not as crowded as the Viña del Mar route 505, but more direct than the Bellavista 607. I recognized her from my Chilean Dance Class. Brie was the one with the beautiful maroon scarf and beautiful, swaying hips. I remembered

watching her dance. La cueca music was bumping, the boys were watching, and every girl in the room wished she could dance like Brie.

“Hey. You’re in *Danzas* with me, right?” A student march blocked traffic and our bus was stopped in front of a mural that said: “Valparaíso, home of the Dreamers.” We talked about dreams.

“I want to travel,” I’d said, “I want to see everything and swim in strange places and eat weird food.” Brie agreed to everything. “Beach and mountains and wine and the road in-between.”

“I don’t have any money, though.”

“We’ll make it work. Motorcycle Diaries and all that.”

It wouldn’t be until our last night together, in Machu Picchu, that Brie and I would laugh at our initial decision to backpack with someone we hardly knew.

Before we left and in the beginning and even at special moments throughout, when the desperate humor of our situation let us feel removed and distant from what was happening, we talked about our trip like it was a grand story. We wanted it to be the story of our lives. When anything happened, we would exclaim, “what a story!” and write notes down in our journals. We made it the stories of our lives. We made it ourselves.

And then there’s the mask. Before we left I lost a bet and as a result, had to carry a cheap and flimsy plastic rabbit mask on the trip. I agreed because that was who I was in South America—sunburned, bug-bitten, simultaneously exhausted by and enamored with all I’d done and seen—and just headstrong enough, just superstitious enough, to take the dare seriously and pack the plastic in my bag and carry the thing with me, everywhere I went.

We arrived in Mendoza early the first morning. Mendoza was a sleepy city, like a ghost town during siesta hour: bodega after bodega, small farm factories and vineyards running into one another, Andes clear water trickling through the city in cobbled ditches and canals, water singing songs and, in the right, muggy, afternoon light, water that looked like wine.

We met Freddy Valencia, a tall, pale, Italian man, at Plaza Independencia. He had set up a tripod to take his own picture by the fountain. At first I thought this had something to do with the European ego, but I soon realized: it was just Freddy.

“We can take a picture for you!” Brie offered as we walked up, to which I added, “Can I take a picture *with* you?”

Freddy threw open his arms, swept me into a rib-crushing hug. “Of course, of course! Photographer, take it away!”

I pulled out El Conejito again. The Italian’s face fell.

“What is that?”

“Our friend.” I smiled up at him. “Please?”

We had dinner with Freddy the first night. Everything was beautiful. It was our first taste of our human desires to eat and be merry and converse late into the night, under dim city stars, and laugh and hold our stomachs and when it is over, only remember the good things, Malbec meat men Mendoza, this is the mnemonic by which I remember this stop, perfectly calm and collected, a pause between the great Andes mountains and the sweeping scenery out east.

In the picture with Freddy, El Conejito stands under his arm at the fountain. Both the rabbit and the Italian—and, I remember, the girl under the mask, and the girl behind the camera—are perfectly happy.

When we got Buenos Aires, Argentina, Brie and I were completely enamored before we'd stepped foot off the bus. But of course we were in love with B.A. Everyone is in love with B.A. The city was the world wrapped up in one sentence and alive and dancing, carnivals in her mouth, especially in *La Boca*, the carnival neighborhood, where we walked for a day and took pictures and felt the city breathe. B.A. flashed us a grin here, and we saw bright old buildings, clowns, music, mate, and Messi. Honey-smearred lips. Plazas and obelisks in the shapes of her eyes, shoulders cloaked in grey silk, all eloquence, antiquated jewelry and shoes and Earth's brightest purple flowers.

We met with my friend Masha Jones by the Casa Rosada, or Pink House. It stood at the center of Plaza Cinco de Mayo. Masha, a friend from home who'd been living in Buenos Aires for some time, gave us a tour.

“The building's pink,” she explained, “to represent the blending of white and red, the two opposing political parties of the country.”

Masha took a picture with El Conejito by the Pink House. El Conejito took another on the plaza, charging into a flock of pigeons.

“Do you miss home?” I asked Masha as we were preparing to leave the next day.

Masha paused. “I miss the snow,” she began. This did not surprise me—Masha spent thirteen years in Russia before moving to Colorado. “And I miss the Christmas season, and my family, and home.” Another pause. “You know, I never thought I would miss anything,

traveling. I thought I'd be too busy being alive and adventurous to have time to think about things.”

“You've been traveling a while now, huh?” I knew Masha had been to Uruguay before coming to Buenos Aires and before that, she'd stayed with a family in Bolivia.

“Yeah.” Masha wrapped me in a hug as we headed to the bus station. “And in all this time, all I've come to learn is how much I love the people and home and life I already have.”

I try to remember my life before Buenos Aires; my life before El Conejito, and Brie, and the buses. My memories are mostly of ocean, calm and swimming, and gentle movements and changes.

My memories of South America are like the night we tango danced at The Church, a creaky old building with wood floors and an organ as high as the ceiling. It was in a dark neighborhood in Buenos Aires. We had to make two transfers to get there. I danced with a boy who looked like Harry Potter, a shy guy vacationing from the Netherlands, and a pompous Argentine who kept trying to kiss me, claiming again and again: “Aw! But I cannot *resist* the honey on your lips!” The music was frantic and panting; my memories are dark and ominous and strangely bright under red lights. Strange hands feel sweaty in my own. My feet ache, and my mind can't keep up with my movements, and I still can't keep up with what happened.

After Argentina and a brief stop in Uruguay, we traveled north. We only took El Conejito out a few times in Uruguay—once at a playground, once at the bus station, and once in our hostel by a sign that read “Kitchen utensils are for shearing.” I think it's because everything about the country felt short and fast. The people were short, cars drove quickly,

the cities were small, everyone drank mate tea from squat gourds, and people talked strangely, with a short, swishy sounding accent that was even more marked than the Argentine one.

Puerto Iguazú, one twenty-hour bus ride north, was enormous by contrast. Our ride through Uruguay and eastern Argentina was pleasant enough. The bus was empty, but for two British girls, Nancy and Stella. We shared mate with them.

“Oh, but you girls packed so *little* for your trip! Is that all you have with you?”

Of course it seemed little. They lugged around two suitcases each; I had one pair of pants, four shirts, and after my running shoes were stolen in Buenos Aires, only my Chaco’s on my feet. El Conejito was the only thing we carried that really matter. In addition to my shoes, I would lose many of my possessions on our journey—my spork, all my socks, my camera, my chapstick, and plenty of money—but the only thing I consciously prayed to keep, to never lose, was El Conejito. Without our realizing, it became a symbol for all that was at stake. Chile, where we came from, why we were going, what held us together.

December 1, 2012, we visited one of the Seven Wonders of Nature. Iguazú Falls is composed of over 150 waterfalls, varying in size from small spring to largest in the world, and everything else is sound and air. Sound of water falling, crashing, foam in the Devil’s Throat, spurts and bubbles at Little Chico, nothing but the churning buzzing sound of water, eternal water, and sweet air, so light and easy, I wanted to breathe it in till I choked on it, suck in the sweetness of fruits and jungle sounds and the taste of mist on my face and I remember thinking I’d never get my mouth open enough, to breathe it all in.

Puerto Iguazú was packed with dirt and fossils and visitors fluent in every tongue and style and way of dress. Gravity was magic; science, a spectacle of hundred-foot waterfalls

that allowed the world and all things in it and broken-winged butterflies to be beautiful. The place was stacked beneath magnificent, tropical trees, canopies of birds and red raccoons and dragonflies the size of my hand. The streets smelled like rust or blood, and rusty colored raccoons sniffed up ants and bananas from the trash.

We don't have a picture of El Conejito at Iguazú Falls. We only took one camera, my camera, on the tour that day, and although we had a few shots of El Conejito, wearing a life vest riding to the island, covering his ears at the loud sound of the Devil's Throat, my camera was stolen the next day in Asunción, Paraguay. I never got it back; the camera, the pictures, the exact shade of the steps, the color of the wind swaying the bridge, the faces of every foreign place visiting that day, the sense of the supernatural, the sense of Paradise. I never got it back. I never got any of it back.

In the days before departure, I would look at the Conejito mask on my desk and think it was a silly thing to carry on this grand adventure. A waste of valuable pack space. But I brought it anyway.

The story of how I got the mask is as important as where it took me after. It was September 19, 2012; Chilean Independence Day, and I'd had my share of Chilean wine and was wandering a Chilean festival, one of the Ramadas, with Brie. The Ramadas constitute the biggest parties of the year in Chile. Emptied soccer fields are packed with rows and rows of booths with terremotos and chicha, with chorillanas and choripan and chorizo. Chileans eat and drink to their country's freedom. Ironically, the Ramadas are still subject to the superstition of the Toque, or curfew, established during the Pinochet dictatorship. This means

it is taboo to wander the streets after dark. Chileans stay out to party until sunrise. The show goes on, all night long.

Brie and I walked arm in arm past arenas roped off for different kinds of dance, past booths of clothes and Chilean flags and children's toys, looking for a place to sit. One booth was selling plastic masks: American faces like Bart Simpson and Sylvester the Cat, superheroes, Batman and Superman, and in the back corner of the booth, a collection of animals. I saw a purple and striped giraffe, a frog with bulging eyes, a cat in a tall hat, and a white rabbit, buck teeth, long ears, complete with a bright, spotted, yellow bow.

Brie pointed at the masks. "Those are so cheesy. So Chilean!"

I nodded in agreement. "We'd be super Chilean if we wore those."

Brie paused, stuck her hand in her pocket. "One mil, dos mil... yes! Hang on!" Pesos in hand, she charged at the booth.

Moments later, she was back with the rabbit mask. The bunny's pupils were punched out for eyeholes. The nose jutted out to a red point, the buck teeth stuck out in a creepy grin, and the ears seemed glued together by that spotted yellow bow. Happy was not a word to describe the thing.

"Want to backpack South America with me?" she dangled the plastic before me. "You, me, and this mask."

"Are you crazy?"

"Not at all!" she took another long sip of wine. "We both want to travel, and travel cheap."

It wasn't until our last night in Machu Picchu that I would realize how crazy I had been, agreeing to backpack with someone I hardly knew. At the time, it felt right. It was the kind of thing you did in South America.

"Sure," I said, "Yes. Yes. Why not?"

Brie presented me with the mask. "I give this to you, then, my friend, my companion, my comrade on this journey of a lifetime we'll have," she grabbed me, pecked my cheek in the Chilean fashion, "I call him... the third travel companion! The Little Rabbit! El Conejito!"

"Aye weona. You have yourself a little wine and you're already a little crazy?"

"I'm not!" Brie took another long sip, "It's my gift to you on this great day of Chile. No—it's my challenge. You have to take the Conejito. To every country."

"To every country?"

"Every city. Every single city! I want a picture with you in that mask everywhere we go."

"Really?"

"Yes. Yes! Let's make a bet. I bet you can't make it through ten cities without losing it!"

The inexplicably deep love I'd recently developed for Chile, and the eerie feeling I had that holiday night that the country was watching me, listening, was the only reason I said yes.

Months later, when I decided to write about South America, I decided to write about the cities: the cities that enchanted me; the cities that mugged me, and made me sick; the cities that I came to know and love like people.

The Uncanny Valley is a place in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Its name is derived from the German *Unheimliche*, or the opposite of what is familiar. Literally, it means “unhome;” something uncomfortably strange or uncomfortably familiar.

The Uncanny Valley is the place for near human beings that frighten us in their almost humanness. It is the idea that nonhuman beasts and creatures—robots, vampires, statues—are okay as they look more and more human, until they look too human.

El Conejito, for instance, was too human for comfort.

My trip through South America was like a trip through the Uncanny Valley. The cities were too vibrant, too individualized, too memorable, to not become memories in my mind. The places became people. Buenos Aires was the oldest sister and the member of some bright, pink circus; Colonia del Sacramento was a squat, buggy man from Wonderland. Valpo was the oppressed artist who painted city murals to tell the story of his life.

Funny, how the brain chooses to write and keep memory.

In my journal—bright red, 80 pages, weird Chilean line spacing that moved back and forth between wide-ruled and college-ruled—I kept track of our stories. I numbered each page, tallied hours on buses, put down the date and time for every new location, and at the top of each entry, in bold, all-caps letters, I put the name of a place.

This is how I mapped our story, how numbers and names and places all became confused, a tangle of memories. El Conejito was real, all the characters were real and all the cities were characters.

All the cities were a real, and all of it, people and places, simultaneously, a dream.

The only other place El Conejito didn't get a picture was Brazil, probably because it was the only place we went by mistake. We got on the right bus, and then it went the wrong way. The man selling us tickets tried to tell us this, that our bus was going to go in the opposite direction we wanted, in the opposite direction of what was posted on the bus terminal route board, but we didn't listen. Or rather, we didn't understand.

"Paraguay?" he repeated our request in a lilting, jeering tone. "You want *this* bus to Paraguay?"

"Sí, señor."

"Are you sure?"

He held two tickets in his outstretched hand but paused, leaned over the window and looked at us, assessed our size and hair color and clothing.

"This one for sure?"

"Sí, señor."

I was sure, so sure, all the time in South America. Not always because I was, but because I had to be. Or so I thought. That sureness, that certainty, was a safeguard, a nonnegotiable.

"Sí, señor," I repeated myself, and reached out for the tickets, "we're sure."

We boarded the bus. We were in the northeast corner of the country, where Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil collide. The bus was striped blue and white like the Argentine flag. We were out of Argentine pesos, out of food. It had been a day since our last meal of bananas and dulce de leche. At the border crossing uniformed officers searched the

luggage, glanced twice at our American passports, interrogated the driver, and waved us through. It was raining.

I realized the signs outside were in a foreign language five minutes after crossing the border when we stopped at a light in front of a corner store. “PRAÇA CENTRAL DESTA FORMA”, it said. My stomach dropped and I lurched forward in my seat.

“Brie!”

“What?” Brie put a hand to her forehead, rubbed her sleepy eyes.

“I think we’re in Brazil!”

There was a pause while Brie stared at me dumbly. Then her mouth fell open. She spun to the window, wiped off the condensation with her sleeve, and pressed her nose to the glass.

“What? How? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure!” I replied, “The signs! They’re in Portuguese!”

“But we don’t have anything...” Brie rubbed her forehead, “visas, stamped I.D., copies... as soon as the bus stops...”

“I know.”

We sat in silence, eyes down, and hugged our packs close. The bus continued to charge through the muddy streets. The driver turned up the radio, the music obviously in a language other than the sharp and lilting *español* we’d learned to love.

“It sounds like they’re trying to sing in Spanish with a mouth full of rocks,” Brie whispered.

I laughed. “Portuguese... Brazil. Brie, we’re in Brazil!”

Months later, around the time I would be diagnosed with a mild case of PTSD because I was jumpy and nervous after our trip, Brie would be filling out an application for a Fulbright position in Rio de Janeiro. She would call to practice Portuguese. I couldn't understand what she was saying.

"It's okay," she would say, "just tell me. Does it sound like that radio station from that one bus in Brazil?"

We would both laugh. Brie would practice more garbled Portuguese phrases; hang up the phone, write essays and edit questionnaires for her application. I would sit on my bed, think about Paraguay, and all the characters we'd had on our journey. The memories would play again and again; tapes rewound an infinite number of times behind my eyes. The differences in our memories would strike me. Her story was, in her mind, unfinished, and she wanted to return, pick up the old pieces and tie up the loose ends.

My story was lost in a tangle of memories. Of things that were real. Of things I imagined.

Brie dreamt about going back. I dreamt I never left.

Eventually the bus re-routed for Paraguay and we were back on track. On track for the Day in Paraguay, the day I lost my camera, the day that would lead to my only increasing case of paranoia, and the day that would make Brie and I realize that there was so much more at stake on this journey than a photo album of funny rabbit pictures.

As our journey continued, El Conejito started to become more and more like a real person. Brie and I talked about him like he was real—would El Conejito want to go to the

falls or the gardens? Would El Conejito like a picture on this bus? with that man? this building?—and we even started introducing him like a friend.

But when it really matter, the day after Puerto Iguazú, in Asunción, Paraguay, El Conejito felt as much a person as Brie or myself. We counted on him like a third companion.

It matters because without El Conejito, Brie and I were just two white girls, alone.

And that matters because to one poor, ginger, Paraguayan boy in the Plaza Central one hot, sunny, unbearable afternoon, two white girls meant to easy pickings. All he needed was a knife.

If only El Conejito had a heartbeat.

Our picture of El Conejito in Paraguay is a blurry shot. I know what the shadows and squiggly lines mean, because I was there. The dark green dash is the tree we were sitting under; the pink smear, from the Capitol building; the white blob in the bottom corner is El Conejito; and the yellow light, the pulsing light seeping through the whole thing, is the sun, the hot, noontime sunlight.

We were sitting on the bench in the central plaza talking about kindred spirits: about paths meant to cross, souls meant to bump up against each other, encounters meant to bless. We'd just pulled out El Conejito and were positioning ourselves for a shot.

“Maybe with the plaza in the background?” I was fishing through my bag for my camera, to give to Brie. “You can stand on the bench, look down on us—”

The camera never made it out of my bag. Like a dream, simultaneously too fast and slowed down, life became a fast action film warped underwater. There was a hand on my left shoulder, a grip that became thin muscular arms around my neck. I breathed in, and found

myself on my knees, the camera cord of my bag pulled tight around my neck, a Latino ginger yanking on the cord. I choked; Brie screamed.

"HE HAS A KNIFE."

I looked at the ginger. It was like he wielded an empty space in front of me; the object glinting under the noonday sun didn't register in my mind. I froze.

I remember the feel of hot pavement on my knees, the feel of something cold brushing my earlobe and neck, the taste of something lumpish and bile in the back of my throat that I later identified as fear. The cord was tighter and tighter around my neck, I couldn't breathe, I tried to adjust the bag but the ginger boy just pulled harder. I felt dizzy, lurched forward, the knife flashed past my left ear again, I caught myself and spoke as best as I could.

"I'm trying," in English first, then Spanish, then English, "Okay okay okay—"

The cord cut my neck, snagged on my braids, the bag was off, the kid the knife my camera my money he looked at me in the plaza under the bright noon day sun and for a moment—

"Run." Brie grabbed my arm. "RUN! He has a knife, COME ON!"

I wondered then what I wonder now: could we have been friends? Kindred spirits? Were our lives supposed to cross that bright, sunny day? What does this encounter mean?

Moments later, gasping for breath as we sprinted across the plaza, I turned to Brie.

"El Conejito!"

"I have him."

A wave of relief.

What mattered the most to me, after it all, was that I never got the Paraguayan boy's name. After all the characters, all the people and the encounters I named and lives that touched and changed mine, his, the nameless one, has been one of the most impactful.

But after all this time, the title of his page in my red travel notebook is still blank.

I couldn't write his name. Instead, I wrote out a list, went through everything I lost that day:

- *Money*, save one credit card, thank you, traveler's belt.

- *Camera*, and all the memories with it, Iguazú Falls, Buenos Aires, Chivito, and tango dancing.

- *Chap stick*, which would prove a valuable loss later in Bolivia, when I would be so dehydrated from throwing up parasite water, my lips would crack and leave trails of blood down my chin.

- *Passport copies*, I counted it a blessing when he didn't get my original but a curse at the Bolivian border when they pulled Brie and I aside for two hours because I didn't have proper documentation.

- *Camera case*, a trivial detail but memorable nonetheless, because shortly before Brie and I left the bus station that morning I'd said to her, "I bought this for when I backpacked Asia. Steel cable strap. It's thief-proof!" That steel cable would cut my neck.

The listing didn't help. Nothing helped, after that Day in Paraguay. We walked through an outdoor market after, three blocks from the plaza, looking without seeing and picking up random objects without grasping where we actually were and what had just happened.

"Are you okay?" Brie kept asking. "You sure? You *sure*?"

Of course I wasn't okay. The red line on my neck tingled. "I'm fine." Again and again. "I'm fine."

I would be afraid of boys and benches and Paraguay and plazas and being alone the rest of my time in South America. And a long time after that.

After Paraguay, we stayed with a Mexican family at an orphanage in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. In the space of five nights I fell in love with the place. Brie and I called it home. After weeks of speeding through cities, sleeping on buses, skipping meals when we ran out of currencies and skipping heart beats as we methodically witnessed worlds and existences of life outside all we had previously known, we were drained, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos, Our Little Brothers, was a wonderful pause on our journey. A chance to stop. A chance to breathe.

I'd heard of NPH from the friend of a friend and had contacted one of the American volunteers, a redheaded girl named Melissa Wojo from Chicago who was volunteering while she finished her dissertation on Mexican artists' portrayals of female death and who got up at sunrise every morning to go juggling.

"You haven't heard of it?" Melissa asked when we first met, "it's when you go jogging and juggling. They do it at circus bars all the time. Juggling."

We thought she was joking, until the next morning, when we saw her trotting dutifully outside our window at six a.m., neon green running shorts, hair in a messy bun, and with three small bowling pins, spinning in a slow, methodic circle.

In exchange for five days of room and board, Brie and I gave all our time to work with the kids. Or I should say, Brie and El Conejito and I, for the kids loved taking pictures with the rabbit almost as much as they loved braiding our hair, telling us stories, playing games with us, or taking us to the river.

The river was the orphanage hang-out, a few miles past the mango grove down the muddy road. We walked there the third day, and my memories of that sunny afternoon are a jumble of sights and smells and sounds: Amazon birds and tropical foliage and thirteen young girls swimming in raggedy underwear and the taste of river water, and the feeling of mud, and soft sun on my shoulders.

But mostly, I remember the mangoes: sticky, sweet, rinds stuck under my nails, all followed by a settled feeling in my stomach when I ate sixteen, seventeen, eighteen of the tiny fruits.

The kids kept passing us more. They were so desperate to share their meager existence with us. Brie and I, eager to participate, ate everything that came our way. This willingness carried over to lunchtime, when, as we sat in our underwear and made shapes in the mud, girls carried us plates of fire-cooked chicken liver, heart, and feet.

That night, we walked back with two of the older girls to the mango grove to restock. We filled our arms and one of our backpacks with the fruit and again, ate until we were sick. As we sat under the trees, we craned our necks back periodically to look at the stars.

“It’s not just that we can see more,” Brie said at one point, “they look *bigger* from here.”

Everything looked bigger from where we were standing. Roads seemed longer, time stretched thinner, colors were brighter and plates fuller and drinks steeper and music louder and the people were large, larger than life, and we were there for it all.

On our bus ride following the orphanage, I vomited seven times in a plastic bag that Brie held up to my face. Each time, she would take the bag, trip her way down the aisle to the back of the bus, and dump the contents out the window.

“You got this,” she would whisper into my ear as hunched over her lap, heaving. “Let it go, let it go, let it go—”

It would be a year-and-a-half later, one sunny afternoon sitting at a coffee shop on the phone with Brie when she’d tell me she’d won the Fulbright Scholarship to Brazil, that I would remember this bus ride. That I would reflect on all the times Brie saved my life, so to speak. That I would realize that I loved her more deeply and intensely than almost anyone, including El Conejito. And that for all those cities, for the time we held hands wandering a market in Peru, for that time on the bus, for all the memories, I never said thank you.

In southern Bolivia, we visited the small town Uyuni and took an old van, caravan-style, out to the salt flats. The transition from desert plains to salt plains, from minimal vegetation to minimal anything, was breathtaking. It was like we were driving into nothingness.

We shared our bus with a group of Mormon missionaries. The group of ten boys played Spanish Christian rock music during our drive and told us about their training in Peru. Elder Harris, the only American, an eighteen-year-old recent high school graduate from Minnesota, took an especial interest in us.

“You’re just traveling?” he said, “you’re not doing anything?”

“We’re taking pictures for a friend,” I explained, while Brie added under her breath, “you’ll see.”

The first stop along the way was the Train Graveyard, which was as beautiful as any resting home for the dead. It was a collection of old and derailed train cars in the middle of the yellow desert under bright, bright blue sky. The guide spoke too quickly for me to catch why they were there.

We moved deeper into the nothingness.

In the center of it all was a Museo de Sal – salt museum, a building literally constructed out of salt. The missionaries stopped to take pictures outside.

“Elder Harris!” I called, “Can our friend join?”

Without waiting for a reply, I pulled the mask out from my pack and strapped the plastic to my face. The Mormons huddled in a group, laughed awkwardly.

Sometimes, when I remember South America, I think the Conejito was more real than we were.

In the photo, I stand just right of center, arms at my sides. The Mormons stand in obvious camaraderie; the white nothingness of the salt flats stretches out behind us.

From the Salt Flats, we bussed north to the sleepy Bolivian city of La Paz, and from there we crossed the border to Cusco, Peru. This was the first train of our entire journey, from Cusco to Aguas Calientes, the tiny town at the base of the mountain range that was home to Machu Picchu. The morning of our trek up to the Incan ruins was foggy. We took a Conejito picture that was nothing but silver mist and his face, suspended, floating.

The steps to the top were tiny, uneven, and intricate, clearly works of centuries past.

“What were you thinkin’, Incan?” Brie gasped at one point. This became our chant as we worked our way up. What were you thinkin’, Incan? What were you thinkin’, Incan?

At the top, perched on the ledge overlooking the classic *National Geographic* shot of the ruins, was a young man with dark hair, a puffy rain jacket, and the shadow of a beard. He was holding out a chart with pictures of birds and gazing out into the fog.

“Excuse me, sir?” I stepped forward, mask in hand, “would you mind taking our picture?”

He turned around; his face broke into a smile. “You American? Me too! The name’s Andrew Rothman. And, you are?”

Andrew Rothman was twenty-six, living in D.C. but from Wisconsin, and in Peru on business for the American Bird Conservancy. He was an ornithologist.

Once we’d parted ways, Brie and I simply referred to him as the Bird Man.

We sat for three hours on top of the ruins, watching the sun set, swapping tales. It was the first time Brie and I had really stopped to share where we’d been the past weeks; in fact, it was the first time we’d had time ourselves to stop and think about all we’d done.

“Iguazú Falls,” Brie said, “incredible. You can’t hear yourself think. And the Chaco desert in Paraguay. All you can hear is yourself, thinking!”

“What were you thinkin’, Incan?” I chimed in. We all laughed.

“And this is El Conejito,” Brie and I showed him the mask, “he’s made some pretty neat friends.”

We hiked down together, but separated at the train station, the Bird Man with tickets four trains from ours.

“It was nice meeting you ladies.” We hugged goodbye.

Brie and I were the first off the train when it reached Cusco. We filed past the remaining cars, caught in the crowds of tourists. Through one of the windows, still sitting in one of the straight-backed seats, was Andrew Rothman.

“There he is!” I cried, while Brie pulled out her camera, “the mask! Get the mask!”

I pulled El Conejito on and crept to his window. Slowly, commanding as much an air of eeriness as I could muster, I stood in the window. Through the slits of the mask, I watched the Bird Man jump, eyes wide, before breaking into laughter.

Brie and I waved goodbye.

As we walked, away from the llamas and steps and Bird Man and day of storytelling, I remember thinking that this is what it is all about. This is what it means to inherit history and Earth and places like this old crumbling Incan palace beneath the sky; to feel the breeze and listen to the birds and remember you are here only a moment, an instant on ancient clocks.

Because this is what South America was about. South America was the intersection of time and place and myself and everything and it all moved through me. Formations rose from the ground and through me. Summer winds threatened to blow me off mountainsides and I caught my breath—for this is the end of the world, or the beginning. And it’s the end of a

motorcycle journey through South America, or a bus trip, or the story of a lifetime, or the start of something else. And this is you and here and now and everything human and Earthy—or it is something else, wordless stop along the way, a pause like all the rest.

I lost El Conejito in the Valley of Death, ten cities after our journey had begun. At this point I was traveling alone. Brie had left me in Cuzco, taken another bus to Lima to meet a family friend for Christmas. That left me approximately 50 bus hours from Cusco to Valpo, three Incan ruins and an alien desert landscape and all the Chilean mines falling in-between.

El Conejito went with me.

We stopped at San Pedro de Atacama, in the northernmost region of Chile, home to the driest desert in the world. There are rumors that the first moon landing was actually a conspiracy filmed here. The place resembles Tatooine from Star Wars.

I thought about going straight home; about keeping the mask in my pack and bussing all the way from Cusco to Valpo. But the desert was on the way, in the way, and I was desperate enough to keep the dream going, still enamored enough by all the encounters I'd had, that I decided to stop.

It seemed like the kind of thing you did in South America.

The first night was rather uneventful. I shared a hostel room with a German lady, Yvonne, who spent most of the night reading *Lord of the Rings*. Before it was dark, I wandered the streets of the small, dusty town by myself, yearning for Brie's company. She'd been my only steady companion for almost a month at this point; her face was the only constant in the sea of strangers. Without her, I was alone.

By noon the following day, I was feeling the solitude even more intensely, was seriously dehydrated in the harsh climate, and, having talked briefly with Yvonne that morning, realized I had only three days to bus home in time for my flight to the States. I don't know which thought was more overwhelming: the stress of getting back and packing up and saying goodbye in just three days, or the looming threat of going home, of waking up from this wild, beautiful, South American dream.

I signed El Conejito and myself up for a desert hike. Our guide, Pedro, wore a turban and Aviators and scrambled around the foreign landscape like a mountain goat. We crawled through a section of sand caves and hiked a mile along a stretch of sand dunes. We watched the start of the sunset in Valley of the Moon, and at the end, just as the stars were coming out, we hiked a narrow pathway along jagged rocks to the shadowy and windy Valley of Death.

I only wanted to take one picture with the mask before getting home. One more shot, to show Brie later. My way of telling her I'd been okay.

I passed my camera to Pedro, stood at the edge of the cliff overlooking the valley, strapped El Conejito to my face and held out my arms. I held out my arms like I was trying to hold it all, all the places, all of South America, all in an instant.

The wind took him and in an instant, I was running. The foreign, lunar landscape blurred around me as I scrambled over red rocks and down sandy sides, tears streaming from my eyes. I was shouting.

“Conejito!” Of course, he didn't answer. “Conejito!”

Thin arms wrapped around me from behind. Pedro, our guide, tackled me to the ground.

“Are you crazy?!” he shouted in my ear, “you can’t run up here! You can’t go there! You’ll fall! You’ll die!”

The wind picked up. I watched El Conejito, caught in the breeze and swept even further from my reach.

“Conejito.” Softly this time. I sank to my knees, Pedro’s arms still gripping my shoulder. For the first time since leaving Valpo, for the first time in so many hours and miles and buses, I started to cry.

Ten Ways of Looking at a Farm

The only day it rained all summer was the day the piglets died. Eight weeks into a summer internship working on a farm, I'd already dealt heavily with death, at least with chickens—hens that died passing their eggs, baby pullets pecked to pieces by older birds, three roosters that I'd killed and gutted myself—but something about the pigs was different. I think it was because it was the first time that an entire life had passed before my eyes. Begun and ended in my hands.

The pregnant sow had gone into labor two weeks early. All the piglets were born stillborn except the last, the one I watched slide out of the mother and into my arms. We called her The Last Samurai. For two hours I rocked the little piglet, cradled her head in the crook of my arm and squirted warm goat's milk down her throat with a syringe. I sat on the steps of the pig barn, next to a bucket with the other six dead piglets. The smell of dead animal meshed with the sound of the swarms of flies so for months after, a single fly buzzing through a room would call up memories of bloody pig bodies.

I kept my back to the bucket so The Last Samurai couldn't see her siblings. But then I got curious, I wanted some idea of what I was up against, so I turned around and pulled back the lid and looked. They were stacked and not moving or breathing in the most finite way. I didn't look again.

As I rocked her I rubbed her body with a towel. The rubbing was recommended in our Farm Anatomy book: *To warm premature piglets, shake and rub vigorously*. Eight weeks into the summer, this manual had proved invaluable. The illustrated guide included information such as: how many eggs the average hen lays per year (260, depicted in the manual as 260 painted white ovals); the four most effective ways to grow tomatoes (on a

stake, upside down, in a cage, or on a trellis); how to spin your own yarn (though we never got around to building a spinning wheel); how to identify prairie dog holes (information made infamous one starry evening when a nearby rancher was visiting and, looking out at the plains stroking his red handlebar mustache, commented, “them dogs be getting curious... make me wanna beat the piss outta ‘em.”); and finally, what to do if any of the eight popular pig breeds was born early: *to warm premature piglets, shake and rub vigorously.*

So I rubbed and rubbed for two vigorous hours and as I rubbed I composed a list in my head, went over things in an orderly fashion, all the things of the farm life that had led to this moment. I took notes on what had brought me there and taught me to participate in that process like another perfectly fitted piece in the great farm machine. I watched the pig’s tiny heart beats as they were pumped through the umbilical cord, pulses of blood that dictated life.

The farm was in southern Colorado, 70 miles from the nearest city and 20 miles from town. Town, of course, might be an overstatement. Rush, Colorado, located on the side of Colorado state highway 94, has a population of 704 people. The town consists of just what you see from the road: the Rush Café, with free Bingo Tuesdays nights; the Auto Parts Mechanic store that doubles as a barber shop; the post office; and the gas station with takeout pizza. There is little else between Rush and the farm. Along County Road 11, one might expect to see anywhere between a dozen and ten dozen cattle, one or two dirty Ford trucks, and sagebrush. The sagebrush goes on for miles, soft, velvet and green, swaying gently in the prairie wind. Sometimes, the sage is all I remember when I think of the drive to the farm.

The farm itself is headed by Michael, a thirty-year-old sustainable waste manager and farmer who had sent out a request to my university for students who weren't afraid to get their hands dirty. He advertised the summer internship as a chance for interns to do things people normally can't and won't. At the time I applied that seemed a reasonable enough description—after all, normal people as far as I knew can't and won't spend summers on a farm—and it wasn't until our first day of work, our first day of processing waste, that I saw what Michael truly meant.

The farm is built on cans. Sometimes, literally; tables constructed with neat towers of cans, cans standing in for weights to keep drying slop buckets from blowing in the winds, and one afternoon, when we served pork ribs and garden salad to a pair of restaurant owners looking to buy our produce, we used particularly faded and rustic cans as art. But more than the avant-garde can structures we built by the Zen garden, the cans act as the foundation for process. The farm intercepts thousands of pounds of food destined for the landfill and turns the goods into animal feed and compost. 100,000 pounds of landfill-destined goods pass through Michael's hands each year—dented cans of Bush Family Honey Style Baked Beans, boxes of gluten-free spaghetti noodles with slightly smashed corners, totes full of Honey Dijon mustard, labels half-peeled away, a few months past the expiration dates that felt impossibly futuristic when printed fifty years previously. All this waste food and more, perfectly good or good enough food items intercepted before the landfill. We processed the goods at two different stations, the dry goods (pastas, cereals, oats, cake mixes, and crackers) in the Lower Barn and the wet goods, cans and jars, in the Upper Barn.

We spent hours a day opening boxes and cans, dumping the contents into scrubbed old Dunkin' Donuts frosting buckets.

I had needed something to shake my life that summer. Like the Last Samurai desperate for breathing, I had needed a vigorous awakening. And I had this image of myself, a city girl afraid of crowds and city spaces that ached for distance and change. So I had scrounged together a bag, old jeans from my mom's closet and ripped-up thrift store flannels, and I moved to the farm.

I drove up with the other interns—just three others, we were five meandering souls total on the farm that summer—on a Friday evening. Michael was waiting out front with a bonfire taller than the house. He spread out his arms as we came up the gravel drive. He wore a green flannel, which I would one day steal to take back with me to the city, and a bandana to hold back his flowing Jesus locks.

I thought—Who knew the Savior would come in Carharts and cowboy boots.

“Now,” the first words Michael spoke to us were: “*Now*, it can begin.”

Within 48 hours I'd inherited three white V-necks that I vowed never to wash, I'd been rammed by the goat and left with magnificent, purple bruises up both my thighs, I'd eaten more pork than I'd seen in my whole life, and I'd answered my question of the first night, of, “how far into the prairie do you have to walk so people at the house can't hear you scream?”

The answer is one and a half pastures.

I held the Last Samurai and thought about these things, all these first moments, and more. The first fire and Ulysses the goat and how it felt when I emptied my lungs into the sky and the day I showed Michael pictures of my trip in South America. How I traveled 3000

miles on buses in South America, how I was bruised and broken after so many miles, how I came to the farm that summer for help and healing and home.

I thought about how rough a pig's back is, and how rough your hands are when you use them, and how rough it is to be ripped wide open.

These memories became my mantra, my list of encounters for coping with the pig loss, my only reasons for believing what no one wants to hear about death, that it's okay, or even meant to be.

The morning of the piglets' death, we talked about childbirth.

We were gathered around the breakfast table. It was a worn farm-stained cheap metal foldout thing that had seen us through the summer, five make-believe farmers holding hands and sharing silence and crying and laughing and spitting food into each others' mouths and eating until someone got sick. Three times a day. Meals so square. Conversation squarer.

That morning was no exception. As one of the interns flicked a grape across the dishes into Michael's milk glass, another said, "I got a letter. My cousin had a baby."

None of us knew a thing about babies.

"Babies scare me," I said, "How do you know you're ready? How can you ever be ready? So much responsibility—an entire life in your hands—who is ever prepared to do that?"

"You don't prepare for life," said Michael, "you live it."

Thirty minutes later we were all sprinting to Upper Barn, drawn to the chorus of pig screams. Michael was over the side and in the pen within seconds. No hesitation. He patted

the pregnant sow's belly, he cooed and soothed her, and he nudged away the dead piglets and caught the last one coming out, and passed her to me.

None of us was prepared to deliver that morning.

Michael was elbow deep in blood and shouting directions to me, things about towels and goat milk and shaking.

I took the dying piglet and started cooing, humming songs in Spanish, without pausing once to marvel at my sudden appointment to motherhood.

It was 100 degrees out and the wind blew 100 miles per hour and the dust caught in my lungs. My lungs that were pumping, inflate exflate repeat. I was acutely aware of this motion.

I wanted The Last Samurai to be breathing so badly. I imagined her small chest rising and falling until well after the umbilical cord stopped beating. I pushed where I imagined her lungs to be. I rubbed and rubbed and picked her up and shook her once. I hugged the body to my chest, wanting her to move or scream or bite again, until I realized I could feel it stiffening. It was the closest to death I'd ever been.

I set her gently back on the towel.

The problem was that I'd started to imagine a life with her. I'd thought about how farm life would change with a premature piglet to nurture, about how the other interns and I would have to schedule feeding times, about how we'd let her run around the house and sleep on the couch and share meals with us. It was the hope, the imagination, the potential, that hurt most in the end.

After she died I carried her to the bucket with the rest of the piglets. I held onto her the whole way, onto the idea of her that is, the idea of her living again. Like her mother, like myself, like everything that had ever lived and breathed on the farm.

It was the closest to life I'd ever been.

A two-month-old piglet, if hoisted just off the ground by its hind legs, will wail like a dying child. If it's caught in the corner of its pen—where the barn that stores its troughs and slop meets the palates leaned against one another like a fence—its cries will echo and ricochet off the walls to produce such a din as to wake the dead children its wailing mimics. It's rendered rather immobile once off the ground. Any muscle it could claim at this young age is found in its legs, meaning it will squirm against its captor's hands but go nowhere. Five minutes of frantic wailing and it will settle into silence, as if five minutes of fighting is all it's got.

This is the type of knowledge I valued that summer. Not that I spent my days chasing piglets; in fact, I never caught any, I never could, and I only saw one captured once. I was down in the chicken coop, shoveling shit and poking the hay to check for rattlers and counting eggs when I heard a high-pitched squeal from up the hill that turned into a drawn-out wail that became frantic, panicked screaming that set my heart pounding. I sprinted up the prairie slope. Michael had a piglet in his hands.

“Just wanted to remind them who's boss,” he laughed. The four piglets in the pen scurried about his feet, grunting and squealing. “And I wanted you to hear,” he added, “*this* is what a piglet sounds like.”

I picked up piglet knowledge and experience and vocabulary gradually over the coming weeks. This I think is one of the most beautiful phenomena of life: that we can, in any place, under any circumstances, find things to learn.

I arrived on the farm in the hands of a retired Vincentian priest. Padre Pablo had recommended I work with my hands that summer because after South America, I felt I couldn't do anything else.

He worked in an office at my school. I had visited, shy but wanting advice on what to do. Padre Pablo had grabbed my hands with his own and looked me in the eyes and said, "why don't you go live on a farm?"

At the time, it seemed like the obvious thing to do. He made the suggestion without a shadow of question or doubt on his face so I answered that way, without question or doubt. I said "okay," and a week later, found myself on County Road 11 in a vivid and foreign landscape.

Pablo would visit four weeks into the summer on the farm, and the first thing he would ask about would be my hands.

"How are they?" he asked, clasping his own, "how are they after four weeks on a farm?"

The truth was they were a beautiful sight. They were callused from a week of digging a pit to roast a pig; the nails were chipped and worn from prying open buckets and barrels; the palms were rough, like sandpaper, from all the lifting and carrying; and I had two matching, identical scars, about an inch beneath the ring-finger knuckle on the back of each hand, the left mark from the time I was dared to climb to the roof of the barn and I slid to the

edge, and the right from the time I was pressed against the barn door, pinned to the wood by the goat.

In silence I approached Pablo and held out my hands, palms up. He took them, rubbed his own rough fingers over my palms, flipped them over and traced the still red circles beneath my knuckles.

“You’ve been working,” he stated the obvious. A pause. “And you are alive.”

When he was done I took them back and held them together in my lap. His words ran circles in my head.

You’ve been working. I traced the faded marks on my knuckles. *I am working.*

And, I am alive.

I dug the grave for the Last Samurai and the other piglets under stormy skies. I hummed country songs I didn’t know the words to as I worked, relishing the touch of the shovel handle in my hands. I sweated that they might rest in peace.

The bucket of bodies was heavy. In the few hours it had taken the Last Samurai to die, the other piglets had swollen to twice their original size. They felt stiff, but the limbs continued to flop around, and the blood pooled around the bodies made a sweet squelching sound as I pulled them out, one by one, to drop in the hole. I wanted to cry, until I realized I only thought that was what I was supposed to do. Cry for things gone and dead. I wasn’t sad though. I thought I should be, but I wasn’t. I was just there.

I gripped the splintery shovel handle again, stabbed the dry earth, and poured one scoop of sand over the bodies. The motion made me freeze. Pigs and farms and babies and

burials were all foreign things to me, but after my time in South America, I was no stranger to panic. I couldn't think. I couldn't breathe.

My muscles tightened and I sank slowly to my knees before the grave. The other farmers were gathered around in a circle, holding hands, watching. No one had wanted to touch the bodies. I had begged to bear the bodies. And now I was intensely, intensely afraid, afraid of doing the thing and walking away, afraid that it would all fade with the blood stains on my hands once the grave was covered. I didn't want to cover this thing that had happened, this morning where I had witnessed and participated in a thing so glorious, so grand, and for a sick second I wanted to grab the Last Samurai and take her with me and hold her every day because I knew no other way of holding on to that feeling.

Michael took the shovel from my hands, pushed the blade into the pile of sand, and dumped one shovelful over the hole. Silently, he passed it on.

Round and round the circle we passed the tool, sandy contribution after sandy contribution to the thing before us.

I thought, shovel, shovel. Memorize, memorize.

I was afraid to forget.

Later I would sit in the shed with Jaws, the white cat, and flip through a journal with notes from the beginning of summer.

“The trick to catching a piglet,” I'd written, “is to get on its level. Lower yourself to the ground. Don't be afraid of the mud. Don't be afraid of its dying child screams. Go for the hooves.”

At least, this is what I think the writing said. I can't remember and I'll never know, because I hadn't read four pages of the description of the piglets—not the ones that died at birth but the ones that had been running around underfoot all summer—before the phlegm was building in my throat and I was flushed with the strain and sorrow of that last heartbeat, that last breath—

I ripped the pages out of my stained, flower pattern notebook and marched to the donkey pasture. If the piglets couldn't live, I didn't want my words about them to survive, either.

I pulled myself awkwardly over the post between streams of barbed wire. Woodrow and Augustus, named for characters from the Western *Lonesome Dove*, stood by their empty trough, waiting expectantly.

“No burnt and expired popcorn this time,” I said, thrusting the pages in their faces.

The wind picked up, and the pages were ripped from my fingers. Woodrow snapped at me; I jumped back, reeling in his donkey breath, and slammed into the barbed wire that would leave cuts on my back that would last for weeks, but not as long as the remorse when I realized that everything I'd ever written about the pigs had been swept away in the wind.

Nothing is as true as life and death. There are no adjectives to describe it. No need or desire to judge or decide or extend any sort of authoritative vision over the thing. I couldn't if I'd wanted to.

Minutes after we'd shoveled all the sand back over the hole, the sky thundered. It hadn't rained in eight weeks but eight minutes later the heavens were dumping the tears for the piglets I would never forget, tears that turned into hail that burned my shoulders like

bullets when I walked away from the grave, walked into the prairie pastures, ran across the open spaces like I was running away from something, from the stinging truth of a dead thing in my hands.

I threw up my arms and imagined the storm pounding something into me. I imagined giant bruises forming on my soul and couldn't even think, *this is how it was supposed to happen*, because nothing is ever supposed to happen.

I ran into the rain a long time, a pasture and a half, before turning back. I was drenched through my bones. I trudged back to Upper barn, back to the pigpen, shivering in the cold, to watch the sow sleep and shiver in the mud and wonder what had happened.

There are ten ways of looking at a farm:

I. Dance inside a shed. Where untold skeletons clatter in the root cellar beneath while white cats prowl like sharks above. The rain on the tin roof is violent, but with subtle romance. The cats fit their paws into boot marks on the floor left by drunken two-step stomping and I wonder what it'd be like to sleep here. To live here. To stay under a thick, thick blanket of stars stitched with vulnerability. Every night. To call the place my home, forever.

II. Look from a front porch. Watch the paint God has spilt on the sky seep into a sunset beyond the trees. Let sounds from the farmhouse spill out, full volume vinyl records screaming bluegrass bad day away, the sonorous version of bloody hands plucking instrument strings to show how dogs run. You better keep your heart young because this porch will be here when you're creaky bone bad back old but it's a stoop with a ferocious view that only a child could ever fully wrap her head around. So stay a child a while.

III. Drive in the terrorist truck. The young farmer had crashed it once. Rolled it in the prairie ditch, took off both the doors. Sit in it by the south pasture and look at the animals. Coffee cups full of sand on the dashboard obstruct the view of the donkeys I'd shoot with my shotgun if I role played on the farm, if names were truth, if something spoken could dictate how a farmer spends out his days of work.

IV Once a week, weed the garden: I sit in the garden at sunset and watch the seeds I planted come to life. Come to life, and not on their own. A toad hops across my foot through the basil and moves the leaves. The plants rustle together in the evening wind and it sounds like whispering. I speak back, lips barely parted to murmur, swooshing sounds to match the hum and growth and buzz of the garden life. I think about why we're here—to plant seeds to one day grow, to water seeds already planted. To measure ourselves against the length of a cucumber and see how much space it takes to grow.

V. Notes from an outhouse: In the outhouse you built yourself there's a haiku on every square of toilet paper. Leave words where others drop bombs—your gift to the people you leave behind. Something like:

On this farm we build
finite things, except for the
shitter, forever.

VI. Why I sleep in the Civil War Tent: On the nauseating nights I like to sleep here, old resurrected construction of war canvas and wood beams. I peer at my hands in the dark and wonder which blood stains are scabs and which cuts are new. Fresh. It's the nights when not even piglets will come to my dreams, I want to be woken by the roosters because that will stop the thinking, so I stay outside, canvas stretched thin between me and the stars, and

when the wind blows, I imagine trees or people talking, whispering things, like, maybe things will be better tomorrow, so sleep now, sleep.

VII. We're all covered in something: Slop dirt compost sweat sand someone else's spit spilt juice mayonnaise moldy milk Billy goat sneeze corn starch creek water dog hair egg yolk donkey piss salsa stains refried beans drunken throw up exploding cans drip coffee chalk marks scabs scars bruises blood bits of gravel bits of dreads spider webs and dust and oil and tomato paste and tears and muddy smears and old flour and broken bits of hardware from the graveyard and ripped shirts, and soapy clothes, and splatters from dog food, and I hope it never washes off.

VIII. When you witness death: Death was so much stickier than all the glorified movies I'd seen. This is what I learned from my time with the pigs. My life was shaken by the event and revived, revived in a way that shaking the dying piglet failed to make any difference at all. Nothing is ever supposed to happen. It's not supposed to rain in the summer and piglets aren't supposed to die and no one is ever supposed to feel lost or afraid or alone, but these things happen all the time to everyone. That doesn't make it okay or even necessary it just makes it what it is, it is what it is so we go on, we do our chores we try to sleep in tents at night we do things like this:

IX. Walk to the top of a hill: This is what it means to hold onto a life. Run up sloped grounds fly over cacti and to the tune of cow bells gather at the top. Gather in a circle, hold hands. Hold it all within yourself within this space and this is what you might see. Worn dirt paths between barns and pigpens and gardens and tents and people. Trails of lights across trails of buckets and waste and feed and everything that makes the farm a farm. Stand at the top of the hill, scream and cry and lift out your arms only so you can realize how big it all is,

how big we all are, that we can never hold everything or even anything so stop trying, stop creating what doesn't need to be created and learn to love what already is.

X. The final way of looking at a farm is from right here: Right here, right now, in front of me. This thing, this feeling, this list I composed the morning the piglets died, this final act of gratitude to all the places that shook my life that rainless summer. It is all the things I could never say. It's what I hold inside me now, like I wished to hold the Last Samurai forever. Privately, quietly, madly but in silence, and I think this kind of love isn't supposed to happen but it did, but it does. Eight weeks into a summer internship and I'd already dealt heavily with words my whole life, but there isn't a single word that's exactly what I wanted to say that morning, or exactly what I want to say right now.

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APPENDIX: MAPS

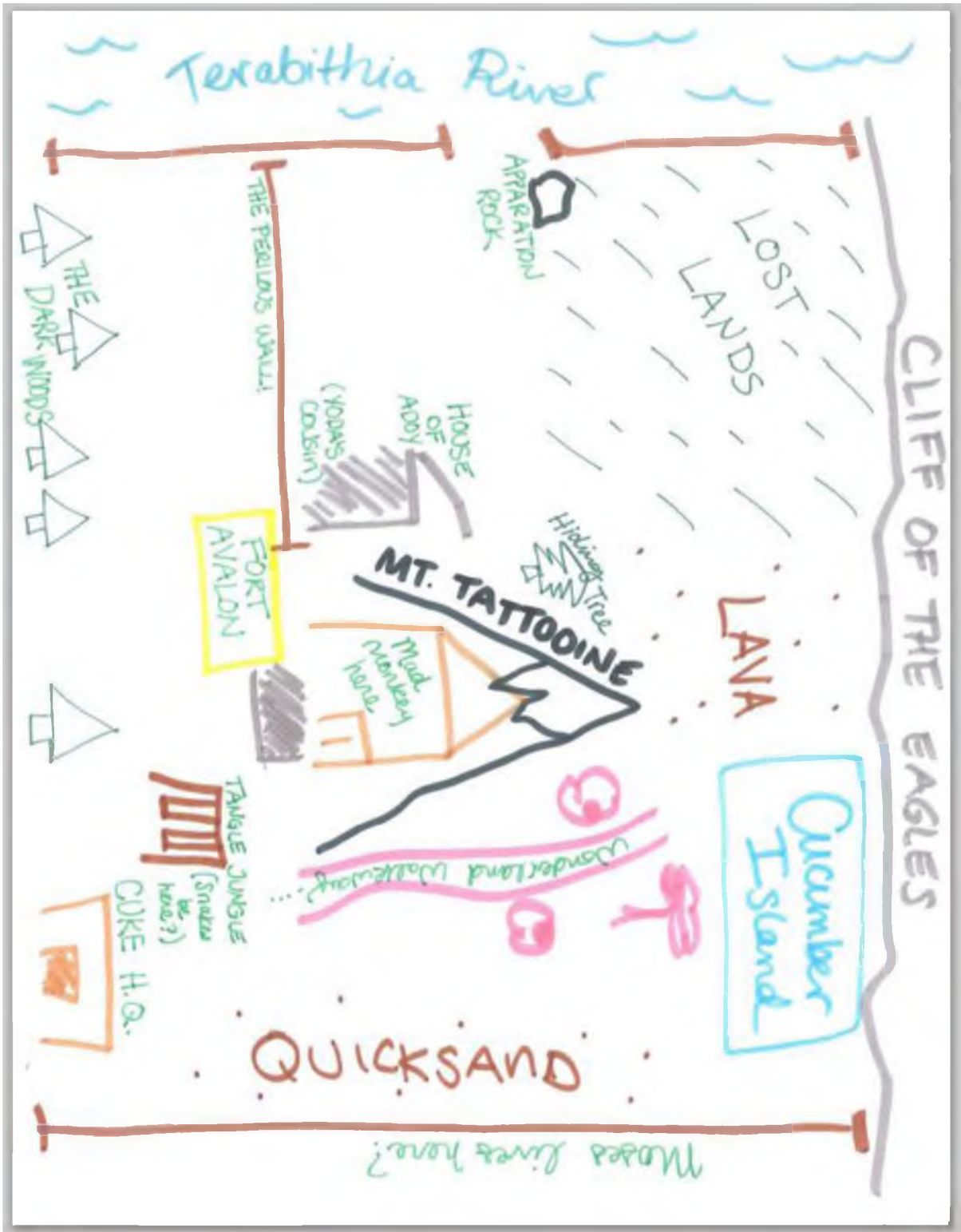
Bainbridge Island

Cucumber Island

Journey through South America

Life of a Can





JOURNEY THROUGH SOUTH AMERICA



