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10-1-2012

# Chile: Original Travel Writing

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## Recommended Citation

Breseman, Kelsey, "Chile: Original Travel Writing" (2012). *2012 AHS Capstone Projects*. Paper 26.  
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# CHILE

BY KELSEY BRESEMAN



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# INTRODUCTION

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This time last year, I woke with the sun. If it was a walking day, I awoke in a tent with my father, packed camp, slung a pack on my back, and walked for miles down unfamiliar roads. On farm days, I woke up in a stranger's house and tried to learn, over breakfast, whether we would be chopping wood, keeping bees, pulling weeds, or building sheds. The road became my home, and each day brought challenging communication, physical exertion, and daily personal satisfaction: I was doing useful, physical work and feeling healthy and alive.

These days, I wake up in a dorm. I leave the whitewashed walls of my fourth-floor room to eat a hot breakfast that has been prepared for me in the cafeteria. My laptop accompanies me everywhere. If I have time, I walk in the half-acre of woods. And though my days are comfortable and my mind is busy, I often feel as though I am looking for something more, just out of my reach. When I sit down to write, the familiar discomfort of journey returns.

It is an odd process, now, to write about who I was and what I did a year ago: it seems like someone much younger who took a semester on leave of absence from school to backpack through Chile. And though I decided while still traveling that I would write about my adventures, I never expected the level of reflection and self-examination that writing these stories has required. Analysis of themes, foils and foreshadowing— those techniques I used to analyze literature in high school English class— have cropped up where I least expected them: in real life accounting of my own true stories. I found myself writing about real-life character foils in *Candado*, comedic irony in *Chiloé*, and denouement in *Cabo Froward*, all under the metaphoric device of physical journey in a coming-of-age story.

What's odd is that while I was traveling, I didn't recognize these situations as fitting into the patterns that Literature had taught me to notice. Even when I began to write my stories, I assumed that I would have to write everything; my journal entries, letters, and blog posts would all have to become part of the long story. That, I thought, was the only way to give my readers the taste of meaning I had experienced. But when I sat down to write I was overwhelmed: how to convey three months of transformative experience? So I began by writing the first stories that leapt to my fingers. And

as I wrote, I learned to skip the boring “and then we went here and then we went there” of my blog posts. In the words of Sven Birkerts (*The Art of Time in Memoir*, pp3), “There is in fact no faster way to smother the core meaning of a life, its elusive threads and connections, than with the heavy blanket of narrated event .... Memoir begins not with the event but with the intuition of meaning.” In the process of writing this anthology, I often struggled to peel away the merely factual to expose what feels true about my experiences. To this end, I began to set limits: I wasn’t going to include any pictures with my text; if I couldn’t describe it, then it didn’t belong in my writing. My readers shouldn’t feel the need to follow along with a map. I needed to show my emotions rather than telling the readers what they were, and if I couldn’t show my character feeling anything, then I wasn’t writing a very interesting story. It has become my work to rediscover in each story who I was and who I became through each experience.

By making my work more personal, I believe I have made my work more relatable: though you, reader, have likely not hopped in strangers’ cars or walked to the literal end of the earth, you have almost certainly felt a longing to feel more alive and connected to the physical world, have known the loneliness of feeling separate from the people around you.

In writing and traveling, there is much uncertainty, and as both character and writer, I have to push forward through challenges despite unknown outcomes. In *Cabo Froward*, I ford a river: “The water was freezing cold, but my legs numbed quickly as I strode out towards where the waves broke in the water. Thighs, hips, up to my waist. With bare feet, I felt my way over the uneven pebbles of the Straits. Just past the point where Rick had stopped, I hesitated, weighing the likelihood that the ocean floor would continue its gradual downward slope. But a few more steps forward, I began slowly to emerge. Standing on the sandbar, a third of the way across the mouth of the river, I grinned and yelled back to Rick, ‘Now do you believe me?’” Short of breath in cold water, uncertain of my path, my mind clears. I triumph when I emerge. And though I pause, doubt, plan my path, and hesitate before re-entering the river, the act of the crossing to that first sandbar gives me the confidence to bluff my way across the remaining two thirds of the river.

My writing follows the same bluff-and-hesitate approach, which though uncertain, eventually leads to accomplishment. I write down what I remember, then come back. I analyze my work, revise to emphasize theme. I

get stuck. I come back and write what I remember again, and the stories grow out of the themes I cast on them. The real stories emerge, transforming, surprising me and forcing me to re-evaluate myself as a character. As I transform as a character, I change also as a writer: I am able to look more closely at my stories and pull out the thread of emotion hidden behind the narrative.

This hunger for some kind of transformation is at the root of my journey. Joan Marler, quoted in *The Art of the Pilgrimage* (pp47), wrote of women embarking on journeys: "First there is the personal restlessness, the feeling of being nowhere in the place they are now; then there is the need to feel something deeper than the surface glare of things, a longing to be somewhere else where that is possible." This feeling of reaching for something deep, something raw is inherent in my travels as well: I try to let the visceral nature of physical challenge bleed through into my life experiences. Henry David Thoreau, echoing my thoughts on visceral experience, wrote in his journal (1852), "We do not commonly live our life out and full; we do not fill our pores with our blood; we do not inspire and expire fully and entirely enough .... We live but a fraction of our life. Why do we not let on the flood, raise the gates, and set all our wheels in motion?" The need to feel, to move, to engage in something beyond everyday bounds, is overwhelming in me. I seek out the strain of muscles in splitting wood or hoeing a field, the cold shock of ocean water, the blistering heat of hours' walk down an exposed asphalt road. I am rewarded by mental clarity from the physical sensation of being alive. More than any other drive, this search for clarity from discomfort drives my person and my character through the stories.

None of these themes are unique to the experience of travel. Travel is an amplifier of the everyday: as a hungry, walking traveler tears into a loaf of bread with unique appreciation for the same doughy carbohydrates eaten at home, so does she feel more acutely the fear and joy of meeting new people; the sense of loneliness of an itinerant lifestyle; the physical realities of terrain and weather. As Sloane Crosley says in her introduction to *The Best American Travel Writing 2011* (ppxx), "the moment the writer takes leave of his or her normal life, everything falls under the purview of new experience. Nothing is safe from examination, including the writer." Especially the writer. Under the lens of travel, the writer is faced continuously with new situations within which to act and react, and therefore continuously learns new things about herself.

One of my goals with writing this piece was to make my travel experiences meaningful to people who don't know me and who aren't likely to embark on a journey similar to mine. I want to bring you my adventures- the rawness of physical travel, through the changing lens of a young woman in a foreign land. In seeking out this meaning, I have once again pushed through my own sense of comfort and insulation, reached beyond the whitewashed walls of my dorm room. In the discomfort of uncovering my personal journey, I have once again come home.

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# CANDADO

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The warm smell of vegetable stew was overwhelming in the warm air. Alondra and I entered through the mud room, laughing and talking, switching off between Spanish and English. Both our faces were bright from the fresh air. Ale, at the stove, smiled and waved to a chair. “*Siéntese!*” Sit! She passed a lime to Alondra to cut, then opened the oven for a cursory glance: I spied warming meat-filled pastries, *empanadas*.

Spanish guitar drifted in from the living room, where Juan must have been home from work. “Kelsey,” he called, “*Conoces esta canción?*” Do you know this song? And the chords reshaped into the intro to “Dust in the Wind”. I walked through to the living room to sing the verse, while Rick passed into the kitchen. I could hear Ale check the oven again, offering to my father, “Sit, please”, and Alondra joined the singing, her mellow alto merging with mine.

Rick also politely ignored the proffered chair; he rattled dishes around, setting the table, tasting the bread. “So much lime!” He teased Alondra.

“Never enough lime!” She declared.

Seba hovered near the doorway, his skinny frame matching the black-and-white Don Quixote on the poster beside him. He nodded to Juan as the song ended. “*Tio.*” Uncle.

Juan responded in kind: “*Sobrino.*”

Rosy-cheeked Tita, appearing from the hallway with a quiet, long-lashed baby in her arms, smiled and explained for my benefit. “It is what we say, what my father says, to the man who is my *pareja* but we are not married.”

Juan was already distracted by baby Lúa, his granddaughter. He pulled at her toes and cooed, “*Mi pollo regalón!*” My prize chicken!

Over the baby’s head, Juan and Seba began to discuss business: Seba wanted to talk about the quinoa farm he hoped to start, and wanted Juan’s advice. Tita, though so short as to stand below her father and her baby’s father, interjecting practicalities into their conversation, supportive, but reminding them of their inexperience with any kind of farming.

Disengaged from the conversation, I reached out my index finger for the red-cheeked Lúa to hold. Her soft, clean fingers curled around my calloused one, contrasting with my scraped knuckles and the dirt under my nails.



She released her hold, and I wandered away. I passed Alondra on her way out of the kitchen and joined Ale by the sink.

She gave me a pile of carrots to chop and began to speak in Spanish. “I’m so glad you could come to help Alondra build her garden! Now that she is starting college, she doesn’t have time to start it on her own. But she is so excited to build one, just like the farms she helped on in New Zealand.”

I smiled. Alondra was my age, and my temperament: just as I was taking time out of college to wander Chile, she had taken a year off before college to travel around New Zealand.

“It’s really freeing,” I commented, “taking time away from what you’re supposed to do, to go have an adventure.” I paused, then added, “I think you have to find something difficult or frightening to do; it’s not enough just to go to school and graduate.”

Ale nodded. “I was the same way; I used to hitchhike when I was your age, and both of my daughters are adventurers. Tita took time out of college too. It was supposed to be just half a year. She went to Brazil with some friends from school.” She turned away to scoop vegetables into a pot. “But then she met a boy. She wrote home, said she was staying the rest of the year.”

Ale turned back to me, smiling conspiratorially. “Of course, you have your lover, who was online earlier.” I looked away, smiling. The whole household had been introduced to Jon via Skype earlier that day.

Ale continued. “But Tita, she had a time! She hitchhiked all over Brazil with her boy. He taught her to climb palm trees to pick the coconuts. Then she came home, went back to school.

“She almost finished, too! She was one month away from her architect’s degree when Lúa came along. But then she came back home again, because that was a time to be with family.”

I looked up from the carrots, my forehead wrinkling. “Tita didn’t get to finish her degree?”

Ale laughed. “It doesn’t matter. She can go back to school and start over again if she wants to, but she has her baby now. They aren’t hiring many architects these days anyway.”

Ale turned away to pull the *empanadas* out of the oven.

I wanted to ask more, but the family had all begun to follow their noses into the kitchen for dinner.

Juan came in and kissed his wife on the cheek while Ale, smiling, swatted him away.

Juan was unperturbed. “Wine? *Vino?*” He pulled out a bottle without waiting for an answer and began to fill the glasses Rick had set out on the big round table.

Tita, holding her baby, sat at the table. She motioned to Rick and me, “Sit, sit!”

Alondra took a seat, and Ale and I began to bring food over to the table.

At the round, wooden table in the warm kitchen, everyone began to eat and talk. Every once in a while, in deference to my need to translate for Rick, Ale or Tita would interrupt to remind whomever was speaking to slow down and speak more clearly. Rick, missing most of the conversation despite my best efforts, took baby Lúa onto his lap. He was content with feeding her pieces of his dinner.

Tita, watching, leaned over to me and spoke in smiling Spanish. “You have a boyfriend, right?” She nodded decisively. “Good. Your father will have a grandchild soon enough.”

I turned away quickly to hide my surprised giggle before regaining control. With a small smile, I turned back. “Soon enough.”

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# PICHILEMU

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When Rick was twenty and traveling in Mexico, his only Spanish phrase was “*Tengo sed. Dos cervezas, por favor.*” I’m thirsty. Two beers, please. At fifty-five, my father’s Spanish hadn’t improved much. But he has always been open to instruction and even correction by his own kids. And since we had three months of Chilean wandering in front of us, he was particularly eager to accept Spanish instruction from me.

He had been learning surprisingly well; on long walks, I’d have him translate the names of bridges and roads. At farms, he would write down useful phrases on his hand, like “please pass the bread” or “can I help you with that?”

That morning, we had left the farm, hefting backpacks a couple of miles to the bus stop, then staring out the window as we approached the coast.

Pichilemu is a surfer’s paradise, but it was off-season. With our backpacks on, we wandered the mostly-empty streets, picking up tourist information brochures to search out maps, planning the next day’s hike down the coast, buying loaves of bread for our next travels. At a marketplace I found a stall of books in Spanish: mostly children’s books, paperbacks, sheathed in clear plastic slipcovers, spread in piles over a folding table.

“Rick,” I called him over. “Want to try one of these?”

We picked over some trickier translations: *Treasure Island*, *Harry Potter*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and settled on one with Roald Dahl-type illustrations.

“Now you can read me a story,” I joked, counting out payment from Rick’s wallet.

We decided to pass part of the evening watching a soccer game; local bars advertised *U. Católica vs. Santiago*.

“When I was in Turkey last February,” Rick told me, “One of our best nights was the time we decided to go out to a sports bar. We all sat on folding chairs with the locals, and everyone was yelling at the players. It was really great.”

I nodded, just then recalling that he had gone to Turkey; I’d been busy with classwork on the other side of the country at the time.

We showed up to our choice of sports bar a little early for the game, and the bar was empty. Supposing that the local sports fans would filter in soon, we took seats at a high table and began to chew on loaves of bread we'd bought. The bartender walked over, and Rick began to order a single bottle of beer. "You can have some of mine--"

I held up two fingers, addressing the bartender directly. "*Dos cervezas, por favor.*"

Rick smiled wryly across the table at me.

"I've been in college these past two years, you know," I said, inclining my head quizzically towards him.

As the bartender brought us our two bottles of beer, Rick returned, "Okay, but you still don't have to finish that if you don't want to." And we settled back into our seats.

The television on the far wall showed five minutes until the game. I pulled out our new book. "Want to start on this?"

"Sure," Rick acquiesced. In an exaggerated accent, he began to read, translating the words he knew.

There were many words he didn't know, but a surprising number that he did. He'd look up at me between sentences. "Something about the library."

"No," I'd say, "The librarian."

And he'd look back to the illustration. "Oh, the librarian! And she's sitting at her desk."

"Close," I'd say, "Reading at her desk."

And we'd nod, take sips of our beer, and continue on to the next sentence.

About ten minutes in, we realized that the soccer game had started and that we were still the only patrons of the bar. Although we had been hoping for local color, this was peaceful: just us and the elderly bartender, who in his dark wool sweater and seat behind his counter, blended into the surroundings. He was content to watch the game.

We began to watch as well. The game was slow, so I sipped my drink idly.

Rick gestured to the screen. "Did you see that?" Rick asked me. "What's your player doing way up there?" He pointed to a blue and white player, assigning U. Catolica as "my" team.

I shot him a look. "What do you mean, my player?" And then, looking back at the screen, "Watch who's talking! Your goalie has to get out of the goalposts if he's going to stop that ball."

We went back and forth, accepting the teams as our own and jeering appropriately.

Behind us, I could hear the bartender chuckle quietly at our animation. We didn't care; we were busy arguing about a corner kick my team was making on the screen.

"Watch it- watch it- watch it- save it— oh, no!" Rick threw back his head in dramatic defeat, as I raised my hands to call out along with the announcer:

"GOOOAL!"

Laughing, I settled back into my wooden seat in the empty bar, savoring the restful evening. I didn't even protest when Rick reached across the table, past his own half-full bottle, to take a sip of my beer.

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# LAGO RANCO

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Lago Ranco, in Rick's and my estimation, could be circumnavigated on foot in four days. We bused away from the coast a few short hours to reach the lake, nestled in the foothills of the Andes. It was the first of November when we set out, so we walked in springtime sunshine. The hours went quickly, our packs light on our backs, the expanse of the lake to our right, our mindsets contemplative. We were reluctant to admit it when darkness began to fold across the sky. Our minds and bodies were tired from hours of walking, but the walking was far too pleasant to stop.

Peering into the woods to our left, we nonchalantly rejected a beautiful campsite ensconced in moss.

"It's still too early to stop," I judged aloud.

We walked through a town, then started down a road which looked like it should lead to a deserted beach, but turned around.

"What if somebody lives there? We wouldn't want to walk all this way back."

The road twisted away from the lake and up a hill, and we kept walking into the twilight. Finally, the light failing, we had to admit to ourselves that it was time to make camp.

But there was no campsite. No likely clearings or empty woods. Fields which we hoped were deserted were, upon closer inspection, adjoined to protective farmhouses.

As I began to consider our options, a small delivery truck passed us. It stopped, then rolled backwards so that the driver's side window was level with us. The driver, a dark-skinned smiling man, leaned out of the window and offered us a ride.

This was not unusual; we'd done a lot of hitchhiking on this trip. In Chile, hitchhiking is accepted as a useful mode of travel: relatively safe, and common enough that one of every two cars we held our thumbs out to was happy to pick us up.

The experience of hitchhiking is an intentional encounter between absolute strangers. It's a situation of mutual trust: you, as the hitchhiker, are asking a complete stranger for a favor. And they, out of kindness or curiosity,

acquiesce. So from the moment the car stops, you are, in a way, indebted to the driver.

And yet, “don’t get in the car with a stranger” is a fundamental rule, ingrained since early childhood, and there are basic safety concerns to consider. You, as the hitchhiker, can only assume that the driver will drive safely, that they will stop when and where you want to get out. And they, in deciding to stop for you, have guessed you to be harmless enough to invite you in.

The two of us hopped in, squeezed together on the bench seat with the driver, pinioned by our own packs- but bright-eyed, friendly. I was wary. I was grateful.

“Where are you headed?” The driver asked in Spanish. He was younger than Rick, but snaggle-toothed and wrinkled. His smile was constant.

The question was addressed to Rick, as always, since he was older and male. However, as the Spanish-speaking one, I leaned forward, then faltered. I was unprepared to answer. There weren’t many options; it had been the same gravel road for hours, and I didn’t have enough of a map to know of any turnoff. I pointed ahead, the way we had been traveling. Fumbling, I spoke: “Um, that way.” Switching to English, I entreated Rick, “Where should we tell him we’re going?”

Rick shrugged. “Twenty kilometers up the road?”

I frowned, discarding his input. I couldn’t help but think of stories I’d read, stories of hitchhikers too clearly vagabonds, who had been picked up and never seen again. “We should give a specific destination. But there isn’t anywhere labeled on our map for miles.” A town, perhaps the suggestion of someone waiting for us somewhere, would be safer.

The driver, ignoring our conversation in English, looked over at us and smiled bigger. “Just that way? Okay, you tell me when.”

I frowned, uncomfortable, but buried my uneasiness below a layer of logic. Everyone we’d met so far, particularly while hitchhiking, had been kind to us. And Rick didn’t seem concerned in the slightest. But I had only caught rides in daytime before, and had always known where we were going, at what point we’d want to get out.

I stared out the window, looking for a likely place to sleep. We bumped up the hill, through patchy forests and past farmhouses. Down a long, straight road, over a river, onto pavement. A long stretch with no view of the lake. The windows of the cab were rolled up, and the warm stillness of the stale air

wouldn't let my thoughts resolve. We'd been walking all day, and I was tired, brain and body.

We drove in silence for maybe half an hour, me watching for potential campsites, Rick dozing a bit after the long day's walk, and our driver just smiling and driving. Every once in a while, he would name a waterfall or stream as we crossed over, nodding at us until I murmured distracted appreciation.

Dusk gathered deeper at the edges of the road. Fifteen minutes more. I considered asking to get out, improvising a place to sleep at any place on the roadside.

Then, as he switched on his headlights, the driver looked over at me again, grinning as always. "So, you don't know where you want to go?"

I sat still, not knowing a safe way to answer. Rick was no help; translating back and forth is too slow for useful communication.

He continued without waiting for me. "I know a place to camp near here."

Relieved, I asked, "A campsite? A real campground?"

"No," he replied, "It's just a place I know. You camp there for free. But it is near here."

This sounded perfect to me. I translated to Rick. Rick sat up and nodded.

"Sure," I said, "That sounds great. How close is it?"

"Very close. I will take you."

We kept driving for ten minutes, and my wariness began to well up again. I considered asking how far exactly 'close' was, but I couldn't think of a way to phrase it that wouldn't be rude.

Finally, a road junction appeared. Our driver looked over at us, concern on his face. "It is off of the main road. But you don't pay a thing. I turn here?"

Quick decision. Leave the main road? I hesitated, then nodded. "Okay." I turned to Rick as we rounded the corner. "He says it's right down here."

Rick raised an eyebrow. "Mmkay." He watched out the window into the growing darkness.

A long five minutes followed, Rick and I exchanging increasingly uneasy glances. Our map showed only one or two roads around this lake, but we had passed many more roads on the drive, and we realized it had been quite a long time since we'd known exactly where we were, or even seen the lake.



We crossed a bridge, and our smiling driver turned to us. “It is a very short walk. You can go from here.” He didn’t slow down. “Actually, this trail up here will be better. Wait.”

Thirty seconds longer. And finally, the truck rolled to a stop. Our driver’s smile was bigger than ever. “Here! Right down that trail. You will love it.”

The door opened easily, and we stepped out dazed into the night, returning our backpacks to our shoulders. The driver, smiling as always, drove off down the road, just missing my delayed words of thanks. We walked down the path through the woods.

And within two minutes, the path opened up. A fire pit lay waiting by a flat patch of grass, perfect for a tent. And beyond, a wide and stony river flowed cool in the growing moonlight down into the vast, open expanse of Lago Ranco.

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# DON JORGE'S STORIES

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Our hosts were a sweet family of three. Martín, the seven-year-old son, was a fountain of excitement and mischievous kindness. Somehow, his unbridled energy was always channeled by his elderly parents' gentle guidance; on the farm, he chased around the rabbits and chickens, chattering happily and teaching Rick and I to pick up the harried hens, chasing them around the coop until they were cornered and exhausted.

We had just finished our picnic dinner, the conclusion to a day out hiking. Martín was full of energy as always, excited to be outside with his father and us, his new friends. Rick stood, at the end of a meal, to explore another trail he had noticed. I remained at the table, passing the thermos of hot water and packets of tea across the picnic table. Martín picked up a stick and began to dig a hole in the ground. His face was determined, and all of his concentration went into the effort.

"Are you going to dig a tunnel?" I asked, smiling down at him.

"No!" Martín replied, frowning at me. "That's impossible. It would take way too long." He went back to his digging.

Don Jorge smiled, the lines around his eyes crinkling. "Some prisoners dug a really good tunnel a few years ago in Santiago."

I looked up, as eager for a story as any child. Out the corner of my eye, I could see Martín perk up as well, though he kept working. "How?" I asked, settling into a listening pose.

"There are two great prison escapes in the history of Santiago. In the first one, prisoners organized themselves and dug a tunnel.

"They dug down out of the cells and into the city of Santiago. They worked in coordinated effort every night for over a year, digging whenever no one was looking. This was around the time that the metro system was being built, so the prisoners had to keep well informed about the tunnels' locations, and at least once had to alter their course to avoid discovery.

"Finally, they finished the tunnel, and in one night, over a hundred prisoners escaped from their well-built, ventilated tunnel. They emerged separately and slowly, and were successfully met and spirited away in minibuses, not to be recaptured. The final tunnel measured two hundred meters, and nobody ever found out what they did with all the dirt."

Don Jorge smiled at my amazement. “Everyone said the city should have just hired them. They could have built the metro! They made a better tunnel, and faster than the engineers.”

I laughed and shook my head. “They must have learned engineering really quickly in prison,” I joked, thinking of the half-finished engineering degree I’d left on hold in order to go adventuring. “But really, it’s just like a movie!”

Martín, his little dirt pit completely outdone by the story, stood up and walked over to our table. “Tell the other story!” He demanded. He clambered up onto the bench beside his father.

Don Jorge, acquiescent, continued. “The other escape- it was during the Pinochet regime.” Martín curled up, his head in his father’s lap. Don Jorge ran his hand over his son’s hair as he spoke. “There was a high security prison in Santiago. It was for captured assassins, people Pinochet thought might be trying to get him. Brave men,” he added distantly. “They put all of the people who had tried to get Pinochet, or the people that Pinochet was afraid of, in the same prison.”

“Maximum security, then.” I filled in, nodding along. I’d learned some of Chile’s history in high school Spanish class: The Pinochet military dictatorship held power in Chile from 1973 to 1990. During this time, Chile was kept controlled by a military secret police. Thousands of Chileans, lacking specific charges, were “disappeared” in the night, never to be seen again. Only the lucky and the very prominent were kept in legal prisons.

“Of course,” Don Jorge assented. “Except, these guys were clever. If they hadn’t been clever, Pinochet wouldn’t be afraid of them. They had networks of friends, and they were good at making plans.

I leaned forward, playing into the story. “What did they do?”

“A group of their friends, accomplices outside of the prison, chartered a helicopter in the city for a sightseeing tour. But while they were in the air, the accomplices tied up the pilot and took over the controls. The ‘sightseers’ were secretly trained pilots, of course. They then landed in a secret location and loaded up on heavy artillery that their networks had stashed. They flew right to the prison, and lowered the weapons from the helicopter to the waiting inmates.”

“The inmates turned the weapons at the guards and told them to drop their weapons. And it was just the machine guns versus the little guns they give prison guards. So the guards fled. The inmates climbed onto the rope and

the helicopter lifted off again.” Laughter tumbled out of Don Jorge’s usually serious countenance, startling me as he pictured the escape. “So there they were, dangling in the sight of all of Santiago’s police force.

“But the police couldn’t reach them! They were too high up. All they could do was follow them in their cars. And they didn’t know where the helicopter was going. And the helicopter flew across the city- and you know that Santiago is huge- and the cars couldn’t keep up, because of the traffic and having to stay on roads.

“So the city’s entire police force is trailing behind this helicopter, and it just lands in this park, and the inmates and the pilot get out, and they have it perfectly arranged because they had all these cars, just normal looking cars, waiting to whisk them away.

“By the time the police arrived, the helicopter was just sitting there on the grass and no one was there but the chartered pilot, who was tied up and blindfolded.”

“There wasn’t a single recapture. Pinochet wasn’t so comfortable after that.” Don Jorge chuckled, his lips curling up in remembered satisfaction, while his young son began to snore in his lap.

I smiled too, relaxed in the victory of good guys over bad. I poured more tea, hoping for another good story.

“During the time of the dictatorship,” Don Jorge began, “I was attending university in the far north of Chile, studying to be an engineer.”

“So you were my age,” I clarified.

He nodded. “I was very active in student movements- I got elected student body president for three years running.”

I smiled, thinking of my own over-involvement at school. Distracted, it took me a moment to register his next words: “During these three years, the Pinochet government put me in prison twice.”

He picked up his mug of tea to take a long sip. I sat back on the bench. Not like me, after all. As he continued, I studied Don Jorge’s face. There seems to be a tacit agreement in Chile not to speak about the Pinochet years. I’d heard snatches of opinions, the convictions that leak out in conversations when they are too strongly held to contain. But they are usually snatched back and hidden, a faux pas in front of the foreigner, not to be mentioned again.

But Don Jorge was calm, soft-spoken, but steady. His face showed no emotion. “The first time, in 1984, lasted only three months. The second time, 18 months.”

I tried to imagine an indefensible arrest: imprisonment, at twenty, for being too outspoken, too daring.

He looked straight into my eyes. "I was not in one of the bad prisons. It was an official arrest, and they treated me decently. Not like some of the prisons where my friends were taken."

"So they let you go back to school between times?" I asked, curious.

"Yes. Fortunately, by the second time, I had completed all of my classes.

"In Chile, to become an engineer, you must take all of your classes, then you write a thesis, and then you defend your thesis in a big presentation in front of your peers, where they ask you questions about it. So I had finished my classes, and I was ready to write my thesis when they put me in prison."

He continued, more distantly. "I asked them for books. You are allowed to ask for books when you are in prison. So I got all of the books I needed to write my thesis, and I used all of that free time to study and to write it. And I finished. I became the only engineer in Chile to receive my title while in prison.

"While I was in there, I was getting letters every day, letters of support from Amnesty International. People knew I was in there, and they had to treat me well. And when I finished my thesis, I was able to get a date to defend my thesis and complete my degree."

For the first time since he'd begun the story, Don Jorge's face took on emotion. His eyes grew distant, remembering. "The day I defended my thesis, that was the most important day of my life. More than my weddings, more than the births of my sons. More than anything. It was the most important day of my life.

"It was big in the news, too, because everyone knew that I was going to leave prison for the day to defend my thesis. Everyone was watching. They were watching in case I tried to escape."

I couldn't resist asking, "Did you?"

He shook his head, dismissing the notion. "The auditorium was packed with students, ordinary people, and news crews. Everyone was watching. And I was escorted in by two armed guards. All the police were there. If I tried to escape, it would have been suicide.

"But I stood up there in front of all of those people, in front of the world, and I defended my thesis. And that day, I became an engineer. It was a huge victory.

“And at the end of the day, I went back to the prison. But I had my title. They couldn’t stop me getting that. And the whole world had seen.”

Don Jorge’s proud smile faded. “It was a difficult time. Many of my friends were fighting the Pinochet regime back then. Ten of my close friends, that I know of, were killed: one was disappeared, and the other nine were murdered in their homes in the night.”

Don Jorge looked down and stroked his sleeping son’s soft hair, remembering his previous life.

I watched my host from across the table, trying to imagine him at twenty, passionate, putting himself in the political front lines that put the contours on his older, now peaceful face.

My own father, fifty-five too, emerged from the trailhead, smiling, and called me over. I left the picnic table slowly, silent, to see what he had found.

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# CHILOÉ

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“Tomorrow,” our hostess said to us in Spanish, “You can help Sebastian put up a new platform. If it’s not raining.” Sebastian, across the table, nodded, always acquiescent to his mother-in-law.

Rick and I had been staying in this house for almost half a week, and hadn’t been permitted to do any real work yet. Though we had envisioned our visit as a work-stay, our hosts treated us as honored guests.

It was raining in the morning, a real downpour, so it was another day off. Rick and I donned our raingear, but left our backpacks behind as we walked ten kilometers into Castro, and sought out a bus towards the coast.

We climbed aboard at the terminal and took the last available double seat. Soon the bus set out, meandering through Castro, down I-5 a bit, and into nearby Chonchi.

The bus driver called back, “Anyone going down to the marina?” There was no response, so our driver turned uphill, skipping the lower part of his route.

More people boarded the bus as we left Chonchi. As people entered, most of them called greetings to friends already on board while shedding rain gear. Many of the standing passengers kissed newcomers, their friends, on the cheeks.

We continued onto I-5, then turned off on a smaller road towards the coast. Occasionally, a rider would stand, walk up to the driver, and point at a spot on the road to be let out. One of the young men in the back of the bus needed a stop, so he stood and yelled forward, “*Pare, pare!*” Stop!

Other passengers chorused the call forward: “*Aquí mismo!*” Right here!

“Un parado, por favor!” A stop please!

“*Pare, ya llegó!*” Stop, he’s arrived!

The driver pulled over on request, the man disembarked, and we continued on our journey. The road took us by a long lake, where little wooden houses overhung the lakeshore. The wind whipped choppy waves up onto the porches so they looked like docks.

A stop at a cluster of houses: an elderly man with smiling blue eyes passed an umbrella up the aisle to a woman with a child; she smiled her gratitude as she stepped out.

One man holding bags of groceries held a quick conversation with the driver as he pulled into his stop. The driver laughed, then waited as the man put down his paper bags on the step of the bus, ran out through his gate (much to the distress of the chickens, which scattered), and retrieved his wheelbarrow to cart the groceries home.

Much later, a man standing in the rain alongside the road waved the bus down. He held a coat up and passed it in to a woman on the bus, who smiled and waved as the bus carried her onward.

We were the last people on the bus when we finally arrived: tourists crazy enough to visit the beach on a bad-weather day. The rain had lessened somewhat, but the paths were pleasantly wet and windy. A boardwalk hike was partially submerged, so we worked our way around it by climbing on nearby trees.

It was late when we walked back to the road, but we were carefully on time for the last bus back to Castro. In fact, we were early.

“That,” I told our hostess over tea, “was when we started to have trouble.”

Neither Rick nor I are particularly patient on the best of days; he would leave my tardy brother or sister behind if he was the one driving us to school. I was always the one already in the front seat of the car, disengaged from the morning rush and immersed in my book. So I was unsurprised when Rick suggested we head up the road to meet the bus.

We began to walk back up the long road that had brought us to this coastal town. The walking was easier than usual, pure leisure without our packs. And we had every intention of flagging down the bus when it came down the singular road- common practice, in Chile, to stop the bus wherever was convenient.

We were still fifteen minutes too early by the time we reached the town’s one stop sign, and ten minutes early when we rounded the corner that blocked the last of the houses from view.

Finally, from behind us, came the noise of a bus. We positioned ourselves in a visible spot, hands out to hail the driver. And a bus came! It slowed at the sight of us.

The driver made an indistinguishable gesture with his hands and continued driving.

“Well,” Rick ventured, “It didn’t look the same as the bus we came here in.”



I nodded. "It's still a few minutes early for the bus to arrive. And we've walked a good way down the road by now, so I'd expect it to be late." And we continued down the road.

Twenty minutes went by with no traffic of any kind.

Our spirits were still high, but I was beginning to worry.

"We couldn't have missed it, could we?" For once, I thought to myself, we planned ahead.

"The bus driver definitely told us eight o' clock," Rick confirmed.

"Maybe," I joked, "there wasn't anyone who wanted to get off down at the beach today."

The sound of a car made us turn hopefully, but to no avail: it was a full car, and didn't even slow as it passed.

In my head, I began to weigh our options. They were slim: we'd only brought a day pack, so, as usual, we were low on food. Coligue, a relative to bamboo, grew along the road, and I'd begun to pull out the tender shoots and chew on them as we passed. We were well bundled for warmth and proof against rain and wind due to the morning's weather, so it was not unfeasible to just keep walking. However, on our earlier bus ride, we'd only passed one cluster of houses big enough to call a town.

"We were a little brain-dead, I think," I explained to our hostess, who sat aghast across the dinner table. "Plus, I calculated in my head: our map said thirty kilometers, six hours' walk. So we would have been fine."

I don't think either of us really intended to make the whole walk home in the dark. It was feasible, technically, but this was not our main concern. Really, we just wanted to be home in time for dinner. Because our hosts, sometime caretakers, might worry.

But we didn't know what else to do. We had to laugh at ourselves, seasoned adventurers thrown completely off-track by the rookie traveler's mistake of missing a bus, or perhaps the mistake of depending on a bus, and having missed some small thing that surely any local would have known.

But there we were, stranded on the side of a very long road, without the gear we'd come to rely on. Laughing, because the situation we'd made for ourselves was absurd. Laughing, because it had once again begun to rain.

I grinned across the dinner table at our hostess. "And then, suddenly, car headlights came around the corner. We stuck out our thumbs, and the car stopped, and two young men drove us, raingear and all, back home in no time at all."

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# PUNTA ARENAS

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The hostel was dingy and dark, and despite several hours of trying, I couldn't get the WiFi to work on Rick's phone. The dishes kept disappearing from the kitchen just when I needed them for cooking, because the various people who owned the place kept sequestering all of the big pots and sharp knives into their own family kitchen in the attached house. So I gave up on the phone, left the dinner preparations where they sat, and went upstairs to prowl our rented room.

I just wanted to stay inside. I'd been uncomfortable since we'd stepped off of the bus; the city was full of clean people in tight, fashionable clothes, sharp contrast to my hiking gear and greasy hair. They seemed to hate or perhaps despise the tourists, the malodorous foreigners with backpacks overrunning their home. I missed middle Chile, where people were surprised to see my blond hair, where my backpack and accent made me novel enough to thumb rides easily, where the people I met were, as a consequence of honest outdoor work, just as sweat-stained and happy as I was.

Here, stall owners in the central square wore false, salesmen's grins. They succumbed angrily to their entrapment in a city so well-located that it was overrun by tourists, and made their livelihoods selling postcards and handicrafts, designed to be forgotten on a shelf.

The only redeeming factor of Punta Arenas, the wild element, was the wind. Though cold, it whipped through the long grid of streets, untamed and straight off of the Atlantic Ocean.

Rick had gone out a couple of hours earlier to explore Punta Arenas, a reluctant capital for adventure tourists. It was our rest day while we planned out our next adventure, but Rick (being Rick) couldn't make himself sit still when there was exploring to do.

I had no interest in going back out. We had gone to the grocery store before searching out a hostel, and since our packs couldn't be brought inside, I guarded the bags while Rick shopped. I realized, when a young boy offered me a bite of his hot dog, how destitute I must have looked: huddled and dozing in a grocery store vestibule out of the wind, packs and clothes stained and long French braids disheveled. Though I declined the boy's hot dog, I probably

looked at least as desperate tearing into our bags of food after Rick finally came through the checkout line.

Our room, a pretty little corner room with three beds, had our damp clothing hanging from every available surface, the knobs of the wardrobe, and the grate on the window. We'd washed our overused socks, our sweaty shirts, and the pullovers with the dirt stains, dreaming of clean clothes for our next big hike. But the clouds had come out and the strong wind didn't come in the singular window, so nothing was drying. And nothing was very clean anyway; hand washing in the bathroom sink does little to remove months' worth of grime.

I moved Rick's wet, brownish sock off the front of the TV screen, turned the set on manually (there was no remote) and lay on top of the laundry on my bed, not really watching the subtitled MTV show playing across the screen.

I was out of books again. We'd removed chunks of our Lonely Planet guide as we left the places they detailed (an effort to reduce carried weight), so even rereading the phone numbers for each hostel, the paragraph about the southernmost bar in the Americas, didn't occupy much time.

Reaching the history section, my eyes slid easily over the familiar text, and my mind slipped away to summer in Seattle, late June, half a year before. Rick had given me the guidebook for my birthday, and I'd read it with the intensity of someone receiving advice from an oracle: trying to remember everything, determined to go everywhere.

I'd read it walking home from work, my bare feet daily chafing the three miles of sidewalk between my polite, polished office and my downtown Bellevue loft. I remembered the sharpness of sidewalk grit beneath my feet and summer breezes in my hair.

Standing in the muggy hostel room, I closed the book. I walked to the open window and put my face up against the wide-spaced bars, feeling the cold iron on my cheeks, and inhaled. The salt air caressed my nose and lips; wind from the Straits of Magellan inflated my lungs, and I smiled.

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# CABO FROWARD

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In Puerto Natales, we had turned down the only map we could find because it was too expensive- a full eight dollars for details on a five-day trek. But I'd copied down a tide chart, the weather forecast including percent chance of precipitation, and a five-part set of instructions I'd found on the internet.

The instructions read:

45 minutes forest path, easy to find

1 hour beach, need low tide

20 minutes forest path, orange and blue flagging

25 minutes beach, *refugio*, cross river. Low tide/high tide: ankle/knee.

And so on, 27 lines of instructions total as our only real guide through the woods, down the beach, across three rivers, to the Cross of the Seas, a big white cross to mark the southernmost point of the continent. Google Maps was blurry over the southern end of the continent, and fishermen we'd asked had told us that we probably wouldn't see anyone on shore and only a few boats where we were going.

"It's free, but the trails are really hard to find," read the travel wiki article.

Locals gave us hard looks. "Down here at the Straits of Magellan, you get the four seasons in a day. That means it could be sunny when you start out, but don't be surprised if you freeze at night- and if you're crossing rivers and it dumps rain on you, you might have to wait a week on the other side before you can cross back again."

But my weather forecast, careful cursive on waterproof paper, showed little rain. Sixty percent chance, tops. And the more I researched and gathered second thoughts, the more adamant Rick was that we go.

I'm not normally one to shy away from a challenge, but experienced trekkers had shaken their heads at the mention of Cabo Froward.

"One last adventure. You're going to love it." Back in the hostel, he had pointed at our big map of Chile, pointed at the very end. "Cabo Froward. The southernmost tip of the American continent. We're not going to get lost; just keep the Straits of Magellan on your left and head south. All the way south."

“All the way south,” I repeated to myself a day later, squished into the backseat of the Jeep, our ride as far south as a car could take us. We had been traveling just ‘south’ for three months. It was our driving direction, and the only real plan we’d had the whole trip: get into Santiago and then make our way southward in whatever way we could. And we had: on foot, in small buses, and by our thumbs, we had made our own way through Chile’s coastline, mountains, and countryside. So though I remained cautious about this journey, I knew neither of us could really resist the southward pull.

We had just said goodbye to our driver and were putting on our packs when a blonde couple came walking the other way. They had big packs and looked weathered and dead tired. Rick nudged me, and I walked over.

“Are you coming back from the Cabo Froward trek?”

The woman smiled, tired but triumphant. “Yes. We have been trekking for five days.”

Rick and I nodded. “How were the river crossings?” Rick asked.

The woman merely shook her head. The man laughed. In a German accent, he spoke. “One of them, she had to swim. I had to cross with my pack and then come back and get her pack.”

The woman began to laugh. “He had to hold them up over his head!” Pointing at his neck, “It came up to here on him!” And with a salute to fellow travelers, they continued back north.

Rick and I exchanged glances. Rick is six feet tall, and the German man was taller. But we weren’t discouraged by their difficulties. Rather, we were heartened. Someone had done this trek this year!

We packed down the road, on sand when the rutted vehicle tracks gave out. Past the lighthouse, and onto the first trail. It was easy enough to find, and a little sign named the islands we could see across the Straits: *las Islas Fin del Mundo*, the End of the World Islands.

The first day’s trek felt like a warm-up, a gradual transition into the wilderness. Our directions advised us to follow the beach, but cut around cliffs by following paths through the woods. However, the informational signs disappeared as we walked away from the civilized world, and the trails grew just as dubious as advertised. Several times, we tried to enter the woods, sure we’d seen a trail entrance, only to have our clear path swallowed up by underbrush. But if we ignored the unmarked trail route, we could walk confidently down the beach, knowing south by the Straits to our left and scrambling over the cliff-edges of the shore when we had to, shaking our

heads and assuming we'd missed the detour trail. Every once in a while, when the beach was sandy, we saw the footprints from the Germans, and were heartened. They were good company on the empty, windswept beaches.

On the trails, the woods were full of gnats. When I looked up at a sweeping view or opened my mouth to talk, they would fly into my mouth and nose. But the trees were a welcome break from the constant wind, and the squishy muskeg underfoot was better walking than the heaviness of carrying a pack through sand. I sang for hours, happy to be back in the wild.

My instructions had listed a *refugio* where we could stay the night just before the first river. However, we had given up following the instructions, so when we reached the first major bit of water, wide but low, and crossable on logs, we couldn't be sure if it was River One or just another stream, not worthy of mention in the instructions. Although we found a wooden stand with just enough map left to tell that it had been torn away, we saw no sign of a shelter. We paused for a dinner break.

"Do you want to look around more for a shelter?" I sat cross-legged, leaning back on my opened pack.

Rick reached for a piece of bread. "The sun's still up. What do you want to do?"

I took stock of myself. I wasn't tired. "Want to go on?"

Packs returned to our backs, we balance-beamed across the water on downed trees and continued down the beach.

More windy beaches, more forest paths, and up into the muskeg. Three hours more of hiking, and we were beginning to tire. However, the sun remained high, so from our perch on a muddy moss mountaintop, we could see the vast expanses of water and rock that remained before us.

"At the second river," I promised to Rick, "we'll stop. The notes say we have to cross it at full low tide anyway."

We descended again to the beach, then had to skirt above a cliff. We had a few false starts into the woods on trails that led nowhere, so by the time we found our way back out to the beach, the light was beginning to fail. However, at least outwardly stalwart, we trudged the rest of the length of the beach, another hour or so, to reach River Two just at dusk.

River Two was big, slow, and deep. When I filled my bottle a little upstream from the straits, the taste was, though tolerable, unmistakably salty. While Rick unpacked food, I tentatively approached the water, testing, feet bare and pant legs rolled up to my knees. More than half a step into the black

water of the river's mouth, the lapping of small night waves would have reached my thighs.

In the beach grass at half-light, just up from where the river met the ocean straits, we set up our orange tent, the sleeping mats, sleeping bags, rain covers on packs. To our practiced hands, this setup was mindless assembly: we each took an end to insert poles into hooks; I unrolled sleeping mats while Rick pressed stakes into the sand.

Our home resurrected, the two of us sat on a driftwood log to share a deliciously caloric tin of sardines. I took my tide charts and sheet of instructions from my pocket and smoothed them out on my knee.

"The tide is just above half now. So we're going to have to wait until low tide to get across."

"Okay," Rick agreed, taking the paper. "The next low tide is at three in the morning." He wasn't joking, I knew.

I shot him a look. "And the one after that is at four in the afternoon."

Rick raised an eyebrow, testing my sincerity. "Feeling lazy? You really want to sit around all day and wait for the water level to drop?"

"You really want to get up and cross an unfamiliar river- in the dark- after four hours of sleep?" Despite all the walking we'd done, I wasn't overtired. However, shorting ourselves of a full night's sleep seemed a poor decision. "We're way ahead of schedule. And the afternoon tide is a meter lower."

"We could set up camp again on the other side," Rick continued, "and once we'd slept enough, we could get going right away."

"If we did that," I humored him, "We'd have to start a fire once we got over there to dry out and warm up. We're halfway to the South Pole. It's freezing at night."

We let the discussion drop, finished packing away our gear, and bundled into the tent for the night.

Four hours later, true to form, Rick shook me awake. The tent flap was open, and he was fully dressed. "Kelsey. Wake up. It's three in the morning. You want to go?"

I don't remember my response, but according to Rick, I rolled my eyes and went straight back to sleep.

When I awoke in the morning, the sun was up and Rick was making noise outside the tent. "You were right," he said as I poked my head out. "Three in the morning was a terrible idea."

I dressed slowly, packed carefully, wrote in my journal. Tacitly, we had agreed to sit out our campsite until the tide fell low at four in the afternoon. However, by one in the afternoon, we were getting antsy.

The campsite was put away, and I'd moved our packs down onto the sand spit, intending to try the ocean route around the mouth of the river. I sat on my bag, barefoot but bundled up against the cold air. Since it wasn't raining, I pulled my pack cover off of the bag and over my arms as a windbreaker. Rick, more impatient than I, stripped down to underwear and t-shirt and poked a toe in the water at the edge of the sand. He had been pacing back and forth between the thinner but deeper river water and the wide open ocean mouth.

"How's the water?" I teased, safe on my perch.

"It's the ocean all right. Freezing." He considered seriously. "Where do you reckon we should cross?"

I pointed out across the mouth of the river, wide into the straits. I had been watching the ocean, and thought I could see edges of land where the tide had begun to fall. "See those spots where the waves break a little? I think it's sand bars. Go out on the spit and see if it's shallow there."

Dutifully, already exposed to the cold, Rick waded out across the wet, gray sand which we'd watched slowly emerge over the course of the morning. He tiptoed out to the very edge and shouted back. "Where do you think it is, Kels?"

I pointed. He walked. Ankles, calves, knees, mid-thigh. With the wind, he was too far away to hear, but I could see him shake his head as he turned around just short of halfway to my supposed sandbar.

"Too deep!" He yelled.

For another half hour or so, Rick waded freezing routes in the water, trying different passages while I egged him on, warm and dry from my perch up the beach. Finally, he came and stood next to me, surveying the wide mouth of the river, the steep bank, the small waves in the straits. "I think we just have to swim." His legs were pimples with goose bumps and freckled with water, but he didn't seem to notice, intent on the task. "Pick the thinnest point, maybe we can float our packs across on the Therm-A-Rests?"

I wrinkled my nose, thinking of salt water on my expensive sleeping pad. "Look, I think the sand bar is the way to go. One of them is even visible now." It was true; the tide had dropped just enough that an edge of sand was apparent, emerging from the water between waves.



“But can you get to it? And do they reach all the way across?” His arm traced a broad arc out at the water, following the unlikely train of ripples.

“Fine.” I stood up at last. “I’ll show you.” And I stripped off my pants, tucked my shirt’s hem up into my sports bra, and walked down to the water’s edge.

The water was freezing cold, but my legs numbed quickly as I strode out towards where the waves broke in the water. Thighs, hips, up to my waist. With bare feet, I felt my way over the uneven pebbles of the Straits. Just past the point where Rick had stopped, I hesitated, weighing the likelihood that the ocean floor would continue its gradual downward slope. But a few more steps forward, I began slowly to emerge. Standing on the sandbar, a third of the way across the mouth of the river, I grinned and yelled back to Rick, “Now do you believe me?”

I could just hear him as he yelled back, shaking his head and smiling. “Can you get the rest of the way?”

I looked out over the water, more ripples in the distance evidence of another sand bar. I took a deep breath and started walking again, my bare feet plunging confidently over rocks I couldn’t see below. Soon waist deep, I was holding my breath, inflating my chest to try to keep as high in the water as possible. Still walking, my legs pushed through the water, the waves licking at my ribcage. The cold was numbing, but I rose in challenge: against my father’s dare and against the physical impediment. And again, finally, the sand under the water began to rise under my bare feet. I emerged onto the second sandbar, glanced back at Rick, and kept going without waiting for his prompt, pushing across the water’s final stretch. Only hip deep this time before I made it to the upward slope towards the far shore.

My celebration was brief; once on the far side, I had to cross all the way back, get my pack, and carry it high on my shoulders while at the same time guiding for Rick, through the sandbars to the far side of the river. But I was triumphant. We had crossed the deepest river and our packs were completely dry.

The third river was marked as “low tide only” in my notes, but since it was only an hour or so beyond River Two (and since we had been so impatient with the previous river), we arrived there at true low tide. We crossed it at only knee deep, our last river before the cross.

We had planned to hike until there were four hours left to the cross. That would let us have a whole day, eight hours with no packs, to hike the

mountain, touch the cross at the end of the world, and come back to rest. But when we reached the calculated point, there was nowhere to pitch our tent. We weren't really tired after so much sleep the previous night, so we kept going down the rocky beach, pushing through wreckage of windblown trees.

Eventually, we could see the cross up on the mountain, just a couple of hours away. We decided to go for it. We found a campsite by the base of the mountain, stashed our packs, set cold ramen noodles to soak, and started up in the last several hours of daylight.

It was a better trail than the rest of the trek: someone had laid planks across some of the muddier parts, and the Stations of the Cross were posted in little wooden stands evenly up the climb.

The way was almost straight up, but I was giddy, free of my pack, buffeted by the wind. Chilean trails tend not to bother with switchbacks- just a direct ascent. In the steeper places, someone had thoughtfully installed a rope to pull yourself up by. The wind grew as we approached the exposed peak. Just before we reached the top, we put on our hoods to cover our ears and cinched them tight; we weren't sure if we'd be able to pull them up against the gale after we crested. We could hear the cross whistling before it came into view: an enormous white outline of steel bars, stark against the blue of the sky. The windblown hillside was covered in stalks of stiff, short grass, and dropped sharply into cliffs at its shoreward edge. Though it was nine in the evening, the sun shone brightly on the water, reflecting off of the waves below.

I immediately noticed the ladder running up the inside of the cross, and without a pause, I wormed my way inside and began to climb. I stopped far short of the cross's arms; Rick, worried, only let me climb about ten meters off the ground. But though the rungs were thin, they were sturdy, and I felt safe within the steel cage. The view was stunning, and the wind staggering. The Atlantic Ocean fell to the left and the Pacific, to the right. The waters mingled arbitrarily due south at the End of the World Islands as I clung to the inside of the cross at the edge of the earth.

Rick found a way through the bushes further out on the point. His path revealed a line of broken crosses. It was an engineering practicum built from symbols of faith: the oldest cross was made of wood, then there was a larger concrete one, and an iron one, all impressively broken and jutting over the side of the cliff, leading up to the porous white symbol to which I clung.

Exhilarated and windblown, we picked our way back down the mountain, across the beach, through the woods, and back to the campsite as night began to fall.

The morning was bright sunshine, beautiful and not even very windy.

“Maybe,” I joked to Rick, “the locals just say ‘four seasons in a day’ to scare off tourists.”

Summer and spring continued for our morning hike, and we sat to eat lunch at the edge of River Three. It was much higher than we remembered it, but we weren’t concerned; the tide was supposed to be dropping, so we planned to eat slowly.

Just as we finished our repast, however, winter arrived. But there was nothing for it: it was two hours’ hike between rivers Two and Three, and we knew we needed River Two at low tide. Taking control of the situation, we ignored the weather and began to strip down to cross the higher water. As we removed our pants, the wind kicked up, causing the sand to bite at our bare legs. Rick plunged in first, splashing across, his pack up high just as the rain began to fall. By the time I’d disrobed and buckled my pack as high as I could up over my bra, the rain was torrential, pounding on my pack cover and the rain coat I’d tucked up high to protect my shirt as I waded. I went straight into the water, soon on my tiptoes to keep my pack above the waves. The bottom edge of my bra was nipped by the cold water, just as deep as River Two had been. But as always, the sandy bottom began to rise. A quick check as I emerged showed the bottom of my pack to be miraculously dry.

The wind was blowing too hard for conversation as we re-outfitted ourselves on the far side of the river. I dried myself off with a pack towel. The wind stung, and sand stuck to every wet surface. Nevertheless, I knew there were hours of hiking to come, so I dried carefully between every toe before pulling on my wool socks. Raincoat, pants, shoes- I’d meant to put on rain pants, but by the time I got them out, my pants were already soaked. So we moved off of the windy spit and carefully on down the beach.

By the time we arrived at River Two, the weather was balmy once again. We were a little early for true low tide, but this crossing was old hat, almost too easy after our earlier tribulations. Cheerfully, we stripped down again, and I led the way, hiking up my pack and feeling for sandbars. I whistled Katy Perry songs, wading waist deep through the Straits of Magellan in the sunshine. Looking behind me, I laughed at Rick’s skinny, outstretched bare legs in contrast with his top-heavy pack as he sprinted across the sand bars.

The wind kicked up again later, enough that we could jump in the air and be carried down the beach. But though the wind was strong, it blew us forward, and when we reached the trail, the woods were sheltered and full of *lao lao*, native berries to snack on.

We spent the evening on the far side of River One. We set up, for the last time, the orange tent. Down a trail we hadn't noticed before, we found the *refugio* we had previously searched for. And though the shelter was broken down, we found a pot in the wreckage, and were able to make a fire and heat water for a luxuriously hot ramen dinner.

We ate, then sat in silence. The dark gathered through the trees, and rain began to fall, but we remained to watch the fire. The next day would bring more hiking, but our journey to the end of the earth was done. We'd been to the end of the world- all the way south. Anything else was heading home.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I'd like to extend a huge thanks to everyone who helped and supported me on the writing of these stories. In particular, I would like to thank my mentor, Gillian Epstein, for helping me to work out the stories I was trying to tell. Special thanks also go to Caitrin Lynch, Kendall Pletcher, Graham Hooton, Trevor Hooton, Rebecca Getto, Arjun Iyer, Michael Heyns, Amy Whitcombe, Philip Loh, Mariah Dunn, and Jon McKay for the time and thought each devoted to helping me revise my stories. Thanks also to Christina Shea, who has always supported my writing.

And of course, thank you to my father, Rick Breseman, for always encouraging me to go adventuring, and particularly for agreeing so readily to accompany me on this one.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Kelsey Breseman has been an adventurer her whole life. Find her barefoot in the woods somewhere.

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