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BETWEEN RIVERS

REFLECTIONS ON HOME, OBLIGATION, AND OTHERNESS FROM A
CONFLUENCE OF CONSERVATION AND CONNECTIVITY

By

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Thesis

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BETWEEN RIVERS

REFLECTIONS ON HOME, OBLIGATION, AND OTHERNESS FROM A
CONFLUENCE OF CONSERVATION AND CONNECTIVITY

Chairperson: Phil Condon

Between Rivers is an exploration of the role of the outsider in international watershed conservation. Through extended personal narrative and analysis of current events, ethnographic texts, and sociopolitical history, this thesis considers questions related to responsibility in conservation. The narrative focuses on Ecuador's Jondachi Fest, a case study in international collaboration and celebration of an ecologically key river system. Grassroots celebrations and river festivals are sprouting up on endangered rivers all across South America. In this thesis, the author examines her own experience as an outsider working to facilitate one such festival – the challenges, shortcomings, relationships, and victories – and the sweeping, undeniably ubiquitous role of the river in her life.

On with the river, day by day, down to the ultimate sea...

One more river one more time. And then no more.

And then that ancient river must flow right on down without me.

- E. Abbey

NOTE TO THE READER: Some character names in this text have been changed.

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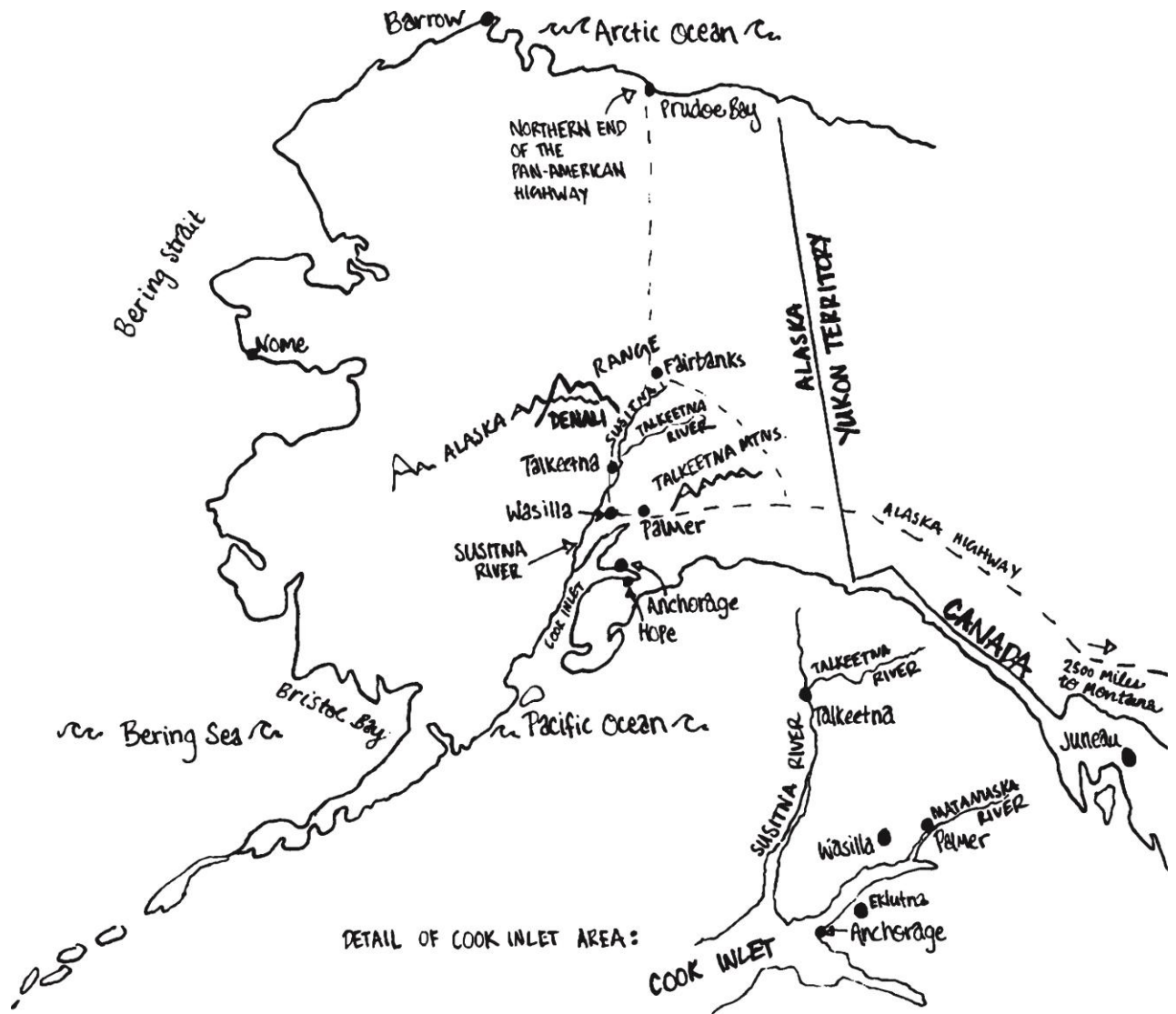
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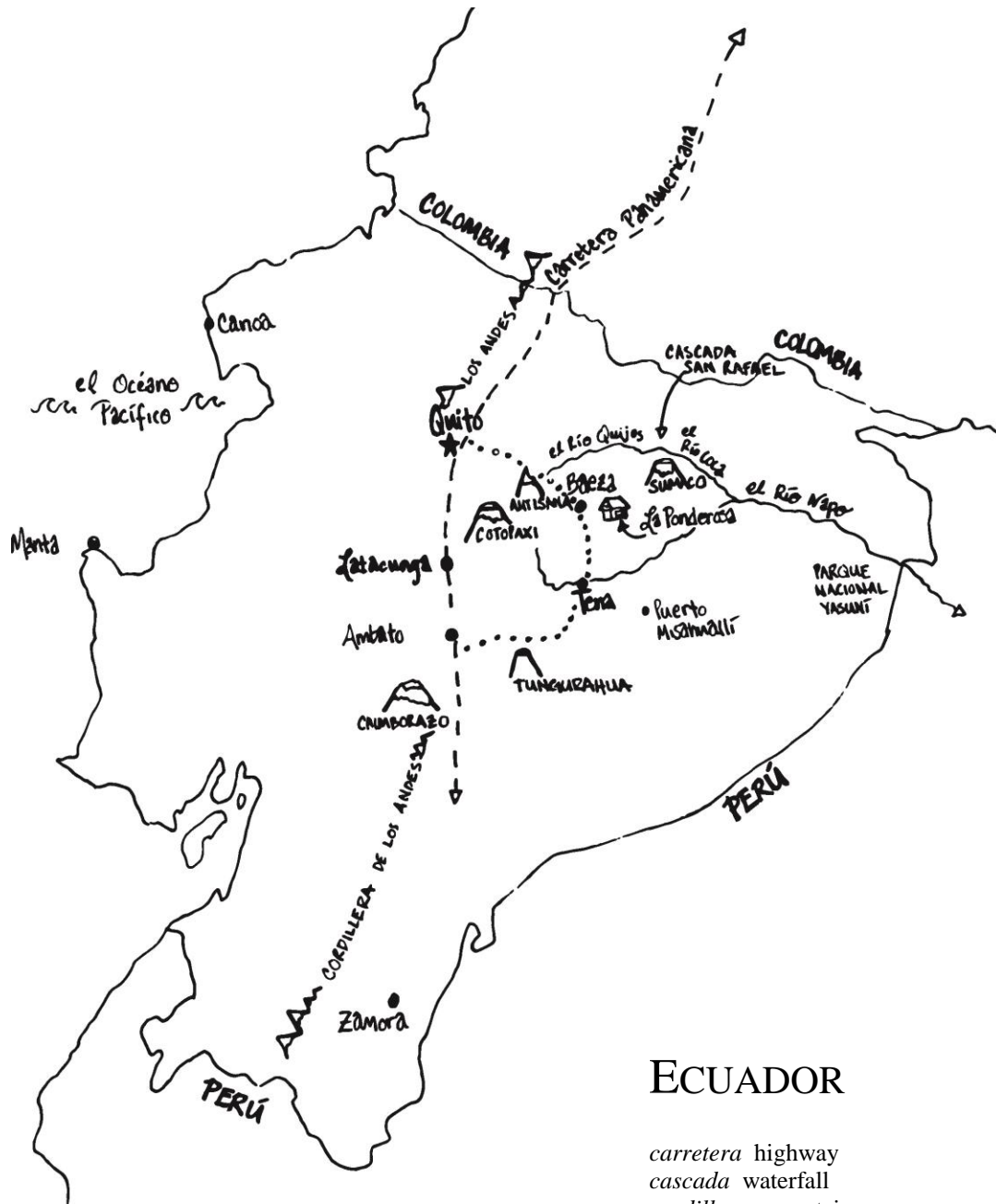
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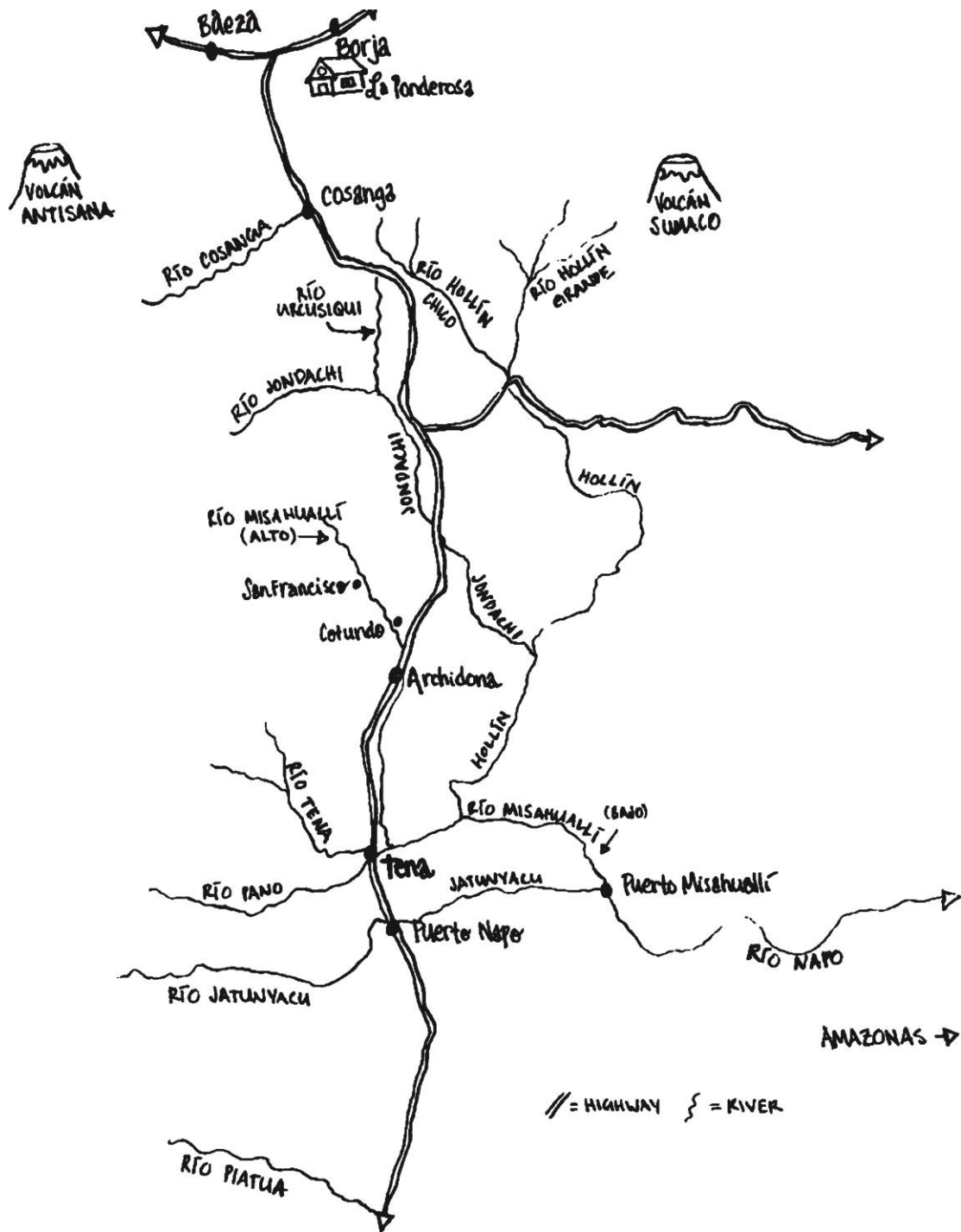
ALASKA





ECUADOR

carretera highway
cascada waterfall
cordillera mountain range
parque nacional national park
océano ocean
río river
volcán volcano



THE JONDACHI AND SURROUNDING WATERSHEDS

The Proposed Jondachi-Hollín-Misahuallí-Napo Ecological Corridor
Napo Province, Ecuador

PROLOGUE

SOUTH

Somewhere in the jungle, a tree falls. Yellow excavators and bulldozers do their work, more trees fall, a road is cut. This road leads to the deep green water of a river in eastern Ecuador, and before long the machines crawl over and across its gravelly bank. They reach into the river, plucking, culling, summoning stones smoothed by centuries of traveling water. The machines load the rocks into waiting dump trucks, engines always running, and the dump trucks drive away, back up the jungle road. The trucks disappear into the network of illegal and largely unseen jungle thoroughfares, and the rocks are taken far away, destined for unknown projects and yet-ambiguous repurposing. The river is changing shape: as rocks are removed, the channel is widened, deepened, straightened.

The water, meanwhile, continues to travel.

Farther from shore, toward the middle of the channel, a small group of kayakers approaches. They move at the speed of the slowing current, floating in brightly colored plastic boats and helmets, cohered by an adventure they shared upstream. They first heard the sound of the machines a half-mile ago, over the squawks and bellows of the jungle, over their own laughter, over an afternoon wind and the whirling of water moving persistently toward the lowlands of the Amazon Basin. The machines come into view, and the laughter subsides. The bird voices drown in the clamor of moving rocks: rocks falling onto rocks, from the bucket of the excavator to the bed of the dump truck, from the shore to the bottom of the river as their foundation falls away and the riverbed moves, shifts, disappears. Above water and below water,

rocks are falling.

At first the machines appear independent, unstoppable in their missions. The kayakers float closer, their voices silenced by the thundering of motors and upset of rocks; the silence also comes as a total loss of words.

As they drift by, the kayakers glimpse faces inside the machines, human faces, brown and tired like their own. They make eye contact. No one smiles.

NORTH

Alaska's Talkeetna and Susitna Rivers come together at a small city park at the west end of Talkeetna's Main Street. In the summertime the town of Talkeetna is abuzz with small planes and tourists. The planes carry mountain climbers to Denali's base camp; the tourists eat ice cream and buy souvenir earrings made of moose nuggets. Sometimes those small planes – mostly Otters, Beavers, and Cessnas – carry raft guides to a remote landing strip alongside the upper reach of the Talkeetna River.

Yellow Jacket airstrip is marked by a tattered American flag and initially, from the air, is discernable only by the expert eyes of bush pilots. The landing strip is the starting point for most three- or four-day descents of the Talkeetna River. I've been dropped at Yellow Jacket a few times, early in the morning after sleeping in a bunk at the tiny airfield or in the back of my outfitter's company van. The planes have room for only one guide, a deflated, folded-up raft, the aluminum pieces of a raft frame, a few oars, a cooler, and some dry bags; the first guide in also takes the satellite phone and the gun. Yellow Jacket is about 80 river miles from town, and on the

flight in it's a good idea to scan the river below for logjams that might be obstructing the river channel. The Talkeetna canyon isn't run commercially but a few times each summer, and conditions change with every fluctuation in the river's volume. The river is usually the color of coffee diluted by too much cream – primarily glacial run-off augmented by clear water from mountain feeder streams. From the air, the braids of the river crisscross over the broad river valley, forming a soft-edged argyle pattern, a latticework of sandbars and channels – those braids are the hallmark of an Alaskan glacial river. They come together a few miles above the canyon, where all the water in the Talkeetna channelizes and flows between a pinch in the river, and this constriction forms a 14-mile stretch of powerful, icy, isolated wilderness whitewater.

At Yellow Jacket, after the pilot and I have unloaded the first flight's gear, and after he flies the plane back toward town and the rest of the gear and guides, I sit for a while. There are rarely these opportunities to be so alone, so far from the comfort of couches and the protection of roofs and walls. The only sounds are those of the storied Alaskan mosquitos, the breeze that keeps them at bay, and the steady rushing of glacial water moving downhill, toward the confluence with the Susitna, and toward the ocean. Spawning salmon thrash in the shallows, uphill and upriver toward the headwaters, always moving toward home. Bear scat peppers the gravely river beach; on the Talkeetna, we pitch our tents over the paw prints of Grizzlies.

Sometime before the next plane arrives, after about an hour of solitude at this riverside airstrip, I'll start rigging boats – assembling frames, sorting gear, considering the distribution of cargo and passengers – all the while scanning the landscape for bears or moose or wolves. I'll apply more DEET – the only thing that really works against Alaskan mosquitos, despite what idealists might profess – citronella, vitamin B, and garlic do little or nothing to combat them. I'll watch the salmon swim upstream.

For now, the Talkeetna flows freely, and boats and salmon travel down and up the river, impeded only by waves, gradient, and the occasional logjam.

THE NIGHT BEFORE each trip on the Talkeetna, and every time I find myself in the town, I go to the confluence. The Talkeetna flows in from the East to meet the Susitna, the Big Su, the fifteenth largest river in the United States. On one such night at 2 a.m., after the band stopped playing at Talkeetna's Fairview Inn, a few hours before we started loading airplanes bound for Yellow Jacket, I walked down Main Street to the empty city park, to the confluence. A summertime full moon this far north doesn't actively illuminate the sky but rather glows in tandem with a sun that refuses to retire. The two rivers came together and flowed heavily past me as I stood on shore. They were nearly bank-full, and logs as long as semi-trucks floated past in a hurry.

There's the sound of the water lapping at the shore and little waves colliding on the surface, and there's the deeper, heavier, more resonant sound of rocks rolling along the river bottom, a real-time restructuring of ancient riverbed. There's the conversion of two great salmon rivers, the weight of glacial sediment, the gravity of ocean-bound waters: here, it seems, it all comes together.

At the confluences of rivers there is magic. I am drawn to confluences with a magnetism that defies my understanding of places. It's something that I can best describe as a settling of energy, a concentration of power and big forces I can't articulate or name.

I want to live between rivers.

INTRODUCTION / PANAMERICANA

In 2014, the federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) issued to a private developer in Idaho a preliminary permit for a 370-foot tall dam on the Talkeetna River. The dam would be built just downstream of the confluence with Disappointment Creek, and a reservoir would flood seven square miles of river corridor upstream of that. The lower reach of Talkeetna canyon would be submerged, rapids replaced with stagnant water. The final 20 river miles between the impoundment and the town of Talkeetna would be regulated by controlled releases from the dam. These salmon, the ones I'm watching now, would never make it so far up the river on their own: a 370-foot wall of concrete is a significant hurdle to upstream movement propelled by fins.

American Whitewater, a relatively influential nonprofit that seeks to protect rivers with recreational value from unwise development, filed comments with the FERC two months after the permit request was submitted, citing serious deficiencies in the project proposal. Alaska's 1988 Recreation Rivers Act and 1991 Susitna Basin Rivers Management Plan prohibit, at least in theory, dam development on the main stem of the river: the Talkeetna is designated as a "Recreation River" under the Act, and the Plan explicitly prioritizes protection or maintenance of the "free-flowing nature of the river."

The FERC ultimately suspended the permit, in light of American Whitewater's comments and overdue progress reports from the developers down in Idaho. American Whitewater expressed its misgivings with the process, given the fact the permit was issued in the first place, despite the developer's disregard for existing river protections within the Susitna Basin. The

intervention drew attention to the recreational value of the Talkeetna as recognized by the State of Alaska decades prior, but it is certainly worrisome that the value wasn't acknowledged in the initial application.

The Susitna River flows 300 miles from a high alpine glacier in the Alaska Range, through the ancient and scoured Talkeetna Mountains, to the Pacific just north of Anchorage. The river supports five species of salmon – Chinook, Coho, sockeye, humpy, and dog – and serves as a primary corridor in the migration of caribou. The proposed Susitna-Watana dam would be the second tallest in the United States, a formidable 735-foot concrete arch structure, ten feet taller than Hoover. The dam would significantly alter the flow regime of one of the world's great Northern salmon rivers, flooding over 20,000 acres of pristine Alaskan wilderness just upstream of the Susitna's Devil's Canyon, home to some of most challenging and remote whitewater in the world. The reservoir would be 42 miles long and over a mile wide. Crucial wolf, moose, and bear habitat would drown beneath the stagnant glacial water. The Susitna supports tourism and fishing industries in south-central Alaska; it feeds the Cook Inlet's wild salmon fishery.

Hydro on the Susitna has been on the table in Alaska since 1980 – it's nothing new. But as Alaska's energy demands evolve to accommodate a growing population, aging gas-fired generation plants, and a 2010 state policy that resolves to convert to 50 percent renewable energy by 2025, the Alaska Energy Commission has once again turned to the Susitna.

EARLY IN MY FIRST SEMESTER as a graduate student of Environmental Studies in Missoula, Montana, I wrote an editorial for the *Alaska Dispatch News*, Anchorage's newspaper

of record. I was writing to express my sentiments on the proposed dam project on the Susitna River. The name Susitna means “sandy river” in Dena’ina, the Athabaskan language of the Cook Inlet region of Alaska. At home, in Alaska, I’d once met a woman who named her daughter Susitna; I thought it was the most beautiful name for a human baby I’d ever heard.

I sent my editorial to the Anchorage newspaper without considering the fallout, the potential aftermath. My words – pecked onto a brand new, just-for-grad-school MacBook keyboard, 2500 miles from the cement-gray waters of the Susitna – met the hands of Alaskan readers on a full-page spread of a September Sunday paper.

I wrote, among other things, regarding the hydro-related studies in the Susitna watershed:

Salmon, caribou, bears, terrestrial plant species, aquatic vegetation, traditional subsistence lifestyles, recreational accessibility, geological economic potential, and anthropological and archeological resources, among countless other “values,” will jockey for rank in a government-constructed hierarchy of relevance, importance, vulnerability, and expendability. Our new perception of the Susitna River will become a reflection of this bureaucratic arithmetic over the period of research and study that precipitates dam construction (or non-construction).

To be sure, no measure of deconstruction, reclamation, or restoration on the part of a future Alaska government will return the Susitna watershed to its current state.

Across our country, as large dams are being dismantled...Alaska proposes the construction of yet another monolithic behemoth, a 735-foot-tall effigy to a bygone era of

overpriced megaprojects that permanently altered the landscapes and cultures they aimed to improve, control, or manipulate. This proposition reflects poorly on the Alaska Energy Authority for its shortsighted, antiquated answer to Alaska's demand for power.

A more elegant solution exists in the deconstruction of old ideas.

The online comments were brutal. One reader suggested I write and think more simply, that my "fancy" grad school words were detrimental to the mission of the piece. Others reminded me that Alaska is changing, and that clearly I've been out of state for too long to understand the current conversation on energy. Others doubted that I was ever an Alaskan to begin with.

Alaskans, I knew, are suffocating beneath the high cost of energy. My family – river people, for sure – couldn't take a hard stance against the dam, as it promised to provide a hundred years of reasonably-priced energy. My own friends were contracted to facilitate and conduct the very environmental impact studies that the commentary lambasted; I didn't hear much from them after my piece was published.

I knew that construction of the Susitna dam would open up good jobs and temporarily alleviate some of the state's dependence on fossil fuels, and I felt that my editorial had perhaps disregarded the complexity of energy issues and the culture of independence in Alaska. I'd criticized the project while failing to suggest a better solution. They were just 800 words, and only a fraction of a percentage of the world's population had read them, but I felt that they'd somehow betrayed my upbringing and my Alaskan values.

Two months later, the *Alaska Dispatch News* published another commentary on the Susitna dam, this one from an expert with a Ph.D., a professor and research ecologist at the

University of Montana's Flathead Lake Biological Station. Another outsider. An expert, but an outsider all the same. I wondered who was doing the talking in the Susitna debate, and who provided the data? Whose voices were heard, disregarded, mocked, respected, or drowned? Within the context of conservation, who is considered "local" and what is the role of the "outsider?" Ultimately, I had to ask, who has the *right* to fight for wild places and who is responsible for the protection of wild rivers anywhere, everywhere?

I GREW UP 50 MILES from the mouth of the Susitna, in a once-little town 5600 miles north of Ecuador's capital. I grew up on salmon and ice hockey and weekend fishing trips to cold and salty coasts. I'd tried living farther south, studying in Montana and Oregon; working river seasons among the ghosts of outlaws in southern Utah and the movie star bison of Yellowstone; meanderings to and through the Grandest of Canyons; one whiskey-soaked autumn on the Gauley River of West-By-God-Virginia; and all of it punctuated by a few too-short Alaska summers on the trails of glaciers near the base of Denali.

In 2007 I moved back home, back up north, and took a job teaching high school Spanish at the town next door to my hometown. Friends often balked when I said I was teaching Spanish in Alaska. "What purpose does Spanish have so far up north?" Alaskans travel, too, I'd say. And it's not just sled dogs and polar bears up here. Alaska's borders are open to anyone who fancies the deep, alcoholic darkness of aurora borealis winters and the insomniac midnight sun of northern summers. It was though, truthfully, difficult at times to convince my students that Spanish could someday serve them. Many of them, in gestures that proved my promises of relevancy at least halfway valid, went on to travel or study or work abroad in Spanish-speaking

nations, and I happily receive their periodic reports from the field – the *field*, of course, being anywhere beyond the rosy glow of Republican-red Alaska.

I've always been a bit of a wanderer, though: daydreams of greener pastures and new opportunities have impeded contentment in one place. And in 2010 my itchy feet temporarily trumped my infatuation with Alaska, and I went to live in the highlands of Andean Ecuador, a trip sponsored by the Department of State's Fulbright Commission and bolstered by a trifle of savings from several years spent working as a salaried educator and summertime river guide. When I first applied for a Fulbright grant, my sights set on Ecuador for its fairy tale islands, rivers, and volcanoes, I proposed as my project a comparative anthology of collected stories from the folklore of both places: from my northern home with its oil, its silty waters and snow-soaked peaks; and from this new place down south, Ecuador, whose very name means *equator*. I wanted to compare the stories, mountains, and rivers of my Alaska with those of a place on the earth's midline. I was drawn to the idea of a country balanced between hemispheres. From my vantage point at the extreme far-north, I wondered how it might feel to be at the middle, at the center.

The highest point on earth, the place closest to the moon, isn't Everest; and the highest point in the Americas isn't Denali. The peak to claim this superlative is Ecuador's Mount Chimborazo. The earth isn't perfectly round; it bulges just below the equator in what mathematicians call an "oblate spheroid." People on top of volcanoes in Ecuador, I learned, stood closer to the moon than people on top of Denali's snowy spires.

So after a tearful see-you-later to my canine companion and a surprise layover in Miami (courtesy of an attempted military coup in Quito), I was off to use my Spanish, for real this time. And I hoped my beloved, reluctant students and their skeptic parents were watching.

Ecuador was home to 15 million faraway someone-elses. My Alaska could fit six Ecuadors inside its border. Yet for each Alaskan that sprawled their limbs across the state, 22 Ecuadorians crammed into some tiny corner of their Nevada-sized patria.

I spent ten months in Ecuador, working as a Fulbright English teaching assistant at a socialist-leaning public university in Latacunga, a town of 80,000 in the highlands. The town sprawls alongside the Pan-American Highway, the network of roads that connect the North Slope of Alaska with Ushuaia, the southern tip of Argentina's Tierra del Fuego. Latacunga's population is largely indigenous, and many students commuted to the university from villages at 12,000 feet in the terraced mountains to the west. I was told I was the first U.S. citizen to take up work in the public education sector in Latacunga, and at times the pervasive anti-American sentiment presented a challenge to my productivity, or at least my North American *perception* of productivity. Nonetheless, during my tenure at the Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi (UTC) I built the infrastructure for a peer-to-peer tutoring program; designed and taught methodological, pedagogical, and conversation courses for professors of English; and designed new courses for secondary English teachers of the province.

I also spent much of 2010 and 2011 learning from the Ecuadorian Rivers Institute (ERI), a river preservation nonprofit based in the jungle town of Tena, five hours by bus from Latacunga. I wanted to know more about grassroots watershed conservation in Ecuador, where most of the rivers I saw were already, for all intents and purposes, dead. Dams, dredging, mining, diversions, and pollution from population centers had degraded highland rivers to the point of irreversible damage. The river that flowed through Latacunga, the Cutuchi, was so polluted with

raw sewage, industrial waste, and household garbage that it hosted no life.

The Andean wind blew through Latacunga and coated me and the university and the alpacas in a film of perennial dust. I craved water constantly, and if I was lucky I made it to Tena once every couple of months to meet with the ERI, go kayaking, and wash away the dust.

AT THE END of my grant term in Ecuador, happily reunited with my dog, a black Labrador-Shetland pony mix named Arlo, I returned to teaching high school, this time in Seattle. Haunted by the spectral, wasted Cutuchi and looming threats to the still-living rivers of the Ecuadorian Amazon, I also began working remotely as the volunteer communications director for the Ecuadorian Rivers Institute, whose executive director, Paul Sperry, had supported me with information and in-country connections since the beginning of my Fulbright year.

In winter 2012, I contacted a charismatic southern filmmaker who had made a short edit about the now-defunct Napo River Festival, an annual celebration of Ecuador's healthy, free-flowing Río Napo. The ERI had organized the event for nine consecutive years. When in 2010 it cancelled the festival due to widespread destruction across the watershed and minimal action on the part of authorities to control or curtail it, Sperry stated in a public letter, published on the ERI's website: "The current status of this unique resource to Ecuador and the world is cause for alarm, rather than celebration."

The Napo festival had been the ERI's attempt to promote the Napo, the ninth largest tributary to the Amazon, for tourism, increasing local unity and awareness of the value of water resources and celebrating regional cultural traditions. This filmmaker had captured and compiled images of the festival to profile the ERI and Sperry's work. I'd been missing Ecuador, missing those warm rivers and my friends at the center of the earth, and so I suggested that we go back,

this filmmaker and I, to make a longer, more effective film, one that could bring global attention to the mounting crimes against Ecuador's rivers. He agreed, but we raised only about half of our proposed budget through a Kickstarter campaign. The project was necessarily abandoned due to lack of appropriate funds.

At home I continued to teach full-time and contribute to the ERI's communications when and where I could, and, in 2014, I began a Master's program at the University of Montana in Environmental Studies. With more time to dream up projects and with the support of my new academic community, I resolved to commit myself to the ERI during my short career as a grad student. Sperry and I began plotting how we could bring awareness to Ecuador's most prized whitewater river – and the river with perhaps the highest concentration of butterflies, anywhere – the Río Jondachi.

ON THE SPECTRUM of necessary evils involved in energy production, hydroelectricity is lumped, often erroneously, with other sources of “clean” energy. But dams, despite some recent international interest in removing old ones, despite modern acknowledgement of their antiquated nature, cannot ever truly be *unbuilt*. The damage of damming rivers cannot be undone. The effects of dams on ecosystems and communities are immediately irreversible, regardless of “restorative” actions taken years or decades after their construction. In developing countries, hydro is driven by the need to identify new sources of low-cost renewable energy to meet a growing population's growing demand for electricity. The price per megawatt hour of the initial construction of a dam is relatively low compared to other sources of renewable energy, but the cost to maintain and operate the project is tremendous. When developers build budgets for hydro projects, it's rare that all the costs are included in the list of project expenses. The true

costs of long-term damages to ecosystems and communities are rarely, if ever, factored into the budgets for hydro projects.

The Jondachi has its headwaters in the Antisana Volcano Ecological Reserve on the eastern edge of the Andes, and it forms part of one of the last remaining free-flowing, intact river systems in the country. The river provides ecological connectivity between the Andes and the Amazon and is home to numerous indigenous communities who regard the river as a vital cultural resource. A 2013 economic impact study estimated that the Jondachi's whitewater tourism industry brings over \$1 million annually to the local economy.

The Jondachi is imminently threatened by a hydroelectric dam, an attempt by a government-run energy company to offset carbon emissions from its twenty thermal power plants, all of which burn fossil fuels to generate electricity. The ERI finds fault in the project in that not one of the company's power plants is located near the Jondachi or even within the Napo province. According to Sperry, of at least eight other hydro projects currently under construction in Ecuador, the Jondachi would be the country's most expensive hydro endeavor per megawatt of installed capacity.

Sperry and I settled on the idea of a new festival: Jondachi Fest, we named it, and its purpose would be to demonstrate the economic value of the free-flowing Jondachi River. We would use whitewater recreation as a mechanism for conservation, in concert with other strategies: a legal defense of the river in Ecuadorian court, and a proposed protected ecological corridor, connecting the headwaters of the Jondachi with the Napo River without interruption. We'd have a kayak race and a community celebration in Tena, one of three hubs within Ecuador's burgeoning whitewater tourism sector.

We began planning via email, and I pursued North American sponsorships and media support from the paddle sports industry. It proved difficult to convince people to join our little organizational team – busy working folks, I found, don't often have space for big projects like this, so far from home. I celebrated, for a while anyway, my relative freedom and flexibility as a grad student and dove into the thing face first. I had no idea what I was doing, and my vision for the event rarely seemed to mesh with Sperry's. But I solicited as much support as I could from other race organizers in the States, from friends and from friends of friends, and I gave my best first-time-ever shot at marketing an international event that had yet to be born.

Throughout the fall of 2014 I was robbed of precious sleep by questions that perforated and deflated my dreams like spears. I was haunted by self-doubt. The project was complicated by politics I didn't understand, Ecuadorian social complexities that seemed too many to manage, Sperry's surprising capacity to micromanage from a continent away, and an increasingly demanding workload at school. I called on my Ecuadorian friends, the people I'd come to love during my kayaking trips to the jungle during my grant year. I asked them for their guidance; I felt the project needed more legitimacy and support on the local level, yet it was nearly impossible to harness and hold the interest of locals during the planning process from afar.

My friend Libby is an Irish-born kayak guide whose family has operated a rafting business in Tena since the mid '90s. She promised me that everything would work out; all I had to do was get back to Ecuador and the pieces would fall into place. Another friend, Abe, who was born in Quito and now guides kayak trips throughout Ecuador, told me the same. Everything is done at the last minute in Ecuador, he said. Meanwhile, Paul Sperry demanded, and understandably so, meticulous organization, anticipation, and attention to detail.

I tried to remember what was at stake: a free-flowing river. Connectivity.

This was an opportunity to help facilitate grassroots conservation in a place that wasn't my home, but that I nonetheless cared deeply for, an opportunity to help protect one tributary to the world's largest ecological thoroughfare, a chance to reimagine my role within global society. I'd perhaps missed out on historical opportunities to protest dam construction on great rivers in my home country, maybe due to issues of timing, scale, and age.

I thought of the rivers in my beloved Alaska. The Susitna, the Talkeetna, the Nenana, the Chitna, the Chulitna – the suffix *-na* means “river” in the Athabaskan language – and I thought about what I'd be willing to do to protect them.

I HAD, and still have, a lot of questions.

It's a difficult thing to suggest that a better solution be sought – that a dam remain unbuilt – when a proposed hydro project promises temporary prosperity for local communities. But certainly the intrinsic value of the river itself should be considered in any long-term economic forecast. What metrics determine the value of a free-flowing river? How do we assign values to healthy fish populations, clean drinking water, ecological connectivity, tourism revenue, recreation opportunities, indigenous sovereignty, and the ancient grace of wild rivers?

I also try to consider the effects of rivers on our souls, the communities of humans whose lives and livelihoods are defined and shaped by meandering or thundering waters. Deeply embedded in the river world I find my best friends, boundless inspiration, my greatest challenges, and my most transformative moments. Inherent to the practice of human-powered adventure is the ethos of preservation and perpetuation of healthy ecosystems. What is the role of the paddling community in the conservation movement? At some point, the practice of paddling whitewater must become a practice of advocating for the places that impel our adventures. When

do we make the shift from passive participants in a sport to fully engaged advocates who will fight to protect the wild places that feed our spirits, that provide the venues for self-exploration, growth, and challenge? What can be accomplished when a common focus is identified, and the power of human awareness is coupled with the power of a free-flowing river? The result has yet to be seen.

Peeling out of an eddy, we are suddenly and irreversibly at the mercy of the river. We cannot slow it down or reverse our decision to join the rushing current. Similarly, in declaring our beliefs, our convictions, our passion, our love, we enter a flow of unknown force. By participating in the celebration of endangered rivers, by traveling to paddle in faraway places, by listening and by observing, paddlers become educated, they come to know their own sentiments on the human choice to control or alter wild rivers. They express their convictions through action. This is the hope, the theory, anyway.

Grassroots celebrations and river festivals are sprouting up on endangered rivers all across South America: Puesco Fest and Futa Fest in Chile, Semana Fest in Columbia, and Machu Picchu Kayak Fest in Peru, among others. I am inspired, and perhaps obligated, to examine my own experience as an outsider working to facilitate one such festival – the challenges, my shortcomings, the relationships, our victories, and the sweeping, undeniably ubiquitous role of the river in my life.

1.

THE BIG RIVER

I remember the drive from Alaska my family made to accomplish the obligatory undergraduate college visit in Montana – that trip wrought with the tension of impending divorce – so much fragility and heat. My poor little brother isolated in his experience, my mother desperate to repair the failing connections that sparked and burned out before her eyes, my father brazenly constructing his exit strategy. And I remember that river – the Middle Fork of the Flathead – our first commercial rafting trip. Our sad little family, transformed for only a couple of hours, in the company of a pretty young river guide and a few other tourists – I can't remember any of their names. Our northern family's first encounter with warm splashy whitewater – waves that cooled the searing anger, quenched our thirst for connectivity, and for a short while washed away the fear that we were losing one another, that our family was disintegrating faster than we could repair its rupturing seams. Contained in that raft and in our brief shared experience, smiles catalyzed by river waves, it seemed possible to wash it all away.

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Throughout my twenties I'd drive from Alaska to the Lower 48 or vice versa, sometimes alone, sometimes with a friend or partner, most times with my dog. The duration of the drive varies depending on route, agenda, road conditions, the number of times black bears or bison or forest fires or electric boreal sunsets slow your progress. The distance in miles is fairly

consistent: between 2100 and 2600, depending on which state – Washington or Montana – lies opposite the line your wheels draw to or from Alaska. Because I'd most often make the trip during a shoulder season – driving toward or away from several months of river guide life – the roads were rarely crowded with anyone but bumbling moose and the sturdy RV-ers who braved snow and suboptimal temperatures in their generator-humming scenic-vista-hunting second or third homes; an SUV or Jeep Wrangler en tow behind the rig.

I'd wake with my sleeping bagged toes encased in frost, my feet reaching out to the Canadian landscape in an expression of humble diplomacy, my head snuggled up in Arlo's belly fur near the front of the truck bed. I'd stiffly maneuver to the back, lift the mosquito net that I'd draped over the topper and gate the night before, and breathe out with something like reverence, "Oh, Canada..." Meanwhile Arlo would begin his morning duties, sniffing out invisible bear trails and wiggling his fuzzy torso in anticipation of breakfast. I'd wipe the frost from plastic tubs and dry bags after they'd spent the night on the ground, then shove them back into the truck bed, a daily game of Tetris. We'd make coffee, pick out driving tunes, and then Arlo and I would continue down the road, stopping for hikes and stretches and snack breaks, daydreaming of the next season, clinging to the one that just finished.

IN LATE MAY 2010 I was on my way south toward the San Juan Islands – via Montana and Oregon and Seattle – when Arlo and I stopped at a friend's house outside of Whitefish, Montana. Joe Numbers had told me to look for the "little French whorehouse," with windows of glass stained in primary colors and a raft trailer and kayaks out front. After seven days on the road, I found Joe's red house and I parked my truck next to his, two Tacoma cousins united in his muddy driveway, just barely on the American side of Canada. Joe's truck was smaller (two-

wheel drive) and older (mid-1990's) with a naked bed and a rack made of pinewood 2x4's, a bumper sticker of the Vietnam Service Ribbon – vertical stripes of yellow, red, and green – adhered to the back window. The first time I'd noticed this sticker on Joe's truck had been when he'd come to San Juan Island to visit me a couple years prior with two sea kayaks strapped to the 2x4 frame. I had erroneously and embarrassingly thought it to have something to do with Rasta culture. I never told him that.

I hadn't been eating much on this trip. I was driving toward a conversation that would signal the unraveling of two entangled lives, and my heart had settled heavily atop my stomach, inflamed, taking up too much space in my body to allow room for hunger. When I arrived at Joe's doorstep I'd been ruminating on my island love's numbered days all the way through Canada, a week without human dialog, my dog and the view through a bug-splattered windshield the only relief from excruciating introspection. I arrived mid-morning in a fall drizzle; Joe had fresh coffee on and eggs still warm in his well-seasoned cast iron skillet. I didn't feel bad hugging him with my 2500 miles worth of road stench and greasy hair; Joe would wear the same Carhartt pants and Nebraska Huskers sweatshirt for weeks on end and I don't think he often washed his rebellious gray curls, anyway. When he opened the door, Joe had crumbs in his bushy white mustache and in the deep creases around his smile.

“Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes,” he mused while smashing me against his giant chest. He smelled like wood fire smoke. Though I'd been driving through rain and frost for a week, I hadn't once on my trip taken the time to build a campfire.

The “whorehouse,” of course, was no such thing. It was a sangria-walled cabin with which Joe had been tinkering for 15 years. He'd installed composting toilet, a rain catchment system, and a garden, but the best parts were the pretty things: the bathroom was tiled with

ceramics he'd brought home from Mexico; he'd replaced the windows – all of them – with his own homemade stained glass; and he'd crocheted hangers for plant pots and covers for couches from yarns the color of shamrocks, dandelions, and peacock feathers. A wood-burning stove floated like a radiant island in the middle of the room; wooden shelves brimmed with houseplants and herb gardens; two afghan-adorned rocking chairs guarded a single fabric-front cabinet speaker, while a porcelain sink next to the rainwater barrel overflowed with dishes begging to be washed.

I took a seat at the table – sandwiched between the rocking chairs and the sink, a space just big enough for two lonely humans who had both been waiting until this exact moment and this exact company to drink the day's coffee – and Joe served us poached eggs with grits and cheese. Suddenly, I was hungry.

Afternoon arrived after our second pot of coffee – Folger's, from one of those industrial size canisters. The light outside hadn't changed, rain still issued from a pewter sky.

“Do you want to go to the river,” Joe said. There was no question mark at the end of his statement.

I nodded.

“Big river's flowing, playful, fun, a few spots to send you whooping and make your heart beat.”

“I've got a kayak on top of my truck out there...”

“And I've got a raft on top of my trailer out there. I want to take you rafting. Arlo, too. All of us in one boat. No kayaks today.”

I nodded again.

We crawled into Joe's silver Tacoma, letting my bug-encrusted maroon one cool in the driveway, and drove to an empty river access on the Middle Fork of the Flathead. Joe and I donned our dry suits. Arlo wore his lifejacket: it's bright red and yellow and wraps around his torso, strapping across his chest and under his belly. It's got a well-stitched handle on the top, so that a hand stronger than my own can pull him out of the water and over the side of the raft if he were to fall out. It's made by the same company that manufactures the PFDs that I wear, their canine version of the thing cleverly called the "Birddog." I love to call Arlo my birddog: though as far as I know he's never held a dead bird in his teeth, he is gentle with what he carries and I think he could've, in a different life, worked as an exceptional birddog. I daydream for him, or maybe with him.

Arlo explored the brushy beach while Joe and I struggled to drag the fourteen-foot rubber raft from the trailer to the water's edge. The rain lifted and a mist replaced it, eventually evaporating to reveal high-up clouds and hints of cold blue sky. The three of us clamored into Joe's little raft and he took his seat at the oars, tall and proud, his gray woolen sailor cap perched almost regally atop that nest of exploding curls. I wrangled Arlo into a half-assed seated position at the front of the raft and held him there while Joe's oars pulled the stern of our boat into the current, and then we slipped away downstream, the silver Tacoma disappearing on shore behind still-naked willows, the river and the sky opening up before us and the wind nibbling at our cheeks, Joe's cerulean eyes sliding gently between a squirming Labrador, a heartsick girl, and his beloved Big River that now carried us all toward something like clarity.

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One April I was teaching in Seattle and had a spring break that coincided with a quest to search for my missing kayak roll. An effective roll is the key to staying safely in a kayak when it tips over in whitewater. I'd worked hard to learn it. It had taken me months of trying before I was able to consistently roll my kayak in a lake or a pool, longer than it takes most people, I'm pretty sure. And whitewater was another story entirely. Sometime in my second year of kayaking, though, I began to trust my roll in whitewater, and I was swimming a lot less. I'd finally begun to understand and appreciate the mechanics of the thing.

When you find yourself upside down in your kayak, your set-up is vitally important, reaching toward the water's surface and winding up, gathering all the energy contained in your torso to exaggerate the corkscrew motion your body should make as your hips pull the boat back underneath you. Your wrists must be perfectly bent forward or perfectly cocked back, depending on whether you're starting or finishing the movement, and you have to be aware of what the paddle is doing as you initiate the snapping motion with your hips. Your correct knee must always be engaged, otherwise it'll never work. Maybe the most difficult part about the roll is the finish: your head, with its nagging, inconvenient desire to breathe, will instinctively come out of water as soon as it senses the opportunity to gasp air. However, if you cannot train yourself to ignore that initial urge to breathe, no matter how badly you're convinced your lungs are burning, the transfer of weight that happens when you lift your head prematurely will inevitably send you right back to where you came from: upside down in moving water. You have to stay calm, and you have to bring your head up last. It should be graceful, effortless, having little to do with muscle and everything to do with physical awareness and *feeling*. This part was always very hard for me.

I'd lost the roll, which I'd heard happens from time to time. It was gone. I couldn't do it. Even in flat water, in the algae infested waters of springtime Lake Washington, I couldn't roll. I was overthinking, chastising myself for working so hard to learn it and then letting it go. But I didn't really let it go, exactly. I clung so tightly, summoning it with all I had, desperately wanting to get better at kayaking. The sport had come to represent everything I wanted to be but wasn't: fluid, playful, acrobatic, more intimately connected to wild waters.

An old friend named Will called me as I was grading Spanish essays at my dining room table in Seattle. He had some time off before his guiding season began in Grand Canyon, and I wanted some help with my kayaking. We agreed to meet at Oregon's Deschutes River, paddle there for a few days over spring break, then scuttle horizontally over the Columbia Gorge to Washington's magical White Salmon River.

My roommate, another friend from the Alaskan river world, would join, and we invited Joe Numbers. He said he'd bring his raft and suddenly sweet Arlo could come, too.

Two weeks later Arlo, my roommate, and I met Will and Joe at an empty campsite along the lower Deschutes in the high desert of central Oregon.

Will went to boarding school in New Hampshire, where downriver slalom racing was his high school sport. He takes phenomenal photos and wants to make his living as a full-time Grand Canyon guide and part-time photographer. He's stocky, with an unfair blanket of prematurely sprouted back hair, sharp blue eyes, and a close-shaven beard. He recently renovated an old Airstream trailer and named her Gertie. He taught me to put coconut oil in my morning coffee for extra energy on the river, and he's lonely, I think. For all his outside adventures and Airstream evenings, I think he'd enjoy a companion.

We floated three nights and four days down the lower Deschutes, from just below Sherar's Falls to the confluence with the Columbia, Arlo thrashing in the front of Joe's raft, my roommate wrestling him into submission. Arlo hates the kayak. He yowls in agony every time I get in a little plastic boat; I think he thinks it's swallowing my legs. Will and I practiced tipping over in our boats in the flat water, and Will pondered my lost roll like it was his job to hunt it down. We had some limited success, and all the while Joe watched me from his seat at the oars.

At camp the first night Joe told me he'd taught himself to roll his kayak, and he began to lose it as he got older. He kayaked a lot, with his best friend from the Midwest, before he learned to row a raft, and he mostly banked on staying upright. He never let himself struggle for the piece that I was fighting for now; he didn't think it was worth the frustration.

Joe had told me on several occasions of a kayak trip he did with his dead-best-friend-Brad – as he calls him, the modifiers and given name all in one breath – on the Verde River in Arizona, a perennial stream that runs only sometimes, only when there's water. I remember the Verde from my childhood, as my grandmother lived in a town called Cottonwood, through which the Verde passed.

Joe says that when Brad died nothing could bring him joy.

He says Alaska saved him: he moved up there to kayak and took a job at the rafting company in Denali. There, he learned to row boats at the age of fifty-something, and the people at the rafting company – the derelicts and the drunks and the larger-than-life characters, with their 4 a.m. dance parties and their insane, insatiable love of the river – the people saved him. The relationships saved him.

As we watched the slowly swirling Deschutes flow past our chaparral camp, its surface sparkling with the kisses of high-desert stars, Joe and I sipped whiskey like grown-ups, not like

wild river guides driven mad by the relentless Alaska nighttime sun, not like we used to when we had first met in Denali, well over a decade before.

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I remember one morning on the Talkeetna River, mid-August, as my guiding season was winding down, the last wilderness trip of the season. At 5 a.m. I was standing huddled against my coworker's shoulder, and together we were watching our stick disappear. We watched as persistent glacial water engulfed that trembling twig, our crude and lonely gauge, sacrificed to a full-moon river the night before, abandoned and stuck vertically in the sand. This was Alaska rain; not even whiskey could warm the bone-drenched chill it had provoked that autumn night in the Talkeetna Mountains.

There was no real eddy, just a small pocket of slowish water that lapped spastically at the shore, without the consistency and rhythm of reliable ocean waves. The rafts were tied redundantly – to rooted spruce trees, to heavy downed logs, to one another. They thrashed violently in the current. We questioned our knots and the integrity of those poor trees we used as anchors. We were watching our disappearing stick-gauge from underneath an inadequately small and tattered tarp, bundled in layers of wet plastic river gear that did not dry during the night. In our frozen hands-turned-worthless-clubs we clutched stainless steel mugs of coffee, and we shivered side-by-side in that pathetic little river kitchen, peering out into the relentless early morning drizzle; we said nothing.

We watched the stick, and we watched the water creep up and up and up, until only the tiny desperate twig-top was visible. It was drowning in the river, and when the water had risen so high as to bury our stick, we turned around and silently began to make breakfast.

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In 2009 my father and I applied for a Grand Canyon permit. We chose a launch date in December, when his field season would be over and I would be on my winter break from teaching. I asked for a few extra days off from work, and we invited our favorite friends to spend three precious weeks with us as we traveled together the 225 river miles from Lee's Ferry to Diamond Creek. And because we are Alaskans (me by birth, my father by choice), we said we would welcome the frosty mornings, the persistent threat of snow, the silence of a river abandoned by the hoards of fair-weather summertime boaters.

My father is a transplant from Arizona, from a place near Grand Canyon National Park. He said he wanted to go back, to gaze up the Canyon walls from the river, to see the place through older eyes, to know it as I know it now, and to remember the way he knew it as a child.

Then sometime in November, a few short weeks before our launch, after months of planning and dreaming, my father told me he'd changed his mind about the trip. He wasn't coming. He had a few reasons, but I stopped listening when he got to the one that started with "I don't want to be cold."

A MONTH LATER I'm swimming in the Colorado, hurtling and plunging through the tail waves of a rapid called Specter. I'm ten thousand feet in front of the nearest raft, my little yellow kayak lost somewhere in the maelstrom, alone, sort of like me. The sky is the same color

as the water: everything is gray. It's dropping Christmas-time snowflakes on the rim, but they don't reach the river. Down here in the ditch, at Specter rapid, it's an all-enveloping and dampening haze of winter desert clouds.

I'm waiting, because that's all I can do. The current is too strong to swim against, so I'm waiting until it calms before I try something, before I struggle toward shore. I've been swimming for too long now and my hands don't work.

The current is finally getting slower, I can see upstream, I think I can hear their voices. My friend John is a Clydesdale, bearing down on his oars, far in front of the other boats, standing up and pushing forward as though he has all the force of the river working with him – or maybe, *for* him. I can see the worried wrinkles on his face. He has made me his mission. I'm swimming, but I won't be cold much longer.

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I now work summers in Grand Canyon. This is the ultimate goal for a lot of raft guides. It's what some consider the best guiding job in the world. I know I'm lucky. Will works down there, too, as do so many of my slowly aging river guide friends. We take people rafting for fifteen days at a time; we try to hide from the summer sun; we tell stories of ancient things; our own journeys become new stories.

People ask why we row heavy boats instead of running motor trips. The motor guides make more money, as they can do twice as many trips in a season. Their boats carry more clients and they cover the 225 miles of river in half the time as we do in our oar boats.

Isn't it obvious? I ask. Human-powered adventure. Those motors talk over the Canyon.

People also ask about the dams.

The Grand Canyon of the Colorado would be different without its dams. The water would be warmer with much more suspended sediment. Familiar rapids would be at times flooded, disappeared, washed out by the high water, and at other times impassable for lack of flow. The river would be unpredictable and recreational river running and hiking in Grand Canyon would perhaps never have become what is today – a thriving \$26 billion dollar industry. If damming the Colorado had been left off of the Bureau of Reclamation’s mid-twentieth century to-do list, the River might still reach the delta. The four critically endangered species of warm-water fish endemic to the Canyon might live to see the next decade.

North Americans are connected by the water of the Colorado. It flows through us when we eat the crops it irrigates or the stock that drinks it in; when we splash in its mountain headwaters; when we run through a sprinkler in an anomalous desert green-grass lawn; when we turn on the faucet to our great Western cities’ fountains, drinking water, showers, and gardens. And everyone who floats through Grand Canyon is connected by a transformative experience, the experience of traveling an occluded capillary in the continent’s struggling vascular system. The river is held back, controlled, managed, and owned, and yet, for all that manipulation, the water is powerful and wild. All it takes is a moment or a day in the heart of Grand Canyon, in the maw of the rapids of the Inner Gorge, to suffer or savor an undeniable truth: the wild spirit of water will not be subdued by humankind. The Colorado’s ecosystems, flood cycles, and intricate sandstone canyons have drowned beneath impounded river, but the water itself, at its essence, is still very much alive.

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Rivers lend themselves to superlatives.

The most scared I've ever been is on a river. Also: the coldest, the hottest, the most awed, most challenged, most exhausted, and the happiest.

I've welcomed more wild, far-from-home, sand-in-hair, frost-on-cheek mornings alongside rivers than on mountains, beaches, or trails combined.

My best friends and greatest loves have come from the river world. I've felt more connected to people on river trips than in any city, school, project, or party. For me, companionship and trust feel more essentially and primitively charged on the river than anywhere else.

Food tastes better. Sleep slumbers deeper.

Dreams flow into and between wakeful moments, tributaries to a big river fed by the magic of our human reality and by magic itself.

I feel more on the river.

I am comforted by the reality that rivers flow in one direction: indecision and hesitation have no place on a river. When you go to the water you let go of control, you succumb to gravity, and you allow the river to carry you away. You merge with the current and with history, a mighty confluence of decisions and consequences and the power of ancient forces. The water teaches, connects, quenches, cools, and washes away the mistakes, the arbitrary order, the illusions of priority and importance. The river reduces us to what matters.

There's common ground in rivers.

Rivers connect ecosystems, societies, families, memories, stories, and our collective pasts to our global future.

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Why does a far-away river matter so much? Why Ecuador, and why now?

Up north, in Alaska, the water is heavy with sediment and it scours any numb and exposed skin that it touches. Swimming black bears have pawed at the bow of my boat. Chinook salmon shimmer as they leap, attaining the impossible, always moving upstream. Down on the equator, there are butterflies and relic languages and feral forest voices I'll never be able to identify.

Perhaps it's because we're taught as kids that the Amazon houses our planet's lungs, and when we see that forest burn, we raise our palms to our own chests, and maybe we breathe a little deeper. Maybe it's because the rainforest is so vastly different from the boreal forest and tundra I grew up on and I can't bear to see either of them go.

The rivers that flow into and through the Amazon Basin quench the burning; they keep the smoke from stagnating so the respirations may persist.

Maybe it's a matter of privilege: I've enjoyed the time and resources necessary to experience things opposite my reality, to know rivers far from my home. I can compare and analyze and breathe as deeply as I want. We don't all claim those luxuries. Or maybe it's because it is there, as it is here, just water moving downhill, *day by day, down to the ultimate sea*. And if it matters here, then it matters there, and I'm in love with it all, everywhere.

2.

THE ROAD INTO LATACUNGA

In English better than my own, the Ecuadorian Fulbright director asks at orientation, inside the lavishly appointed U.S. Embassy, nestled within a well-protected and gated courtyard in the Mariscal district in Quito, “What will your legacy be?” How will you leave your mark on your new community? How will people remember you and your good work? I stare at the photos on the wall: William J. Fulbright, Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton. I stare at the other people in the white-walled conference room, all brilliant, young achievers with ideas that I’m sure are brighter and more ambitious than my own. I speculate through my insecurity that they might know the answer to that question, given their satisfied half-smiles and knowing nods; the little I know of them makes me think they will succeed: they will leave a lasting legacy. I’m not so sure, however, about myself.

Two months ago, Jody Dudderar, the tall and charismatic assistant director of the Fulbright U.S. Student Program, told me in a private conversation, while fancy hotel air conditioning sheltered us both from the mid-summer D.C. heat, while we sipped plastic-cup coffee and shared pastries, that I was among the oldest applicants for Fulbright student funding in 2010. I had applied at-large, without the support of a university; I was perhaps overqualified for the grant I’d pursued. “You might have been better off applying for a research grant,” she told me.

I flash back to the conversation I had in September the year before with a Spanish professor at the University of Alaska. I had pursued his comments on my draft grant application

because he was a Latin Americanist, because he was on the Fulbright committee at the Anchorage campus, and because I needed (or thought I needed) some guidance. He told me – and I accepted his words – that I didn’t stand a good chance of winning a Fulbright research grant, given the fact that I didn’t have a home university. “You are alone in the race for coveted government money, competing against the country’s most over-stimulated minds and their enthusiastic academic coaches, in an era where domestic jobs are hard to come by and every idealistic young American wants to see and change and heal the world. You, three years removed from academia and corrupted by the blue-collar world of high school teaching, are at a disadvantage,” he’d told me. To do research, I needed the supervision, guidance, and clout of a university. “Do yourself a favor: lower your sights a bit.” And so I applied for a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship grant, thinking that I might be more competitive in that arena, given my professional teaching experience, though the Latin Americanist remains unconvinced.

To his – and my – surprise, I win the grant, though all the while I secretly wish it were a research grant. I’m not sure I want to teach English; I’m not convinced that’s the best way to “leave my legacy.” So I focus on designing the required supplemental project, the work that will allow creativity and freedom from my role as the only native speaker of English in my future Ecuadorian community.

After accepting the grant, I relax a little bit as I wait out the summer: I hike a lot with my dog, relish the remaining long Alaskan days, and take solace in the fact that the Fulbright has deemed me worthy of representing my nation in the tradition of cultural exchange and mutual understanding, a tradition generously funded by the U.S. Department of State.

I thought I saw a cock fight on the median. The bus paused at a stop light and I stared from my window at five or six grown men gathered in a circle on the strip of raised concrete, their hunched bodies protecting something in the middle with the defensive posture of public mischief, glancing out with sinister smiles, spastic collective movements when the object of their focus moved or changed or leapt. I thought I saw feathers flying. Then again, maybe the men were playing cards.

I saw skinny dogs dart across the road, their wild eyes scanning the street for kindness or forgotten food. To our left, the east, Volcán Cotopaxi loomed above the rose-studded valley as a sentinel, a revered guardian and a feared watcher of Latacunga, the upper flanks of its cone white with snow and glaciers in a landscape that was all green with agriculture, all brown with dust and exhaust. The bus thundered through the outskirts of town, stopping to drop squealing uniform-clad school kids along the side of the road or to assimilate more people in transit, most of them with at least one spacy-eyed baby in tow. On the television screen at the front of the bus, angry Asian men spilled one another's blood again and again, in constant combat, screaming in dubbed Spanish over the bawl of the souped-up, aftermarket bus engine.

Greenhouses sheeted in white plastic flooded the valley floor, rose plantations reaching for miles toward the base of Cotopaxi. Closer to the road, unfinished concrete buildings outnumbered the finished ones, vertical rebar extending naked and skyward from the top floors of windowless, wall-less structures, dogs stranded on the roofs, pacing and barking and spinning in circles.

The bus lumbered into the Latacunga terminal and the passengers spilled out: the teenage girls who bleated when their male companions touched them, the vendors of fried pig skins, the

bags of grain, the bags of chickens, the spacey-eyed babies and their mothers. Clutching our packs to our chests, my Alaskan friend Keith and I crossed the bridge over the Cutuchi River, which flows from the snowy flanks of Cotopaxi through Latacunga and on to irrigate the industrial farmlands of Ambato to the south. Dark-skinned people half my height lined the bridge, hawking their goods: stockings, watches, batteries, toilet paper, goats, upside down sugar cones full of blue and pink “ice cream” that did not melt beneath the equatorial sun. I stepped in puddles filled with liquids I couldn’t identify, regretting my flip-flopped feet. People stared; I looked down and walked quickly. Keith walked close behind me, his eyes fixed on my back. We wove through the uneven cobbled streets of the city, feeling our way toward the only gringo-friendly hostel in town. Latacunga was a hive, a buzzing, writhing, swarming, shrieking, sweating, shoving nest of humanity and emaciated Andean dogs. We purchased a room at the cavernous Hostal Tiana, with its blue walls and concrete floor and scratchy woolen blankets; I set down my pack, curled up on the cold rug at the foot of Keith’s bed, and started to cry.

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In October 2010, when I arrived in Latacunga, the new building at the Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi, was unfinished. Very few classrooms had glass in the holes meant for windows and all the floors and furniture were coated thickly with the dust of Andean windstorms. The concrete stairs that connected the four floors – each extra-wide step about a meter deep – spiraled through open space, no railing or wall to buffer clumsiness. This building, whose construction was initiated with funds from the nation’s previous administration, now functioned as a drafty, chalky shell for free public university classes. After construction was

halted and government money retracted by the incoming administration, the university came to resemble many of Latacunga's, and, indeed, Ecuador's, structures: halfway finished (or halfway demolished) with no immediate prospect of completion. In Ecuador, earthquakes, floods, landslides, and volcanic eruptions level human construction with alarming frequency; the country is in a permanent state of rebuilding.

The other building on campus – the older, smaller one with most of its windows intact – was originally constructed as Latacunga's new prison and now housed offices and conference rooms, with their fabric covered furniture and desktop computers. Many of the classes I worked with were conducted in a seemingly defunct secondary school nearby, a ten-minute walk from campus through dust and dogs and daytime *discotecas*.

I didn't choose Latacunga; Fulbright chose it for me. There had never been a Fulbright grantee placed in Latacunga, and the only foreigners in town were the climbers who came to trudge to 20,000 feet, to the rim of Cotopaxi's crater. I was there to work as an English teaching *assistant* – a label that, for me, mocked years of training and experience as a professional educator. And so I “assisted” for the first couple of weeks and then began to assimilate more responsibility. The responsibility, I had to be sure, was attached to some fundamental working part of the university; I could not and did not accept the myriad requests from students and instructors for private English tutoring.

I attended English classes for upper-level students studying to become teachers themselves, and there I offered myself as a resource – a real live gringa whose North American accent and Scandinavian stature served more at first to distract than instruct. Each time I walked into a classroom, I was greeted by giggles, whistles, stares, and catcalls. As a teacher trained in North America it was difficult for me to accept or understand the learning environment at the

UTC, and my first impressions of the institution were negative. Classes had been in session for two weeks when I arrived and in those first days I visited a number of classes for future teachers of English. In half of those classes, instructors were not showing up to teach; the class might be full of students, but for reasons left unexplained there were no professors present. In the other half of the classes, the ones that enjoyed the presence of a professor, I observed unchecked interruptions. Everyone interrupted everyone else – there was no discrimination there. I watched uncomfortably from the back of the room as shy beginning students – many of them from the indigenous mountain villages and to whom this classroom environment was quite foreign – produced awkward squeaks of English in front of a cackling crowd of merciless classmates, interrupted repeatedly by their peers and their instructor.

During my first week on campus: as students were packing up to leave class, one professor asked me to publicly rate his students' English on a scale of one to ten; I was called to a surprise meeting to “interview” a recently hired English teacher and assess his language ability (this, without any prior warning to me or the new hire); I was given the task of creating entire new courses for students and professors at the UTC, without any prior formal training of my own in pedagogical design.

It didn't take me long to realize that my students cheated and copied, the instructors cheated and copied, the school administrators cheated and copied, and no one really seemed to mind. The emphasis in language learning was on memorization and repetition, rather than on original production or creativity. I found that when I presented an original idea to a faculty member, he or she might have claimed it as their own by the next day, perhaps sharing the idea with others and accepting recognition for the novel notion, whatever it was.

I often thought back to Susana Cabeza de Vaca's question: how will you leave your legacy? I thought my efforts might be hinting at legacy, at sustainability – that word now pulverized by overuse – but I couldn't envision any of my programs or projects persisting in Latacunga after I left.

Somehow, though, learning happened here. With or without my North American ideas and resources, education occurred: the students of the UTC's language program learned to speak English. They'd been doing it their way for years, and they'd continue to do so when I left. After a while, after a long and admittedly painful period of adjustment, I couldn't help but wonder if Fulbright's notion of leaving a mark was simply overrated.

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A week after my arrival in Latacunga I took up residence in an apartment beneath a home where three generations of the same wonderful family lived. Marcia and Edison owned the house and were the parents-in-law of Rodrigo Tovar, my colleague, the mousey and serious-faced director of the English teaching pathway at the UTC. Rodrigo wore his straight black hair in a bouncy bowl-cut, parted exactly down the middle of his head. He refused, from the first day of our meeting, to speak anything but labored English with me; he was overjoyed – though a smile never once so much as gave him away – to have a built-in practice partner.

Rodrigo was insistent that I take the apartment beneath his in-laws. It was close to the university, I'd be safe there, and it overlooked the Cutuchi River. His wife, Paola, smirked the first time he mentioned the house's proximity to the Cutuchi. Rodrigo had acknowledged my interest in rivers, and initially, for me, the house's view of the river was a selling point.

The first time I visited the apartment it was empty but clean. Three days after I agreed to live there, Edison had furnished it completely. Marcia and Edison beamed and held one others' hands tightly as they showed me the finished apartment. That place became my home and the family's skittish golden retriever, Nina, moved in, too.

Marcia was the director of a private school for girls and Edison worked as an educational consultant in the Cotopaxi Province, advising teachers and administrators on sound pedagogical practice and methodologies. In 2010 they were both in their late-fifties, working long days, each one of those days carrying them closer to retirement. A taxi would pick Marcia up each morning and take her to work, while Edison would drive the family's small SUV to his myriad meetings across the region. Marcia wore her curly salt-and-pepper hair short, she never wore make-up, and I never once saw her without a neatly pressed pantsuit or skirt and jacket, even as she fried plantains in her too-small kitchen or hung laundry to dry on her roof.

If she went more than a couple of days without seeing me, Marcia would slowly make her way down the outside stairs, her voice reaching toward my door: "*Chandrita?*" I'd let her in, sometimes reluctantly, and she would give me hugs and ask, "*¿Qué más, Chandrita?*" Marcia and Edison called me *Chandrita*, the suffix *-ita* being the diminutive, a simple form of implied affection. They always used the formal register – the *usted* form of conjugated verbs – when speaking to me, and, even though they'd been married for thirty years, they also used it with each other.

I went upstairs to visit with Marcia during moments when I felt sad or alone, and during my last month in Latacunga, Marcia and Edison took me on a trip to meet their families in the provinces to the west. Before I left Ecuador at the end of my grant term, I translated a number of my favorite recipes into Spanish and assembled them into a little booklet for Marcia.

Marcia's sister had a tortilla stand on a side street downtown, a few blocks off of Latacunga's main square. I never learned how to make tortillas, but I was told repeatedly that it's just flour and water and cheese and a spot of oil. You don't fry them. The only grease should come from the *queso fresco* as it warms within the patty of dough; the oil goes in the dough itself. When I visited Marcia and Edison in 2016, at the end of my most recent trip to Ecuador, there was a stack of those tortillas at the breakfast table the morning we were leaving for the Quito airport. I wanted to carry them with me. I would have eaten nothing but Marcia's sister's tortillas until they ran out, and I would have wanted nothing else and nothing more.

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Five or six times during my tenure in Latacunga, I had dinner parties. I'd take the morning to shop at the open-air market – *el Salto*, it was called, the “leap” or “jump” or “waterfall” – spending maybe ten dollars filling giant striped plastic bags with fresh produce, dry goods, and cut flowers. I'd wander among the stalls, fragrant with star anise, lemongrass, overripe mangos, and raw meats affected by midday sun. Tortillas, plantains, and hunks of chicken sizzled in oversized saucer-shaped pans of reused oil. Pig heads perched naked on wooden tables while the meat stripped from their faces fried in vats alongside the skin from their bodies. Vendors from the highlands brought their potatoes – red, purple, yellow, white, sweet, and fingerling – and sat among them on the concrete as ruddy-faced children darted in and out from between upright burlap sacks. Women shucked corn and cut sugarcane among the folds of their dresses and dirty alpaca blankets; men stood guard at their trucks, playing cards and drinking cokes; impractically loud music and announcements of opportunities to buy imported

plastic watches or fresh quail eggs issued from tinny speakers atop rust-pocked pickup trucks. Flies traveled between heads of wilted lettuce and trays of brown eggs speckled with chicken shit, stopping to congregate on hanging slabs of meat, eventually chased away – or not – by a weathered human hand.

My favorite avocado lady knew me, or at least she knew my face. She acknowledged my repeated visits to her stand and made small talk; she seemed happy to see me every time I came. Her single gold tooth shimmered when she spotted my blond head floating above the ocean of felt fedoras and low-hanging rainbow of woolen shawls. Sometimes she'd even wave at me from across the Salto; in Latacunga, where I didn't have many friends outside my home or the university, this relationship was precious. I'd distract her from her sales as long as she'd let me, and I'd buy more 25-cent avocados than I needed, every time.

I'd spend indulgent hours poring over the online New York *Times* food archives and I'd summon old recipes I knew by heart, things that reminded me of home.

Everything tasted different in Ecuador, familiar recipes made new by the South American cousins of North American ingredients. One variety of sweet potato in Ecuador, once cut open width-wise, reveals a constellation of purple stars radiating from its center. The local zucchini is so woody that it takes a solid boil and sacrifice of its cellular integrity to cook, and by then it's well past what I recognize as squash. Spices are plentiful but outside the MegaMaxi superstores of Quito, where the urban elite peruses aisles brimming with imported jars of McCormack, it's often difficult to find familiar seasonings. At the Salto, in place of jars of ground cumin or curry, I'd find wispy bouquets of fresh *yerba luisa*, *yerba buena*, basil, and chamomile.

I'd invite my colleagues from the UTC, the teachers from the Agrogana rose plantation, the upstairs family, and any Fulbrighters within a 4-hour radius of Latacunga to my dinner

parties. I also always invited Paul Sperry, but so far as I can remember, he was only able to make my 30th birthday party. I'd spend all afternoon cooking. It was always a challenge to make six or eight dishes with my limited supply of pots and pans, and I'd usually send one of the loitering children from upstairs – sweet Gabo or Ishmael or little Ana Paola – to steal industrial-sized aluminum reinforcements from Marcia's kitchen.

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One afternoon, after my day of teaching at the UTC had finished, I went to visit Marcia's sister at her downtown tortilla stand. She had another friend there, and the two of us sat on overturned five-gallon buckets while Marcia's sister cooked tortillas from her place in a plastic lawn chair. I offered my hand at turning tortillas in the skillet, which was the size of those plastic saucers we took sledding as Alaskan kids. Most of my students in Latacunga had never touched the snow, even though Cotopaxi's glaciers were only a couple hours away by truck.

Marcia's sister rejected my offer to help with the tortillas. She had a business to run, and apparently word had spread throughout the family of my ineptitude in the tortilla department.

I looked past the brick wall of the tortilla stand toward the Cutuchi. The river ran deep through a *quebrada*, a ravine, just beyond the street where we sat. On the other side of the ravine, landslides of garbage tumbled toward the water's edge. When I crossed the bridges that spanned the Cutuchi on warm days, I had to cover my nose and mouth; the stench that rose from the water was nauseating.

I asked the women in the tortilla stand about their river.

They told me that when they were little girls growing up in Latacunga, the Cutuchi used to run clear. It's now the color and consistency of used motor oil. Mothers used to wash laundry in the river and children used to play on its banks. Marcia's sister would chase frogs around in the ravine; now the Cutuchi supports no life, aquatic, amphibious, or otherwise. The people in Latacunga regard the Cutuchi as a lost cause, and the city's waste funnels through the little gorge, on toward the croplands to the south, where it will irrigate the very same broccoli and potatoes and carrots that we buy at the Salto market.

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I would go running on mornings when I didn't have class, from my house near the Cutuchi River to the municipal stadium, a place called *La Cocha*, the Kichwa word for "the pond" or "the swamp."

Flower vendors sat with straight backs on the side of the road on the way to La Cocha. Umbrellas and patchwork fabric tarps and layers of clothes kept the sun off, their legs buried in mounds of long skirts and hospital-blue aprons. I never saw them eating, but they were huge ladies that gossiped and chuckled together among their sprays of cut flowers, until I ran by. Then their smiles faded and their heavy heads swiveled atop humps of blue fabric to watch me pass.

A little farther along I'd pass old men playing cards and they'd chirp things like "*Dale, dale*" or "*Con fuerza.*" I never minded their raspy words of encouragement.

Then I'd get to the place where security guards with ambiguous jurisdictions patrolled nonchalantly, kicking at trash and massaging the guns strapped across their torsos. Sometimes they'd holler at me or hiss and I'd feel my blood boil. Every now and again I'd succumb to

frustration and unleash abbreviated out-of-breath lectures at them. Then they'd laugh at me. I'd keep running.

There were often other runners at La Cocha, most of them wearing brightly-colored polyester jogging suits, the ubiquitous uniform of exercisers in the Cotopaxi province. It was rare that someone would be running dedicated laps; mostly they were stretching or walking in between short, ambivalent spurts of exertion. Occasionally, when I'd run in the afternoons, school kids recently set free from school, in their own uniforms, would race me around stretches of the track. They'd usually win.

One time, after attempting to climb the southern Ilinizas volcano with some friends, U.S. human rights lawyers who lived and worked in Quito, I stood alone on the side of the Panamerican Highway, waiting for a Latacunga-bound bus. After starting our climb at 2 a.m., we'd been denied the summit by a combination of relentless rain and wind and unsatisfactory clothing. I was tired and wet as I stood on the dusty shoulder of the highway, watching one bus after another thunder past. Sometimes they'd slow at the sight of me, then speed up once they got a closer look. At one particularly low point, a passenger hurled at my head some greasy food packaging from an open bus window. I ducked before the trash hit me, but I felt the blow.

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I volunteered as an educator at a Fair Trade rose plantation called Agrogana – most of whose roses went to Whole Foods Markets in the United States – offering support for the after-school English and arts program for the children of Agrogana's workers. There, I built an internship program that would have linked interested UTC students of the English Teaching

pathway with the children at Agrogana, offering them the opportunity to explore creative teaching methodologies in a non-traditional educational setting, and, as a bonus, promoting understanding of the Fair Trade initiative and responsible agricultural practices. After months of paperwork and roadblocks and administrative resistance to my project, the proposal was approved and I distributed applications to my students at the UTC. I set a deadline for the internship, the deadline came and went, and not a single UTC student applied. Nothing ever came of that project.

A Quito-based Fulbrighter and I built a platform for diverse communities on either side of the equator to collaborate on projects based in the arts and technology. We were awarded a grant through the embassy's Cultural Affairs office for our first endeavor, the U.S.-Ecuador Community Soundscapes Project, which linked ten unique groups of Ecuadorian and U.S. youth in production of sound "portraits" of their communities. My group of kids at Agrogana and a group of my old students in Alaska were among the participants.

Near Christmastime, at the plantation, over two hundred *campesinos* – Agrogana workers and their families – gathered for a holiday open house. These people had come from the rural outlying areas that surround Latacunga to watch their children perform the skits, readings, and songs they'd been practicing in their classes. It was a long, tedious program with very little structure or flow (normal for Ecuador, nearly intolerable for me) in which the singing children's voices were swallowed by the tinny blare of recorded accompaniment, and careful recitations of memorized verses were drowned by the din of constant conversation. And yet these families and their children observed, or at least were physically present for, the entire three-hour program. The auditorium was filled to capacity that day with hand-me-down outfits reserved for Sundays, callused hands, and subtle expressions of pride.

My group of young scholars had prepared a photographic presentation that, unfortunately, proved to be too complicated for the occasion. During our last few class sessions, my group had learned about Haiku and the presence of the five senses in that form of poetry. Their final synthesis of their new knowledge involved the composition of their own English Haiku in which they expressed their interpretations of the idea of *home*. They used my camera to take photographs that correlated to the themes expressed in their poems. I built the slideshow, we procured a projector, and in the end the limiting factor was the absence of an extension cord that could accommodate a three-pronged plug. No one seemed disappointed but me, and my scholars bravely read their English Haikus to a restless, non-English audience. I like to believe my students' families appreciated the challenge and complexity of trying to define *home* with foreign, borrowed words.

ECUADORIANS WISH FOR three things each time a new year comes around: *salud, dinero, y felicidad* (health, wealth, and happiness). They also like to wear either red or yellow underwear as the old year makes room for the new, as these colors are said to bring the wearer love or money, and they are equally enthusiastic about both options.

Ecuador maintains a tradition of constructing effigies to be burned at midnight on New Year's Eve. These dolls may represent famous characters – such as Buzz Lightyear, the blue things from *Avatar*, or President Correa – or they may represent a family member or local community leader. For the nighttime hours leading up to the stroke of twelve, the dolls are put on magnificent display on porches, sidewalks, and in storefronts. Families and neighborhoods construct elaborate scenes that include the effigies, their testimonies or wills, loud music, and intricate details that speak to a tremendous collective creativity.

On the eve of 2011, the house by the Cutuchi overflowed with siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles and delicious food prepared by Marcia and Gaby, her youngest daughter. After eating and sharing conversation filled with inquiries about Alaska and the incomprehensible strangeness of my vegetarianism, the extended family left and just the residents of our house remained. At midnight, Rodrigo unveiled two colorful homemade cardboard robots. One robot represented Marcia's brother, Pato, and the other was meant to be me. We arranged them in the street so they looked to be engaged in robot battle, with cardboard swords in hand and a small, green referee standing by. Then we set them on fire.

Looking up or down the street, we could see dozens of tiny fires ushering the effigies and all they represented out of the lives of families, burning the *año viejo*, the old year, and creating space for all the good that the new one promised to bring. At midnight, hugs – not kisses – were exchanged and as the fire grew in size, family members took turns leaping over its flames. A bottle of Boone's Farm was passed around but no one drank in excess. And when all that remained of the robots – and of 2010 – was embers, we went inside, where a small family dance party ensued in the living room.

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A few months into my stay, the UTC hosted a conference for representatives of indigenous groups from around Ecuador: *El primer encuentro nacional al rescate de las lenguas ancestrales*, the first annual National Gathering for the Rescue of Ancestral Languages. I'd been looking forward to the conference for weeks.

I remember standing at the back of the crowded lecture hall, straining to hear the speakers

over the unapologetic babbling of faculty and students in the audience. I had come to hear the speakers' stories, but I was forced to listen to the audience's conversations, as well. They were mocking the speakers, mocking the folklore they shared, insulting their traditional dress. The cackling and ridicule overtook my ears and I could no longer hear the stories of the visiting representatives of Shuar, Achuar, Cofán, Kichwa, and Huaorani communities.

One of the instructors from the English teaching pathway – the new hire whose language skills I had been called to informally “evaluate” during my first week in Latacunga – was seated a few rows from the back of the auditorium. He caught sight of me and turned to wave, a big, honest smile stretched across his face. The Huaorani man on stage explained his animist culture's legend: the Huaorani believe they are descendants of the union between an eagle and a jaguar. The English instructor whispered loudly and laughed with his friend, their hands like shadow puppets, intertwining in a strange, derisive interpretation of the myth.

I stared at the back of the instructor's head for a while and then I gave up. As I walked out of the auditorium, I heard the speaker at the podium softly say, “The Huaorani will never hunt a jaguar.”

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In January 2011, a dear friend from California came to visit and we went to Tena to go kayaking. I remember studying my GRE vocabulary cards on that trip, curled up between the bus window and my friend, Rosada's, shoulder. Multisyllabic words seemed the best distraction from the sickening roar of the bus. The highway and the bus slid down the eastern slope of the Andes, plunging toward the Amazon Basin, past brown waterfalls, tiny towns perched on slippery cliffs,

and transitioning ecosystems. I hated those bus rides. Between the landslides, the dizzying fog, the cows on the road, the aggressive speeding and honking, and the ultra-violent low-budget movies shown en route, I developed the opinion that busses in Ecuador were perpetrators of social injustice. Because most nationals couldn't afford a safer means of travel, they defaulted to bus. While we, as relatively wealthy foreigners, might have chosen a different means of travel, the majority of Ecuadorians had no option beyond the bus system. I came to believe that all bus drivers in Ecuador were boorish abusers of power.

My criticism of the Ecuadorian bus system has mellowed with the passage of time, and sometimes I daydream about the greasy *chifles* and creamy *helados* hocked by the traveling vendors who board at some unremarkable stop and disembark somewhere equally as obscure. The chaos of the country is so often tempered by the seemingly limitless patience of its residents.

Sometime late in my grant year, I found myself on an overnight bus, coming home from the colonial town of Cuenca in the south. The fog was so thick that it might have been possible for someone of a different disposition to forget about the invisible thousand-foot cliff off the driver's side of the road. Despite the blinding clouds that suffocated the bus and the steep hairpin turns that defined our route, the driver forged ahead at what I deemed to be an unsustainable clip. We were, I was convinced, going to die. So with tears in my eyes I approached the driver, who was by now my enemy, and in nearly perfect gringa Spanish I demanded that he slow down. He asked me to calm down, breathe, and acknowledge and appreciate the fact that his own *mother* was seated directly behind him. How could he ever endanger *his own mother*?

I looked at the old lady and she smiled peacefully.

But then I insisted, and said that if he wouldn't slow down, he must leave me on the side of this highway, a hundred miles from anywhere, because my chances of survival were better out

there, alone, than on his bus bound for *infierno*.

He was dumbfounded. He looked at me briefly with truly kind and patient eyes, kept his hands on the wheel, made no motion to reduce his speed, and then said, “*Princesa*. Don’t you see the angels? They’re there, on the sides of the bus.”

Mystified and exhausted, I gave up. If this man and his mother really believed that there were angels escorting our bus, then it might be in my best interest to accept their lunatic anodyne and take my seat once again. “They’re carrying us and we’re safe,” the driver said. “Have faith.”

3.

TENA

Tena smells like rain. Even when the rain is reluctant to come, on days when the clouds linger low in the sky yet produce no water, Tena smells like the spongy wetness of the jungle, dank and clean and heavy. When the skies grow dark and the rains finally come, the plants – bromeliads, large ferns, and trees bearing fruits of all kinds – issue perfumes reserved just for rainy days. The songbirds and cicadas and spider monkeys holler out when the rains come. The rivers rise, and sometimes they double in volume in a matter of hours or even minutes. The rain falls so strong that it stretches the fabric of your t-shirt. If you're caught on the streets when the sky lets loose, your toes become steeped in a rushing tincture of rainwater and red mud, spiked with the dog feces that garnish the sidewalks. The water clings to your clothes and skin and hair, and you will not dry out until the sun emerges again. The falling raindrops leave trails through the sky that linger until the equatorial sun returns to desiccate the sultry air.

The rivers here seem thirsty for rain. During a dry spell they are described as *tristes*, sad. Here, you can literally watch, in real time, as the rainwater brings life to rivers and landscapes. Signs at river accesses and on bridges read, "Don't contaminate the rivers, Water is life." *El agua es vida*. It's a common, perhaps overused refrain, but it's never uttered without conviction and a drop of melancholy.

In the heart of Tena there's a peninsula that most people call "the island." It's where the Pano and Tena Rivers come together to cleave city in two, an asphalt soccer stadium and defunct airport to the north, and to the south the bustling *malecón*, the municipal waterfront, teeming

with tour operators promising pink dolphins, piranha, and intimate encounters with medicinal plants. The two rivers come together at the easternmost tip of the island, a rocky little spur directing them toward their common destination, the Río Napo. On most days they are of comparable size and similar character, one meandering or sometimes surging in from the northwest, the other from the southwest, both arriving to the flat, broad Napo Valley from the eastern slope of the Andes.

At the arrowhead tip of the island, the Pano River surrenders its name and clear green hue to the swirling brown Tena River, and together they flow through town, toward the east, where they will soon become the Río Misahuallí. On the north side of the island, murals adorn the giant concrete steps that elevate the street away from the unpredictable vertical reach of the Tena. Amid the mural's chaotic, indiscriminately placed swaths of color, luminous jaguar eyes peer out from a lone cloud of black as if to say, "*welcome to the jungle.*"

The Kichwa legend of the two rivers is Shakespearean: two star-crossed lovers united in post-suicide ecstasy. According to myth, the Tena is a woman – a Quijos princess – and the Pano a young warrior. The two loved each other with such forbidden intensity that they killed themselves in order to be converted into rivers, eventually converging and flowing together toward the sea. The poison came from a vine whose extract was used to paint the tips of hunting arrows – one drop could kill a jungle carnivore. Before dying, Tena and Pano promised Yacu Mama, the goddess of water, that they'd never separate, that they'd stay together always and for eternity, abandoning their human bodies and melting into the landscape as two twin waterways.

A poet from Puyo, just south of Tena, describes the urban confluence as something of a memorial to the two lovers:

Hoy la ciudad recuerda su amor todos los días, al cruzar el puente peatonal, vistos desde el mirador o sentado frente a un bar del malecón, saliendo del colegio, del trabajo, todos quienes pasan en algún momento por el puente peatonal o de vehículos son testigos de ese gran amor.

Today the city [of Tena] remembers their love each day, in crossing the pedestrian bridge, with views from the tower, or sitting in front of a bar on the waterfront, leaving school or work; all those who pass by on the pedestrian or car bridges are witness to this great love.

On the island, at the confluence, are the remains of a zoo. Two of the surviving residents, a pair of emaciated boa constrictors, persist haggard and broken in a glass cage, a 50-gallon box with dirty, barely transparent walls. The other survivor is a tapir the size of a pony, who traverses the property between rivers, tame and agreeable and dog-like. The old zoo has security guards, who patrol the buildings on the island and the empty tower that rises above the rivers. At the second Jondachi Fest, we held our athlete orientation and race briefing on the island, in an air-conditioned meeting hall, part of the old zoo, its entrance just around the corner from the dying boa constrictors. As I arranged t-shirts and paperwork before the athletes arrived, the tapir stood silently in the doorway, observing me with what might have been curiosity. I stared back, until a security guard shooed it away.

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“Cierra la puerta, mi niña.”

Close the door, baby girl, he whispers with typical Ecuadorian patience. She doesn't close the door. Instead she shines a flashlight directly into his eyes. He eventually takes the flashlight from her and she scampers from the room; the door remains open.

We're in the only empty room in the house, and the space is completely dark, save the astringent light emanating from the babbling television on the other side of the open door. He shines the flashlight upward, the light illuminating the underside of his face from the chin up. He widens his eyes, sticks out his tongue, and attempts to laugh wickedly. Diego Robles is about to tell a ghost story.

A web of loose wires and extension cords adorns the otherwise naked wall behind him. His face is pocked with acne that's discernible even in the shadows. That's a topic that's come up before. Mayonnaise is his favorite food, and acne is the price his skin pays.

The letters on the front of his black shirt are glowing, along with the whites of his eyes, against the darkness. Together they spell out in English, THE SECRET OF LIFE IS TO DARE.

“I'm black, you know. That's why you can't see me.” He laughs. His Amazonian skin is dark, but to call him black would be taking it too far. He's making a joke, and not at his own expense. He's wearing a backward baseball cap emblazoned with a yellow Batman insignia, which also glows as it floats atop his brow.

“¿De dónde es la chica?” Where's the girl from, someone hollers from the doorway.

He answers simply, quietly, unfazed by the steady stream of interruptions, *“Estados Unidos.”* The inquiring voice seems satisfied and a flurry of footsteps carries it away.

He's at his cousin's house. These screeching kids, all of them under the age of eleven, are his cousin's. His own baby – whose name is also Diego – is at his mother's house. Diego Sr. and

the young mother are trying to be friends, he says, but they are not romantically involved, and the baby stays with her, mostly, where she lives with her own parents and grandparents.

He tells me that today was the last day of *carnival*, which Diego's Tena community celebrates with at least five days off from work, excessive drinking, and the liberal application of spray foam over the entire city and its inhabitants. On any given night during *carnival*, pedestrians cannot expect to travel a single city block without being ambushed by enthusiastic troublemakers wielding multiple cans of foam. The stuff stinks, it stains, and it sticks to everything it touches. Earlier today, as the end of *carnival* neared and the cans of foam began to run dry, locals resorted to throwing eggs at passersby. One friend, Diego says, hurled an egg at a little girl. To the girl's horror, a baby chicken, tiny, limp, and fully dead, tumbled out upon impact. My mind can't move past this image; Diego doesn't skip a beat.

He says he's been working without a break for the past week, safety kayaking along with the raft trips that his family takes out every day. The tourists visiting Tena this week are nationals, locals from other parts of Ecuador, and they'll all be leaving tonight. With the closing of the festival, it's time for the regular people to get back to their regular jobs. Diego says he's tired and ready for a rest.

"When people come to Tena I tell them to choose local guides," he says. "We are the best. We are like fishes in the water." Diego learned to maneuver a kayak in his father's tilapia pond. Like a fish in the water, indeed.

When he was twelve years old, Diego met a kayak coach from North America. He was just passing through Tena, visiting a couple of expat friends from the southeastern United States who were pioneering commercial whitewater in Ecuador. This coach – Diego remembers him as "*Oriom*," which probably means his name was Orion – coaxed him from the rubber rafts and

inner tubes he'd grown up with and into a plastic kayak. Diego practiced in the pond, among the tilapia. When time allowed after school, he'd take his hand-me-down kayak to one of the dozens of rivers that surround Tena, periodically seeking the guidance of the expats but mostly learning by doing, by feeling the river and by knowing his place within it.

He talks about some trouble he's been having this week with river guides from Quito. They travel four hours to Tena to guide trips on his local rivers, then head back home to Quito later in the same day. Their investment in Tena is minimal, and this irritates Diego. There are plenty of local guides, mostly indigenous boys from Tena, whose only source of work is the river. He doesn't like the guides from the city or their irreverent practice of stealing work from locals. "I protect my people, especially people from Tena." He's fierce about this. He's fierce about protecting his family's rafting business, his values, and his rivers. His eyes convey this intensity, emerging ablaze, searing, from the blackness of the room.

Diego admits that it's painful to watch his rivers die. He sometimes posts videos online of yellow bulldozers and backhoes dredging riverbeds for gravel; he and his nephew Brayan are trying to explore as many rivers by kayak as possible now, before they are disfigured by development or by dams.

Diego is arguably the best kayaker in Ecuador. He's taught a dozen younger boys to paddle hard whitewater, pushing them past their perceived limits and fostering in them the courage and confidence necessary to progress in the sport. He was the originator of a trend among Tena kayakers to tattoo a wave design on the space between index finger and thumb. The wave extends toward the middle of his hand, and when he's on the water the shaft of his paddle is enveloped in art.

"Baja el volúmen." Turn it down, he says, through the open door and to no one in

particular. The music gets louder, and only then does he raise his voice. Someone finally listens, the music disappears, and once again the only sounds are those of the children and the humming static of the television.

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In 2010 I met Javier, who goes by the nickname Makanaki and whose family runs an all-indigenous river guiding company in Tena. Makanaki is trouble. He fights at bars and he likes to kayak class V creeks under the heavy influence of a local spirit, *aguardiente*, distilled from sugarcane. Makanaki and I get along well, though, and during one of my visits to Tena he asked my friend and me to work as safety kayakers on his company's raft trip on the Jatunyacu River. In exchange for free lunch, we agreed to paddle along with the trip, providing an added element of "safety" for the clients. In the United States this would in no way be legal or acceptable, given our lack of familiarity with the Jatunyacu or the protocol of his company. But we did it anyway, and lunch was delicious.

Makanaki brought his younger brother, Alvaro, on that trip. Alvaro was fourteen, and he'd been in a whitewater kayak a total of two times before. He was quiet and calm and clearly terrified of the gringas. Makanaki asked us to keep an eye on Alvaro, to give him pointers, to make sure we didn't lose him or his borrowed kayak in the rapids.

Because he hadn't yet learned to roll his boat, he swam every time he tipped over, which was often. He quietly persevered, accepted our deficient instruction, and in the flat water between rapids he attempted his roll again and again, and with each attempt, he swam. Late in the trip, Alvaro's sinuses began to bother him. I gave him the nose plug off of my helmet,

insisting that he wear it whenever he planned to practice his roll. Sheepishly and with the sweetest of silent smiles, he accepted it.

At one point I asked Makanaki if he was worried about his little brother. He dismissed my concern and told me to have faith. Alvaro belonged in the water – the rivers had raised him – and it was time he learned to kayak. Someday soon, Makanaki said, Alvaro would make his living as a river guide. Knowing how to kayak would make him more employable and versatile. This wasn't just for fun; this was for his future.

4.

JONDACHI

The La Merced de Jondachi hydro project specs are as follows:

A 13 foot-tall cement dam will span the width of the Jondachi. Four hundred sixty-nine cubic feet per second (cfs) – the quantity needed to operate the project at full capacity – will be diverted from the river and dedicated to the generation of 18.1 megawatts of electricity. A small impoundment will store some water, but it won't be enough to allow for meaningful distribution or beneficial use to local communities. There will be no backup reservoir to hold excess water after heavy rains; there will be no reserve to draw from during periods of low-flow. There will be no guarantee reliable generation of electricity. Stream flows on the Jondachi have not been recorded, and no historical data is available to the project planners.

There will be no consideration for fish passage. Forty percent of fish species in the Tropical Andes region of the world live only there; they can be found nowhere else on the planet (Anderson 2011). Run-of-river dams – like the Jondachi project – divert water from the main channel, run the water through turbines, and eventually return the water to the river a few miles downstream. The de-watered reach of river becomes a different environment for aquatic and riparian biota. Things change and the biology must adapt. Some species, of course, limited by their very constitution, will not be able to conform when the water is removed from their habitat.

The Ecuadorian Rivers Institute has opposed hydro development on the Jondachi River for over a decade. In 2012, the ERI began its legal defense of the Jondachi in a renewed effort to stop the La Merced de Jondachi hydro project and keep the Jondachi flowing freely. In an

inspiring and novel political statement, Ecuador built into its 2008 constitution an acknowledgement of the rights of nature, personified as Mother Nature, or *pachamama*, in Kichwa. In theory, that constitution granted legal standing to natural entities such as rivers; the ERI states that it is acting on behalf of the Jondachi River to be sure those “rights” are not disregarded.

Additionally, under the 2008 constitution, human benefits from water and in-stream environmental flows are prioritized above industrial or productive uses. Because it is a *human* use of the river, by law developers should consider recreation in the determination of environmental flows and the planning of projects. The ERI is pursuing the designation of the Jondachi-Hollín-Misahualí-Napo Ecological Corridor, the first-ever endeavor of its kind in Ecuador. If all goes right, the proposed ecological corridor will be included in the Ecuadorian government’s new plan to make the country a major low-impact adventure tourism destination. The initiative is championed, at least for now, by the Ecuador’s *Ministerio del Deporte* (Ministry of Sports) and the *Ministerio del Turismo* (Ministry of Tourism).

At the heart of the initiative is precedent-setting protection of the Jondachi under a new wild and scenic statute. The ERI hopes that this process could open the door for future protection of other imperiled rivers in the Amazon Basin. If the ERI’s model is implemented, other governments can follow in the footsteps of Ecuador.

The ERI, for most of its fourteen years in Tena, has operated as a one-man show. I met that man, Paul Sperry, in 2010.

EVEN AS OVERWHELMING interest in hydro development persists in some pockets of the world, dams are being dismantled across the globe and great rivers are being set free. Last

year alone, according to the conservation group American Rivers, 72 dams were dismantled within the borders of the United States. For Paul Sperry, who grew up in the southeastern U.S. surrounded by steep creeks and a unified local kayak culture, it's bittersweet to read of such success in river restoration in his home country. From his office within his modest apartment in Tena, with the help of some local supporters, many of them expats or members of the Quito elite, he has led a singular mission in Ecuador since 2002: to protect and preserve the country's unique water resources. The offenses against rivers in Ecuador are numerous and often heinous: unauthorized damming, rampant illegal gravel and gold mining, deforestation in riparian zones, devastating historical contamination from oil extraction...the list goes on. The ERI, with its limited funds, has a hard time prioritizing one fight over another.

Before I ever met him in person, after a friend from the river world introduced me to Sperry's ERI, I'd exchanged novella-length emails with Sperry on the myriad threats to ecological and social systems in South America. I appreciated how much information he was willing to share with an interested stranger, but I often felt as though I didn't have sufficient experience to continue the conversation.

Sperry is a mesmerizing and challenging character. He is meticulous in his methodology and careful with his words. He arrived in Ecuador in the late 1990s as a kayaker, and he still sees his work through a kayaker's eyes: he chooses his lines carefully, weighing ideal outcomes with the potential consequences of his decisions. His list of past and current projects is long, and he's hardly a radical. He seems fully aware of his otherness, his status as an outsider, despite his years of dedication to and investment in the local community. He's tall and fit with a full head of graying hair. Life in Ecuador and the stress of his chosen work have taken a toll; he often looks tired. He does yoga every morning and goes kayaking when he can, which, admittedly, is not

often — he spends most of his waking hours poring over maps, dredging the internet for data, visiting government offices and constructing complex documents in Spanish legalese. He avoids the bars. On Sunday nights he prepares the coming week’s pancakes with chocolate chips and maple syrup delivered by occasional visitors from the States. He stocks his counters with fresh fruit, usually mangos and avocados – he prefers them for their removable skins – from the corner store beneath his apartment. He keeps on his counter separate towels for hands and for dishes. He never washes dishes with water from the faucet – he uses bottled water from the 5-gallon jug he keeps and refills – and dishes must be completely dry before using or restocking on shelves. He has an affinity for good bourbon – he’s from the American South, after all – but doesn’t care for Pilsener, Club, or the less popular national lager with identical flavor, Brahma.

He had a girlfriend when I first met him, Andalucía. He called her Anda. She has since moved on, though when she comes to Tena she still stays in Sperry’s apartment and keeps some things there. They are sometimes roommates, he says, nothing more. When she’s around, she seems to get frustrated easily and generally avoids eye contact with him.

Despite sporting a well-earned patina of fatigue, Sperry’s blue eyes sparkle when he talks about rivers. When he gets really excited, he winks when he speaks and his smile gets a little bit crooked, like he’s sharing a secret with you, like he’s on to something and now you are too, and you also can’t help but get excited. He nudges you with his elbow and drawls a low, humming “You know?” You may or may not actually “know,” but you find yourself nodding along anyway.

Sperry doesn’t seem like he’s listening. It appears he prefers to speak – a lot – rather than listen. But when you rummage through his memory for chronicled data, or he conjures details of a seemingly forgettable conversation from five years ago, you are convinced that he must, in

fact, listen. Not only that, but he must also remember, with uncommon lucidity, all the pieces and nuances that an average mind lets slip away: every statistic, price, and date; every precise maneuver in every rapid he's run; each purported interpersonal altercation in town; the way people's faces have reacted to lectures he's given; how certain rooms have chilled when he walked in; and which restaurants have historically offered the best vegetarian options throughout the years.

I watch his eyes when he speaks with others. They look away from his conversation partner as he tries to explain himself with more and more words, many of them repeated to the point of insulting the listener. He tries to remind the listener of every detail of context, everything they might need to be successful in the dialog, all the ways in which his superior memory might help put the pieces in place. Succinctness eludes him; he loses conversation partners with his loquacity. Some Ecuadorians in Tena, when they reference Sperry, flap their four fingers against their thumb in the universal gesture for *blah-blah-blah*. It must be discouraging, I think, to wake up each morning knowing that everyone you talk to is bound to disappoint you, unable to keep up. To me, at least, it seems that Sperry's already anticipated the solution before the question's even been asked, which would put him at an advantage in chess but at a point of perpetual complexity in social interactions.

Most of the ERI's money comes from small (under \$5000) grants or private donations for specific projects. Sperry does contract consulting work in Peru to pay the bills, but the ERI cannot afford to pay him a living wage for his work in Ecuador. His parents and sisters all work in the medical or bio-med fields. I wonder – but I don't ask – if he's able to persist in Ecuador because of their support. I also wonder why they don't just bring him home.

He keeps a pristine mid-90s Toyota Tacoma at his parents' place in Missouri; he does not keep a vehicle in Ecuador. He's a cancer survivor and a Dead Head. Some people speculate that he's done too many drugs, too much LSD; I don't think that at all.

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The bathroom at Paul Sperry's third-floor guesthouse is set apart, outside the actual apartment and among the clotheslines and the washbasin and the doors to two other small homes. Everything is concrete. The electric hot water heater is mounted on the shower wall. When I stay there I generally choose to take cold showers, bypassing the box of wires and opting out of a morning round of roulette with electrocution.

In January of 2015, the bathroom trash was full with toilet paper, three or more gringos defecating constantly, their bellies wrecked by the invisible enemies that live on the fruit, in the water, and everywhere else they put their hands. In the mirror above the toilet, my hair looked impossibly curly, my pale skin sweaty, my face drained of color and enthusiasm as I entered into the fifth straight day of computer work at Paul Sperry's kitchen table, preparing for the first-ever Jondachi Fest. English voices climbed the stairs.

I opened the door and in the concrete hallway, my old friend Will was standing, sweating, burdened with bags of kayaking gear. Still lingering on the top stair was his coworker, a kayak guide from New York I knew to be Dave – we had been introduced via social media in hopes that he might document the festival on video. I noticed that he wasn't sweating as much as Will or me.

I gave Will a hug and Dave, too. They left their bags in the apartment, adding to the mess of gringo luggage strewn across the floor. Now five North Americans' gear and clothes and Gatorade bottles clogged the tiny space and made it feel even hotter, and even more uncomfortable each time a neighbor caught a glimpse of our stuff through the open door. Will and Dave then left to go paddle the Upper Jondachi River, promising to be back sometime in the evening. I went back to my computer.

When they returned from a day of kayaking on the crown jewel of Ecuador's whitewater rivers, glowing, sun-kissed, and clean, I was still sweating at Paul Sperry's kitchen table, struggling to incorporate all the details of our overly complicated race registration forms into coherent documents in both Spanish and English. My body hurt and I had not left the table in many hours, except to make occasional, desperate trips to the upstairs bathroom.

"What's an inscription?" Dave asked the computer screen as he hovered over my shoulder.

"Registration," I said.

"But to inscribe isn't the same as to register, is it?"

"It translates this way from Spanish and here they just use it in English, too. It's fine."

He paused, confused. "But an inscription is different. Like something you scratch into a rock or a trophy. Shouldn't somebody tell them?"

"Don't worry about it. If you want to *inscribe* yourself in the race, you should give me twenty-five dollars and sign this ten-page waiver."

Paul Sperry emerged from his back office wearing nothing but perfectly preserved Patagonia river shorts from the mid-1990s, staring down at his clipboard, scratching his head with his free hand. "We need to design this t-shirt back with the list of all the sponsors on it." He

looked up and, noticing the two extra bodies in the room, offered some high fives to the boys who had just gotten into town and off the river. I stood up and peeled my shorts from the backs of my thighs; I wanted high fives, too, but instead I snuck past them and up to the concrete bathroom.

That evening Dave offered to help with the t-shirt. He'd gone to college for graphic design and was proficient in the Adobe programs. What would have taken me hours of YouTube tutorials and inefficient keystrokes, Dave finished in twenty minutes. For those twenty minutes he sat across from me at Sperry's kitchen table, his hat tilted back above his face, his kayaker shoulders hunched heavily over Will's keyboard laptop. Will offered me a cold Pilsener and Dave smiled as my computer offered the room some treble-heavy Willie Nelson. He quietly pointed to his Waylon Jennings shirt. I had noticed it earlier, but I nodded anyway, straightened up my back, and went back to populating the fields on the inscription forms.

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Dave is handsome and reminds me of many of my river friends: confident, quick-witted, and inordinately fond of cold, malty beverages. His skin is always perfectly tan, which is really irritating; his curly chestnut hair looks good at any length and regardless of whether he's washed it during the past week. He's a former competitive swimmer and a sometimes-sponsored kayaker, meaning that river industry companies sometimes pay him to go kayaking. He has a tattoo on his forearm that reads, TRY HARDER. He never seems to get nervous. So when he claimed he was nervous around me, I naturally assumed it was a ruse, a convenient and well-rehearsed line. I was quick to dismiss our first kisses as another unfortunate river-world mistake.

At the end of the first Jondachi Fest, as we loaded up the kayaks and rafts after a two-day descent of the Lower Jondachi and Hollín Rivers, Dave handed me a bracelet. It's made of black cloth and features the same rainbow spiral as all the Ministry of Tourism's marketing materials. In English, it reads: *ECUADOR LOVE LIFE*.

He tied it onto my wrist on the banks of the river. It was the first gift that Dave gave me. The next two gifts were these: one ice cream bar, brand name Magnum, two days later, just before I left Ecuador to return to school; and one shiny new kayak helmet, four long months later, when he came to live, to stay, in Montana.

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Early in 2014, Ecuador launched a powerful new tourism campaign. On all new marketing materials, the same circular, polychromatic mosaic appears, loosely suggesting the form of a wheel, tunnel, or seashell. It's rumored that the country's goal is to eventually replace top non-oil revenue sources like bananas and shrimp with a sustainable tourism market: perhaps prioritizing experience over extraction, at least in the realm of agriculture. According to the Ministry of Tourism, over 600,000 foreign tourists visited Ecuador between January and May 2014, an increase of 16.3% from the same period in 2013. Tourists from neighboring Columbia account for the majority of Ecuador's annual tourist influx. The U.S. also sends a substantial number of visitors each year; Americans comprise Ecuador's second-largest tourist demographic.

For the 2015 Superbowl, Ecuador took out a \$3.8 million ad in English, a thirty-second collage of images of equatorial beauty set to a whimsical re-mastering of the Beatles' song, "All

you Need is Love.” In addition to the thirty-second Superbowl spot, a full, song-length edit of the “All you need is Ecuador” ad circulated on the Internet. At minute 1:12 a young kayaker appears next to a colorful floating word: CONQUER. The commercial’s spokesman, in a deep and somehow reassuring voice, says slowly, as though it were the first time these infamous lyrics have ever been muttered, “There’s nothing you can make that can’t be made, nothing you can save that can’t be saved.” The kayaker in the commercial is Brayan Robles, Diego Robles’ 17 year-old nephew from Tena. He paddles deftly off the lip of a 40-foot waterfall on the Río Hollín and his soaring kayak is enveloped in the mist of the cascade. A shot later, we see him paddling away from the camera, down a steep-walled jungle canyon, as the strangely familiar narrator breathes the last word of the lyric: “saved.”

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On the morning of the second annual Upper Jondachi Race, I lean against a rock, my feet submerged in a pool on this still-wet river. This pool, just downstream from the La Merced de Jondachi dam site, is itself like magic, offering cool water in a heat that cannot be approximated or imagined away from the midline of the earth. This rock in the upper stretch of the Jondachi River, 15 or so miles outside of Tena, is situated just under one degree south of the equator. The water is the sometimes-blue-sometimes-green of tropical places; it reflects the mood of the sky. The trees here are rooted in cracks in the canyon wall and their trunks reach skyward, low-hanging branches dripping with heavy, plate-like leaves toward the river’s surface. Mosses coat the shaded facets of cabana-sized dry rocks, algae covers all stony surfaces that are in regular contact with the water. In between these lithic sculptures that define the river’s course, spiders

the size of fists linger in dark cracks where they showcase their thready architecture; the rocks themselves are the ceramic art of surrealists.

I look upstream to the hanging bridge I crossed to get here. It spans the river maybe one hundred feet below the site of the proposed dam, and it's been here a lot longer than the dam's emerging infrastructure. That bridge was probably here before unregulated deforestation in the riparian zone began to accommodate cultivation of finicky *naranjilla*; before unchecked gravel mining scarred nearly all the surrounding river corridors; before illegal gold mining and dredging became commonplace throughout the Napo watershed. It was here before international boaters started kayaking in Ecuador, before interested parties began assessing the value of the free-flowing river as resource, before the efforts to quantify the worth of an unobstructed jungle creek to the local tourism industry.

Now, a vinyl banner hangs off the upstream side of that bridge: Jondachi Fest, it says, in bright, confident typeface. The logo emblazoned upon that banner – a leaf, half forest green and half aqua blue – was dreamed up by a graphic designer in Boulder, Colorado. His first iteration of the design was rejected for its uncanny resemblance to the corporate logo of Petroamazonas, Ecuador's state-run oil company.

A teenaged indigenous porter from the village of La Merced de Jondachi helped me hang it from the bridge, and I gave him a Jondachi Fest t-shirt in exchange for his assistance. He's now leaning up against this rock beside me, cooling his feet, his new t-shirt soaked through with sweat. It was a hot, slippery trek through mud and shade-less fields to get here, twenty minutes of stumbling downhill with lifejackets, ropes, and waterproof bags full of paperwork and a cumbersome, antiquated megaphone.

We watch as an ant trail of people slips over the gnarled roots of riverside trees: representatives of the Ecuadorian media, local firefighters contracted to provide emergency medical support and the use of their two-way radios, and professional timekeepers on loan from the national Ministry of Sports. A few members of Makanaki's family of raft guides are drunk already; the porter and I exchange glances as they tumble down the final stretch of jungle trail to the boulders and gravel of the riverbank. One of them stops to shake my hand as they pass by the pool I'm reluctant to leave. Eduardo's hands wrap around mine, his eyes abuzz with morning intoxication, his smile soft, his damp cotton shirt wrapped around his head. "Are we good?" I ask in Spanish. "Yeah, we're good. Sorry about my cousin." He kisses my cheek, his face clammy and stubbly, and then follows his family downstream.

The first of the kayaks have made it to this particular bend in the river: a diffuse rainbow of plastic boats gathers like oblong Skittles candies in the eddy that contains this pool. There are about twenty kayakers here now, ferrying to and from the far side of the river or stretching their shoulders from their seats in their boats, their legs hidden by black neoprene pulled over cockpits. I've put on my lifejacket and crawled up onto another rock a little further out from shore. The vintage megaphone dangles tenuously from my shoulder, and I wonder how hard it would be to replace in Ecuador if it were to accidentally take a swim.

A few kayaks gather in the water around the rock I'm perched upon. "We're still waiting on the girls," a North American paddler hollers up to me, his voice muffled by river noise.

There seems to be some concern for the drunken raft guides downstream. One of them is threatening a swim to a mid-stream boulder just above a precipitous drop in the river. I try my best to trust he won't do it and focus instead on what's in front of me: a line of anxious kayakers

from six different countries, a nervous government timekeeper with a strong Cuban accent that I barely understand, and this precious fossil of a megaphone.

“Here they come,” someone shouts over the din of the two rapids we are sandwiched between, one 200 feet downstream, the other just upstream from our eddy, seething beneath the hanging bridge. One by one, the female kayakers come shooting out from behind the monolith that chokes the current against the river-left wall and obscures the rapid from downstream view. Two more kayakers follow, the last of the group, the “sweepers,” we call them, and they nod to me that everyone’s here. My stomach is in knots. I reach for the megaphone.

A swell of shrieks and garbled shouts arrives like a wave from downstream. People onshore are whistling, calling out to or about something in the water, waving their hands and gesticulating wildly. He’s done it, I think. The drunken cousin is in the river. “Is everything okay?” a tiny, concerned voice reaches up to me from the water. Another North American kayaker, a young woman from Washington State, implores me for information and consolation with her saucer-wide eyes. “Sure,” I lie with a smile. “You ready for this?”

I grab the megaphone and holler out in my best gringa Spanish that it’s finally happening: we’re about to have a race. And at that moment, in what may prove to be our collective naiveté, we believe this race might actually save this river, a notion that we don’t dare dismiss, not now, not with all that’s been invested, not with all that’s at stake.

IT’S MY OLD FRIEND MAKANAKI. Drunken sabotage, I think.

Earlier in the morning, as I handed out race bibs and checked required safety equipment on each competitor (whistle, river knife, rescue rope), Makanaki breathed fire into my face. I sat on the tailgate of a taxi truck and recoiled as *aguardiente* fumes streamed from his mouth. I’d

asked him to show me his whistle and knife – he didn't have either.

“Chandra, don't ask me to carry a knife. I'll kill someone. You know I'll do it.” The rumors were many: Makanaki had stabbed one of his own brothers sixteen times in a drunken fight; he'd burglarized several mutual friends, taking whatever he could from windows left open in the night; he'd been violent with women.

I averted my eyes and stood up, backing away from his dragon breath. “These are the rules,” I said. “It's for everyone's safety.”

He'd become furious. His own day-drunk cousins were reluctant to support him in his tantrum; his little brother Alvaro Andy, now a handsome 19 years old, stood quiet and watched as Makanaki threw his fit. Alvaro hadn't had a whistle, so he'd asked around until he found one to borrow for the race. The fact that these two were brothers worried me. I was afraid Alvaro might one day grow to be angry and drunk like his brother.

Makanaki looked toward Paul Sperry, who stood beside me now, along with a few Ecuadorian kayakers who were getting anxious.

“*¡Care verga!*” Makanaki shouted in Sperry's face the most insulting of local one-liners. “*¡Estos jodidos gringos!*” These fucking gringos, he wailed. When no one shouted out in solidarity, Makanaki's frustration intensified. He spun in circles. Someone had informed the police and they started encircling the scene, pistols at the ready.

It seemed to me that everyone there saw his boozy violence and no one heard his words. No one was really listening. Makanaki shouted that he would not be kept from his own river, from his family's river. No one had the right to keep him from the river, from the water that flows through him like blood, like *aguardiente*.

Some political theorists say that Latin American politicians “fiddle far too much with their constitutions.” Every year since 1978, Latin American countries have adopted an average of nearly one new constitution per nation. According to the *Economist*, the average Latin American constitution survives 16.5 years. For comparison, constitutions lucky to be born in Western Europe might live to be 77.

In September 2008, Ecuadorian voters enthusiastically approved their twentieth constitution since the nation’s independence in 1830. Rafael Correa, president since 2007, called for a massive overhaul of “the neoliberal policies that had shifted wealth from marginalized peoples to elite corporate interests” (Becker 2011).

Economic neoliberalism, according to anthropologist David Harvey, was a 1970s political project aimed to consolidate and reconstruct class power under the doctrine that market exchange is itself an *ethic*. The ethic of the market – of exchange, enterprise, acquisition, and “free” pursuit of wealth – can therefore, under the neoliberalist model, guide human action. Neoliberalism aimed to privatize everything from resource extraction to infrastructure to education to energy production, operating under the assumption that if free enterprise can proliferate into all corners of human existence, humanity will be better off for it. In the international arena, neoliberalism spread throughout much of the developing world with the help of the international financial institutions and multinational corporate hegemony. In Latin America, where debt to international lenders became especially prevalent in the 1980s and 90s, many nations relinquished control of their economies to foreign parties.

Correa's new constitution, however, was not met without resistance from the indigenous pueblo. While Correa and his supporters labeled his leftist agenda and the constituent assembly a "citizens' revolution," the indigenous minority worried that this new president was working to inhabit political spaces previously occupied by social movements. Correa's proclamation that this was a *citizens'* revolution, a revolution of the individual, not one of antiquated social movements, was a blow to the communal social structure of most of Ecuador's 14 indigenous nationalities. Throughout the transition, Correa butted heads with indigenous leaders as both sides strove to organize and mobilize citizens at the grass-roots level.

Correa's constituent assembly was led by Quito-born economist Alberto Acosta, who promised to operate under the Kichwa principle of *sumak kawsay* – the notion of living well and searching for "harmony between people and nature." Indigenous people, though largely in favor of Acosta's purported platform, grew increasingly concerned that Correa's successes would come at their expense.

The indigenous leaders in the assembly – represented largely by CONAIE, the *Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas del Ecuador* – emphasized for their part the importance of abandoning the neoliberal model and the extractive industries that wreaked havoc on local ecosystems and societies. Also on the indigenous agenda was a call for nationalization of natural resources, equal rights for women, and a reevaluation of the management of water: the new constitution should explicitly declare access to water a human right and its privatization and commodification should be illegal. Water use should be prioritized to meet human needs – including food sovereignty – before industry.

In November 2007, as the assembly gathered in Quito to "fiddle," to revise and restructure this twentieth constitution, things came to an ugly head in the Amazon.

In a town called Dayuma, on the edge of Yasuní National Park, indigenous inhabitants protesting oil exploitation took control of several oil wells. They called for economic support and local environmental protections. Correa sent his military forces to quell the swells of unpatriotic subversion, proclaiming that “infantile environmentalists” were themselves hurdles to development and that his agenda would not be derailed by pressure from social movements. In this one incident, 45 protesters were arrested and charged with terrorism for their efforts to thwart oil extraction.

“No more strikes, no more violence. Everything through dialogue, nothing by force,” Correa declared in 2008. The famous Ecuadorian protest – the burning of tires, the colorful tagging of public buildings with social movement monikers, the vocal dissent in broad daylight – was effectively shut down, made illegal in Correa’s quest for more organized, centralized governmental control.

The 2008 constitution also grants communities – including indigenous groups, who are often denied a voice in the national political arena – the right to consultation regarding development projects on their lands and waters. However, the Ecuadorian government, in reality, owns all hydrocarbon, mineral, and water resources, meaning that, in practice, local – and especially rural – communities don’t have much influence in decisions about hydro development. The 2008 constitution mandates – as does the 2007 U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People – “free, prior, and informed consultation” with impacted communities. Consultation, of course, does not equate with consent.

In May 2008, CONAIE asserted that indigenous communities must be consulted before their lands are opened to mineral extraction. Indigenous groups hoped to maintain control over concessions to operate on their lands. The issue of extraction without consent persisted and in

January 2009 Correa implemented a new mining law with intentions of making jobs and growing the economy. Still, no approval from local communities was necessary to begin extraction. Struggling to get a foothold in the debate, opponents of the new law exposed the lack of associated environmental safeguards, calling the law unconstitutional in its contradiction of the new constitution's supposed protection of environmental and indigenous rights. Indigenous leaders and environmental activists said the law ushered in a reignited neoliberal agenda, allowing foreign corporate interests to lay further claim to Ecuadorian resources.

In response to the new law, CONAIE organized demonstrations throughout the country, and 4000 protesters blockaded the Latacunga-Ambato route in the southern highlands, while tens of thousands organized in the Amazon and on the coast. Correa, meanwhile, declared these dissenters were blocking Ecuador's economic and social progress. The blockades were met with violence: beatings, arrests, and gunshots.

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I'll probably never kayak Ecuador's Upper Jondachi River. It's not for lack of trying – I do try. It's because, by the time I am a strong enough kayaker to enter the emerald current that snakes and plummets between sheer walls glistening with epiphytes, giant ferns, and creeping ivies, the majority of the water that flows freely through it now will be carried away by an aqueduct for the generation of power. The water will be pilfered from this ancient corridor that has seen centuries of hydrologic migration, reassigned to a new, geometrically perfect pathway, funneled toward magnetic turbines that miraculously produce electricity – the magic of

engineering, the celebrated genius of humankind. Maybe it's fairer to say that the water will be borrowed, temporarily repurposed, like a beautiful woman summoned from the crowd for the grand magic trick, then returned after the electricity's been made and the crowd's been wowed, wooed, pleased by the miracle of control, the taming of wild waters and white tigers. Then it will be returned to the river, after chasing its shadow several miles downstream via an aqueduct that parallels the dry riverbed.

Two-thirds of the world's large rivers are dammed. Major river systems unaffected and unobstructed by dams are rare. The term "free-flowing" conjures images of precious movement, tumbling water, migrating fishes, liberty. Free. Flowing. For now.

The existing majority of dams are concentrated in in the northern third of the world, and now developers have turned their gazes to the rivers of the frontier Neotropics. A recent ecological impact assessment of planned hydro projects across all six major Andean tributaries to the Amazon arrived at the following conclusions (Finer, Jenkins 2012):

1. There's a critical need for more careful evaluation of dam projects in the region. If better planning and assessment doesn't come fast, construction of dams in the Andean Amazon will "continue as a chaotic, project-focused endeavor with little regard for the larger regional picture."
2. We urgently need a strategy to maintain Andes-Amazon ecological connectivity. This directly involves the protection of the few remaining free-flowing river systems from hydro development, from glacial headwaters to lowland estuary.

3. Hydropower cannot be accurately labeled a “low-impact energy source” in the Neotropics. Not all rivers are good candidates for hydro development, and projects on some rivers will carry more dire consequences than others.

Plans currently exist for over 400 dams across the Amazon Basin. Of those, 151 will be built on five of six major tributaries that flow from the Andean headwaters (Little, 2013). Ecuador’s Coca-Codo Sinclair project is the only existing mega dam in the Andean headwaters, but there are plans for at least 17 more. Second only to Peru, Ecuador has the highest number of planned and existing dams in the region.

More than half of the dams in the Andean Amazon are planned for Peru’s Marañon River and its tributaries that reach across Ecuador and Peru. Much of Ecuador’s current hydropower comes from dams on two northern tributaries to the Marañon, but the rest of that river system is still free-flowing (Finer, 2012). The Marañon is the largest tributary to the Amazon – technically and historically regarded as its hydrological source. It is a huge river, discharging over 500,000 cfs at its mouth (similar to the output of the Mississippi) and flowing 1000 miles through desiccated Andean highlands to the jungles and flatlands of the Amazon Basin. A 340-mile section of the Marañon that cuts through Peru’s high desert has been labeled the “Grand Canyon of the Amazon” and has been compared by river runners to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, though the depth of Marañon’s Grand Canyon is twice that of the Colorado’s.

Local opposition to the dams on the Marañon is significant, as most of the electricity generated will power Peru’s deeply controversial mining operations or be exported to Brazil. Odebrecht Corporation is Brazil’s largest construction conglomerate and runs Chadin 2 – one of the two most advanced dams on the Marañon. Chadin 2 has been met with tremendous local

resistance. The Cajamarca region's Yagén Defense Front (YDF), a group of peasant farmers and villagers, opposes the dam outright, as Chadin 2 – a 600 MW project – would flood 20 square miles of their villages, croplands, and valleys rich in biodiversity.

The YDF's 34-year old vice president, Hitler Rojas Gonzales, had recently been elected mayor of the community of Yagén when he was assassinated. An outspoken opponent of the Chadin 2 dam, Rojas Gonzales was murdered on his way home from in Yagén on December 28, 2015. At least six bullets, issued from a weapon wielded by another Yagén resident, Alejandro Rodríguez García, perforated his young body. Some locals claim that Rodríguez García was working for or with Odebrecht, that he was pro-company and that he supported the Chadin 2 hydro project. Some call Rojas Gonzales' death a death foretold. For its part, Odebrecht adamantly denies any connection to the murder.

On January 13, 2016, Cajamarca's Superior Court sentenced Rodríguez García to six years in prison and a mandated payment of 30,000 Peruvian *soles* (around 8800 U.S. dollars) to the Rojas Gonzales family.

In late January the *Guardian* asked Odebrecht about the status of Chadin 2, which was in the stages of engineering and studies at the time of the murder. Odebrecht said that construction would begin in 2017, but “only if the agreement of the population is obtained.”

Marcelo Odebrecht, the Brazilian CEO of Odebrecht SA, was sentenced on March 8, 2016, to 19 years in prison on corruption charges.

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Ecuador's Napo River complex remained largely unobstructed by dams until recently.

The largest dam in Ecuador is called Coca-Codo Sinclair. This massive project will be the first major disruption in downstream sediment flow on a tributary in the Napo River system; upstream fish migration on the Coca is naturally interrupted by San Rafael Falls, Ecuador's largest and most spectacular waterfall. Immediately upstream of the dam site, the Quijos and Salado Rivers come together just above a key hydrological feature: in 1927 a North American petroleum geologist, Joseph Sinclair, was exploring the Coca River and arrived at a great angular bend. This curve was eventually dubbed the *Codo* Sinclair, or the Sinclair Elbow. The Codo is an important bend in the river, as it leads directly into the impressive 500-foot tall waterfall. Conditions here are perfect for big hydro.

China's Sinohydro, the world's biggest, most prolific dammer of rivers, was awarded the Coca-Codo Sinclair contract in 2009. Eighty-five percent of the project is financed by Sinohydro; the rest by Ecuador's oil sales to China. The price tag on the project is two billion U.S. dollars. The plant will generate 1500 MW of electricity, and by some estimates this will equate to covering 30 to 40% of Ecuador's energy needs.

In 2012, a bus full of Chinese and Ecuadorian project employees near the Coca site crashed into a rock, injuring 30 and killing two.

On the evening of December 13, 2014, 25 workers were standing on a raised platform inside the plant's main pressure well, a cavernous vertical conduit that will eventually transport water from a reservoir to the main engine room. A landslide led to the collapse of an interior stone wall, which gave way to a surge of incoming water. The platform collapsed and thirteen people were killed and over a dozen more injured: ten Ecuadorian workers and three Chinese.

Wilo is my second-favorite taxi driver in Ecuador – second only to Fabian, who pronounces my name *Chandriya* and regularly peppers our conversations with wide-eyed *woooow*'s. Wilo owns a little farm in the lush Quijos Valley called La Ponderosa. He keeps chickens, *cuys* (guinea pigs, for eating), and cows. His wife – whom he refers to as *la Jefa* – grows orchids and sugar cane and passion fruit in a colorful, fragrant garden. Wilo is patient: he speaks slowly, articulating each syllable and employing his giant hands in deliberate gestures during his careful conversations with gringos. Wilo-smiles are rare; he is a very serious man. He also takes his job seriously – he prides himself on his excellence as a *taxista* for *kayakeros*. He appreciates it when gringos speak Spanish.

Wilo told me in January of 2016, as we drove past the newly erected silver transmission towers for the Coca-Codo Sinclair dam project, that the Quijos and Coca Rivers should have been dammed 30 years ago. He professes unflinching support for President Correa.

The transmission lines are hulking and shiny behemoths that stand awkwardly atop slippery jungle mountains. The verdant landscape undulates in waves, visually and, sometimes, seismically. The Quijos Valley is constantly moving: landslides happen everywhere; the earth flows here. In two months this winter, Wilo says, 50 landslides fell onto the road between Tena and Quito, more than in any other year in recent memory. More rain, more moving earth.

Wilo gently swerves his truck to avoid a pile of crushed rocks and mud on the outside of a corner, and the truck slides through the spray of a gushing roadside waterfall. The highway crumbled here not long ago, maybe last week, he says. Dave mentions from the backseat, in quiet English, that maybe people aren't meant to live here. In the Quijos Valley, houses fall into the river; the hills can shed 200 foot-tall trees from their flanks in an instant.

The swollen rivers churn with extra water and woody debris as we wind our way through the valley. I crane my neck out the passenger window to watch the transmission towers as we pass: the behemoths stand their ground, for now.

5.

OUTSIDERS

The Upper Misahuallí River flows from the southern edge of the Antisana Volcano Ecological Reserve northwest of Tena, slipping past little roadside jungle towns, from San Francisco to Cotundo to Archidona. The Baeza-Tena road separates the Misahuallí drainage from the Jondachi River, which springs from the east side of Antisana.

The water in the Misahuallí, or Mis, is usually clean and clear, especially the higher up in the drainage you go, before the communities have a chance to dump their waste or garbage into the river. I once tried to kayak the Upper Mis, in 2011 with Diego Robles, at very low water. I'd never paddled anything like it before: huge camel-colored rocks that create a series of convoluted chutes and flumes, a path difficult to see or predict at times. "Just follow the water," Diego had told me.

With kayaking, you have to be loose. If you're tight, if you're stiff, your hips won't move with the water and your boat will fight with the current. If your body isn't relaxed, rocks and waves will tip you over, sometimes violently. If you can let go of some of the control and just flow – just follow the water – your chances of staying upright are increased significantly. For me, I still have to consciously consider what my face is doing when I paddle. I try to smile. If I'm smiling even a little bit, my face probably *looks* relaxed, and maybe my body will follow suit.

That day in 2011, I was decidedly not relaxed: my hands were shaking before we had even unstrapped the boats from the truck. Diego would paddle deftly and gracefully off of a rock,

sailing into the pool below it. He'd then wave me on through, shouting, "It's easy." I'd hit a rock above the drop, spin backwards and fall sideways off the shelf, hitting my head and shoulders on the way down. I would swim out of my boat, and Diego would shake his head at me. "Next time you'll do better." But each time I repeated the sequence – panicking, tipping over, closely inspecting rocks with my face, then swimming – and each time my heart felt a little heavier, my muscles a little more tense, my knuckles a little bloodier. Eventually, I'd had enough. I waited on a perfect rocky beach while Diego finished the run, my body bruised and tired. He came to collect me an hour later; I'd fallen asleep in the sun.

Today it's 2016 and Wilo and I drop Will and Dave off at a river access in San Francisco. This is where Diego had taken me several years before. I tell the boys of the experience, and they scoff at Diego's poor judgment. Dave asks Wilo to drive me a few kilometers downstream to another access, cutting out the majority of the steeper rapids. So Wilo takes me to a perfect rocky beach with butterflies and a beautiful pool – this is the place where I had rested after my painful attempt at paddling the Upper Mis with Diego in 2011. Will and Dave would paddle the first section and meet me here.

Wilo asks me why I don't put in with the boys. With his characteristically meticulous annunciation, he asks me in Spanish, "Is it too strong for you?"

"I had a bad experience on that section, Wilo. I don't want to go back, not yet."

"I understand bad experiences. I wish you luck today."

I watch for the boys and I watch the butterflies. Maybe twenty minutes go by and their kayaks come into view upstream, slipping behind rocks, out of sight, emerging again to fly off of ledges and slide through perfectly defined chutes. The kayaks are blaze orange and lime green water striders from afar, leaping gracefully, beautifully, between and over rocks. The colors flow

with the current, spinning, whirling, playfully exploring the pockets of the river that only falling water visits. What a thing, to *play* with the river, to know it in several dimensions, to feel its power and want to experience its power more intimately.

Eventually I see the beards and blue eyes of my friends.

I cram my legs into the kayak and I tighten the back-strap as much as I can. I pull the neoprene spray skirt up tight around the cockpit coaming, checking that the grab loop is exposed in case of an emergency exit. I take deep breaths. I let the air out of my lungs and tighten my lifejacket a little more. Dave wears his loose, almost to where I think it might come off if he ends up boat-less in the water, which he rarely if ever does. I check my helmet and rub some sand on the shaft of my paddle. I splash my face with handfuls of warm Upper Mis water. I focus on my smile – all parts of my cunning plan to outsmart my fearful mind. We go kayaking.

Following Dave is mostly easy, though he often gets his lefts and rights confused. Will paddles behind me. “A Chandra sandwich,” Will calls it. Toward the end of the run I try my first real boof – a move that, if done right, sends you sailing off a ledge and safely past the turbulent bottom of the drop. It doesn’t go very well: I paddle up to the horizon line and then stop, falling off the ledge and tipping over for lack of momentum in the swirly water below. I swim. My boat continues downstream, the boys chase after it, and I drag myself onto the rocks and onto shore. Through pools along the shore and over boulders and the giant spider webs woven between them I make my way downstream, sans kayak and sans confidence but otherwise unscathed.

Maybe fifteen minutes before the take-out we pass a couple of thatch-roofed houses on river left. From upstream, we see two indigenous kids swimming the river. As we get closer we see that they each have an animal in tow, a duck and a dog, both paddling furiously to stay afloat, the dog clearly out of breath. Around the duck’s neck is tightly wound nylon cord. The dog is

missing the tip of his ear – the wound still bright with fresh blood – and a metal chain digs into the matted fur of his neck. The young boys, maybe seven and fourteen years old, lead the animals through gently swirling currents. Each time a current grabs the legs of the dog, he is pulled under until he can kick hard enough to bring his face to the surface. He paddles furiously to keep slack in the older boy's chain. He gasps for breath. The duck is dragged down by the currents and the younger boy yanks on the cord, bringing the bedraggled bird back to the air. The kids see us and stare at us. We stare back, floating slowly through the slack water.

Dave asks me quietly if I want him to go cut the cord and I say yes. He paddles his boat to the duck and carefully takes it without words from the younger boy, who offers no protest. In still water behind a rock, the young boy watches Dave as he unties the rope, setting the duck free, at least temporarily, to waddle up onto the shore. It shakes off the water and then lies down in the duff. I want it to waddle far away, but it stays there, well within reach of the young boy, whose name, we learn, is Jefferson. The older boy laughs at the spectacle: three gringos in plastic boats and protective gear that the kids must find absurd, setting their pet duck “free,” their faces twisted in fused expressions of ethical confusion and perhaps something like self-righteousness. Laughable, for sure. The dog's ear continues to bleed, his face struggles to stay above water. The older boy tugs him along as he starts after the duck, chuckling the whole time. Will floats silently, doing and saying nothing. Dave has convinced Jefferson to give him the nylon cord, gently fibbing in broken Spanish that he needs the cord to tie his kayak into the truck on the way home.

I've been transfixed, dumbfounded, I think, but I soon find that I've been hurling angry words at the kids, admonishing them for their abuse of power over their animals, asking them rhetorical questions that they giggle at rather than answer. I tell them that they were not

compassionate. “You’re going to kill your animals,” I say, and they nod, their strange smiles foreign to me. Jefferson glances at his duck and watches Dave slowly drift away, his blue and white braided nylon cord resting on the deck of the gringo’s kayak.

That night, in bed, I listen to the repeating record of my anger, my patience lost, my temper raging, raising my voice against indigenous children whose home I am simply visiting. I feel lost in my role here. The duck had no voice, so I felt authorized to lend it one. But surely its voice wouldn’t have sounded as shrill and as harsh as mine?

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Downstream of Tena, the Misahuallí will meet the Río Hollín as it tumbles in from the north, from the dark and rugged UNESCO-designated Sumaco biosphere wilderness.

Volcán Sumaco, in the heart of the reserve, is a 13,000-foot Andean outcast, standing very much alone, set apart from Ecuador’s lineup of fiery snowcapped superstars. Of Sumaco’s three violent historical eruptions, only the most recent was witnessed by human eyes, and from far away at that. The rocky flanks of Sumaco are ensconced in a matted blanket of the flora of six distinct ecosystems, intimidating and inhospitable to human visitors. Sumaco’s very geologic structure is that of a misfit among the Andean giants, a unique stone cast south and east from the main spine, pitched toward the heart of the Amazon but landing short even of that mark. Twenty-five miles from the town of Tena, the elusive eyes of *Pristimantis ernesti* watch nervously from their niche atop Sumaco’s cone, a community of small brown robber frogs that live nowhere else on earth, just here, just up high, outcasts in their own right, watching and waiting.

Six years ago, as relentless equatorial rains pounded down on Tena, Irish-born whitewater guide Libby Poole found herself paddling a raft through the streets-turned-rivers of her town, searching for residents left swimming or stranded by one of the worst floods in Ecuador's history.

Just as the increasing frequency and intensity of floods in Ecuador represents changes in Amazonian weather patterns and ecosystems, Libby represents changes in the role of women in paddle sports in her country. Truly, Libby Poole is as unique as the hundred-year flood.

Libby is the blond-haired daughter of Irish missionaries and has lived in the Ecuadorian jungle since grade school. She is one of few female river guides and kayak instructors in the country, founded the first women's kayaking group in Ecuador, and recently took third place in a semi-pro downstream race as the only female competitor.

While she prepares to tell me her story from the 2010 flood, Libby is on the bed in her apartment in Tena, clutching a pint glass of white wine. She's fidgeting less than usual, it's clear she's very tired. Lean arms the color of sunbaked sand extend out from a black fitted t-shirt, the word "America" scrawled across the chest in white cursive that hints at the typeface so famously immortalized by the Coca Cola brand.

Libby moved to Ecuador in June of 1993 with her parents and two older brothers when she was eight years old. Being a gringa in a rural Ecuadorian school was challenging, especially before she learned to speak Spanish. "The kids were always asking us for pieces of our blonde hair as keepsakes. We were the only gringos for about five years, then later more missionaries came, and that made it easier." Libby spent the next eight years of her childhood attending

school in the morning, swimming in the rivers in the afternoons, and learning to kayak. Her family eventually started River Lovers, which eventually became Tena's busiest rafting company.

Libby worked as a safety kayaker for class III raft trips for a long time, paddling her kayak out in front of rafts full of clients, maneuverable in her little boat and quick to chase down swimmers bucked from their seats in the whitewater. She didn't get much formal instruction in kayaking until her early twenties, when more and more foreign boaters started coming to Ecuador. A decade later she's now one of the most sought-after kayak instructors in the country and guides top-tier kayaking trips. Libby readily admits that it's a constant struggle to make ends meet, and that she often fantasizes about leaving Ecuador to pursue different dreams. That's easier said than done, though, and so she perseveres in her jungle home. The rivers of this rainforest raised her. Her clients call her "Jungle Libby."

It makes her sad to talk about her rivers: new dredging, illegal mining, and logging operations are popping up so fast she can keep track. Sometimes I invite her, as lots of her international friends do, to come kayak some North American rivers with me. My invitation, however, is an unfortunate tease, given that Libby's residency situation is complicated. She has to find ways to stay happy and busy in Ecuador, as limited funds and myriad visa issues mandate that she stay put.

I ask her about the factors she thinks contribute to the changing character of Ecuador's rivers. Libby cites human activity – rampant deforestation and in-stream gravel mining – as implicit in the heightened intensity of floods.

In April of 2010 – April 5, she says, according to her journal – after three months of perplexing jungle drought, the skies above Tena unleashed 48 hours of relentless rain. Sometime

around 1:30 a.m., a landslide on the upper Tena River sent a wall of water surging downstream toward town. The Tena River rose between twelve and fourteen meters in a matter of 30 minutes. The rain of an entire month fell in five hours. At 2:00 a.m. frantic phone calls woke Libby from her sleep.

Earlier that day, the skies had been purple, bruised and swirling. Libby was working in the office of her family's raft company office, watching the churning sky, when she got a call from one of her guides. On the Lower Jondachi River, about 20 kilometers from town, the wind was pummeling the jungle canyon, and sizable chunks of wood were falling from overhanging trees. A branch had fallen with such force and timing that it impaled a client's leg, piercing straight through her flesh to the rubber raft, puncturing the boat. Libby ordered a truck to the river to evacuate the client and spent the remainder of the day and night with her in the Tena hospital. Libby went to bed only a few hours before the river flashed.

The 2:00 a.m. calls came from river guides who were awake and a perhaps a little tipsy when the wave arrived in Tena. Libby wiped the wine and sleep out of her eyes and rushed into town. What she saw there was apocalyptic. The Tena River had overtaken the town, the main current fracturing into smaller rivers that ran through and over and around the buildings, creating eddies behind houses, hotels, and storefronts. The electricity, astonishingly, never failed. According to Libby, streetlights "floated like buoys" at the surface of the water. Traffic lights sputtered and sparked. Somewhere on the south side of the main channel, Libby found two of her river guide friends. They borrowed a raft from a downtown warehouse and grabbed a couple of dumbstruck onlookers. They paddled the raft through rapids that now tore through the heart of Tena, and they caught an eddy behind a swamped and stationary bus. Libby grabbed onto the bus's roof rack and held the raft steady as they surveyed the horizon for stranded residents. The

stubborn street lamps cast a spectral glow on the town. There was a lot of yelling as the raft floated through town and paused to pull people off of rooftops or out of truck beds and into the passing boat. Some of the water had conveniently channelized into a sort of back-eddy that swirled around 180 degrees to the main flow, permitting the raft to swing back to the higher ground of city park, where the water was only waist deep. Here, they dropped off their soaked and shaken passengers, then guided the raft to rejoin the eastbound chaos, veered off into the side channels streaming through the city, and made another pass for floundering residents.

At some point, Libby identified in the flotsam a box of once-hot chicken and potatoes, escaped from a late-night food vendor. She and her crew refueled on soggy chicken and continued in their efforts well into the morning.

For almost four hours the water raged through town. Then, almost as suddenly as it had risen, the river dropped again. Where water had rushed minutes before, an opaque membrane of sludge ten centimeters thick now glazed the city.

Over 1300 families were directly affected in the communities of Archidona and Tena and along the lower Napo River, further downstream, losing property or homes to the flood. Houses fell into the rivers as the banks crumbled beneath them. Bridges were washed away, and massive landslides on the highways isolated rural communities. Some families lost everything to the river.

Amid the devastation, it comes as something of a sad miracle that the flood claimed the lives of only two human beings. On the island in the middle of town, the residents of the Parque Amazónico la Isla, a small zoo, saw the most destruction and loss of life. Over two hundred caged animals were killed that night, unable to escape their enclosures as the combined waters of the Tena and Pano Rivers swallowed the island. Parrots, toucans, monkeys, and snakes drowned

or were washed away with the flood.

Libby says that for the three weeks following the flood Tena was in a state of emergency. Landslides continued to block the roads from Quito and helicopters brought aid to Tena. Libby recalls a transformation among the people in Tena. The muddy water had doused the collective local consciousness in fear and uncertainty, and experts worked to explain the disaster with science while the government tried to pacify the anxiety of its people with vague potential solutions. News reports included interviews with national meteorologists, examining the role of a changing global climate in the unpredictable new weather patterns in Ecuador. Thinking back to her childhood in Tena, Libby remembers that the rain used to come at reliable intervals. The rivers were regularly “happy” and full, and afternoon storms were expected daily. Now the Tena area will sometimes see weeks without rain, and when the inundation comes, it happens so quickly that the land and rivers cannot support the volume of fallen water. And that’s when it floods.

When she’s finished with her story, she says that all the international kayakers are leaving for the season and Tena’s about to be lonely once again. But with another healthy swig from the pint glass she throws a hand up, toasts the inevitable and familiar solitude of the off-season, and laughs her Irish chuckle.

A week earlier her bag full of paddling gear was stolen out of the back of a pick-up truck. She has no illusions of getting it back again. Two weeks before that she lost a couple hundred dollars when she was robbed on the street in Tena. And her old friend Diego Robles owes her ninety bucks for the river shoes that she sold him. That transaction occurred over two months ago, and he says he has no real plans to pay her back.

She laughs at this, too. She has to.

Paul Sperry doesn't offer praise, probably because no one's work can ever measure up to his standards. He attempts to delegate tasks but is invariably disappointed by his helper's performance. From afar, from Alaska or Montana, I avoid his meandering, monopolizing phone conversations and prefer to govern our dialog with pointed and organized emails; his phone calls are never shorter than an hour and are rarely productive. I know my distance annoys him, but I cannot give him more time than I already do. Sometimes my chest tightens before I've even read an incoming email from Sperry, defensive anticipation of my prickling against his written words. I skim the email as quickly as I can, judging it as accusatory or combative or insulting before consuming the content. I imagine the email talking over me, interrupting me, rejecting the social nicety of eye contact, yammering about topics I scarcely understand with no regard for my mounting confusion.

I can't classify my reaction to Paul Sperry.

At Thanksgiving in South Dakota two years ago, a phone call from Sperry devoured three hours of family time. My endearingly protective mother told me to abandon my work with the ERI; I told her I'd made a commitment and that these rivers were important to me. I also confessed that my aversion to Sperry sometimes reminded me of how I felt during old and ugly arguments with my father. I couldn't peg the parallel, but it bothered me.

Despite the difficulties, earlier this year Sperry wrote a proposal to Patagonia, the clothing company with a strong anti-dam environmental platform, suggesting that they outfit me with all new gear for my upcoming work in Ecuador and supply me with a paid summer writing

internship. Sperry has provided me with several letters of recommendation to add to my applications for graduate school, jobs, and educational grants. When I go to Ecuador, although the ERI can't pay my way or for my time, Sperry lets me use his upstairs apartment as a home base and he fuels me with bottomless French-pressed coffee in a country where freeze-dried Nescafé is the horrible, inescapable standard.

IN JULY 2015, six months after the first Jondachi Fest, Sperry came to visit me in Montana on a rare return to the U.S. He drove his Tacoma – with an old Eskimo Diablo kayak strapped on top – and camped for a few days on the back porch of the house I was crashing at. I was between Grand Canyon trips, homeless in Missoula for a couple weeks before heading back to the desert and my guiding job on the Colorado River. One evening we went with some friends to the Alberton Gorge, a stretch of whitewater on the Clark Fork River, thirty miles east of Missoula. It was at least 85 degrees that evening but Sperry wore a technical Gore-Tex waterproof layer with latex wrist and neck gaskets over thick neoprene. He crammed enough dry clothes and survival gear into his kayak for a weeklong expedition, even though the two-mile stretch of river parallels Interstate 90 and we were accompanied by at least ten experienced, local kayakers. Sperry paddled out in front of the group at one point and we lost him. We assumed the worst: not knowing where the poorly marked takeout was, he'd floated past it and on toward the Columbia River. A few hundred yards above the takeout we found him, surfing a tiny, anomalous wave in a stretch of glassy flat water. The wave was maybe five inches high: *tiny*. Sperry said it was perfect. He'd found the perfect wave. He'd found his zone.

The next day, as he and I stood in the borrowed space of my friend's Missoula kitchen, Sperry told me that after two years of deliberation, the Jondachi River defense had been rejected

in Ecuadorian court. Ecuador's government water authority rejected the ERI's demand to cancel the water concession that had been granted to CELEC EP-Termopinchicha (the government-owned energy production company that aims to dam the river) for their proposed hydro project on the Jondachi. The court had denied the ERI's argument for consideration of tourism and recreational use of the river, and the resolution disregarded blatant errors in the water concession process. It ignored the report by the government-appointed expert and his damning evaluation of the hydro project: the project was foolishly conceived and should be completely reconsidered. Adding insult to injury was the resolution's assertion that the ERI – and all other recreational users – are using the waters of the Jondachi without a permit when they go kayaking. According to the ruling, all users of the river resource must obtain a concession in order to comply with the “law.”

I didn't know what to say. Legal processes in my own country confound me. I can hardly begin to grasp the complexities of Ecuadorian law. The issues are compounded by widely recognized corruption and manipulation in the court system. The law seemed straightforward – the legal defense should have worked. I couldn't even summon a coherent question to ask him.

I leaned up against the kitchen counter, shaking my head. He handed me a frosty lemon-flavored San Pellegrino from his travel cooler, his eyes desperate.

I stared at the floor.

He continued: he believed construction on the hydro project was only momentarily stalled out due to lack of funding. The country of Ecuador is out of money. The government is broke. In order to appeal the court's ruling, the ERI would have to carry the case to contentious court, ultimately making a constitutional demand against the dam, calling on the Rights of Nature statute in the 2008 constitution. The cost of the appeal would approach or exceed

\$25,000, and there was no guarantee of a different resolution. If he didn't appeal the ruling, however, the ERI's arguments would lose all credibility and it would forfeit the opportunity to pursue future legal opposition to the project. "The ERI would basically admit to conforming to the resolution and all its hideous implications," he said grimly.

I said I would think about how we might go about sharing the news.

We'd need a tactful strategy, he said, to avoid making the country look bad or angering the government. We couldn't simply throw the ruling up on the website or issue an announcement via social media. A thoughtless course of action could result in a range of ugly consequences: Sperry could be deported and the ERI would cease to exist. There would then be no organized opposition to the crimes against Ecuador's watersheds, leaving the doors wide open for unchecked exploitation.

I promised him I'd think on it, that I'd do my best. The tragedy of faraway places was too much for me to digest in the kitchen of this home that wasn't mine.

Ultimately, a few weeks later, the ERI would decide to re-hire the lawyers to appeal the Jondachi ruling. The case remains unresolved, stagnant in the channels of Ecuadorian bureaucracy.

"You're the only one who's shown any commitment to this," Sperry said. His voice cracked; he was crying.

I took another sip of my San Pellegrino and went back to contemplating the borrowed kitchen's floor.

6.

TAXI DRIVERS AND FOREST FAIRIES

There's something unromantic about my boldest memories of the Jondachi festivals.

The stories I want to tell, the ones that were the most impactful, for me, for now, are not necessarily of the race or the awards ceremony. Nor are they memories of the seminars and workshops we facilitated in the week preceding the race. They are not memories of the public activities we tried to organize on the waterfront – some activities happened, others died as ideas, and they were all attempts to bring community members closer to their rivers, closer to the Jondachi corridor. I don't find myself wanting to talk about those memories as much. The stories I want to tell about the festivals are of the interactions that confused or inspired me, or the moments where I felt most vulnerable, or when I saw others at what I thought to be their most barren, leafless, or empty. It's the adversity and the chaos, the raw and weird expressions of love that I remember most. Maybe, as the space between the concluded festivals and present-day me fills with time, the stories that I deem most important or defining will be different.

My dad once told me, after we'd endured another long-distance fight maybe five years ago, that we're all just doing the best we can. Sometimes that means deviations from the predictable, proving – because this needs proving, over and over – that we can't ever really know the motivations behind the actions of others.

To be safe:

Don't take anything personally.

Don't harbor expectations.

Don't trick yourself into believing you truly *know* another person.

The work comes down to people. To careful relationships. To the unknowable reality of others and the stubborn resolve to prove that reality wrong. The reality of a long string of discrete moments connected by water or by breaths or by arguments. The reality of misunderstanding and mismanaged emotions. The reality of fear, of insecurity, and of fear of being perceived as insecure.

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Joe Numbers sponsored Dave to go back to Ecuador in 2016 for the second Jondachi Fest. Or rather, Joe Numbers co-owns a bar on the western fringe of Glacier National Park, near the Flathead River, and the *bar* sponsored Dave to go to Ecuador. The other co-owners of the Stonefly Lounge are Joe's son and his son's wife. The Stonefly gave Dave a hooded sweatshirt, a couple free cocktails, and a thousand dollars. Joe Numbers is the reason that Dave was able to go to Ecuador this year.

Dave won the second annual Jondachi Race – first place out of 25 talented international paddlers – just 48 hours after succumbing to the debilitating delirium of jungle fever. At the award ceremony that night, I struggled to keep the news a secret from Dave and Joe. Libby and I had had to revisit the race times just before the award dinner started, since the government-appointed timekeepers had botched the job. After recalculating all the results, Dave's time was still far and away the best, ten seconds faster than his closest competitor.

Libby read the women's results to a raucous, cheering crowd, awarding handmade wooden plaques to three female paddlers, all from the United States – no Ecuadorian women competed. I then read the men's results, awarding third place to a sixteen-year old Ecuadorian

phenomenon who travels with World Class Kayak Academy, a school for kids who go on to become professional paddlers, originally founded in Missoula. Second place went to my old Quiteño friend, Abe, who guides kayak trips throughout Ecuador and just this year organized a small festival and race on the Quijos to celebrate its numbered days as a free-flowing river. By this point, Dave had figured out that he'd won. I watched him squirm into his Stonefly Lounge hoody as sweat immediately began to bead along his hairline; no one else in all of Tena was wearing a sweatshirt at that moment, I was sure. I read his name and watched Joe's face light up with what I imagined might approximate fatherly pride. He'd said to me months ago, "I just want to see the Stonefly logo on a podium in South America." Joe wrapped his arm around his lady friend, D, his petite, blonde-haired high school sweetheart with whom he's been reunited after thirty or more years, after living a lifetime apart.

THE MORNING AFTER the Upper Jondachi Race, I woke up with something like sunstroke. I thought cool water might help and I asked Libby and Paul if I could take the morning to go paddle the Piatua River with my friends. I'd never seen the Piatua and I needed to get out of Tena, which was hotter than anyone could remember it being in any recent January. We called up Fabian, who met us at the bodega to gather boats and gear. Fabian, my favorite taxi driver in Ecuador, confided that he loves driving boaters out to the Piatua. It's an hour from Tena, and the kayak run itself takes about an hour, which means it doesn't make sense for him to drive back into town to pick up more work. Instead, he gets to go swimming in and nap alongside one of the Napo Valley's most pristine and beautiful rivers.

I slept the whole way out there, resting my head on Dave's clammy shoulder. We dropped the boys – Dave, Will, and another friend from Montana – off up high on the river, just

above where the bulk of the steepest rapids are found. Dave asked Fabian to take me a little lower, to a river access that crossed private land but would lead to a safer, more enjoyable run for me. He also asked Fabian to walk with me down the private trail, since the local residents had a history of provoking uncomfortable interactions with foreign kayakers.

After we left the boys upstream, Fabian and I drove to an unmarked and overgrown trailhead a mile or so down the road. We left the truck and carried my kayak down a muddy path toward the river.

The Piatua is clean, remote, and largely untouched by the atrocities that plague so many of the other rivers in the Napo watershed. It is a broad river, not a creek like the Upper Misahuallí, and at low flows the crystalline water spreads out across the riverbed in a series of pools and currents separated by huge, smooth, sand-colored boulders. There's no riverside highway – just a rarely used and potholed one-way 4x4 trail. The only sounds are those of the jungle: on the Piatua I heard no busses, no bass-happy stereo systems, very few captive chickens, and no squawking car alarms.

Fabian is in his mid-forties and has three children, the youngest of which recently turned eleven. He has a big belly, bad teeth, and playful eyes; he gives really good hugs. Fabian loves Jondachi Fest and admits that the whitewater tourism industry in Tena is his family's bread and butter. That said, he cannot and will not take a hard stance against the Jondachi dam. It's just too complicated, he says.

When we arrived at the water, Fabian looked at me with his animated saucer-eyes and said, "*Wooooow, Chandriya. Qué perfección este río.*" I smile every time he utters his version of my name. The extra vowel makes it sound exotic, almost Spanish. To me, his mispronunciation of my name is like a gift.

He stripped off his t-shirt, folded it, and carefully placed it on a clean, dry rock. I put on all my paddling gear and plopped down cross-legged in a tiny, shaded pool adjacent to the shore. The water was medicine: my baking insides began to cool. I watched as Fabian nimbly climbed up the rocky shore tangled with vines, issuing a “woooooow” and a wag of his head each time he paused to take in the view. It was as though it were the first time he’d seen the Piatua, though I was certain he’d been here a hundred times before. Without hesitation he dove into a shallow, mellow current and let it carry him on his back 50 feet or so, until the gradient started to pick up and he flipped onto his belly and swam to shore.

We heard a shout from upstream and the boys appeared, one by one emerging from behind beautiful boulders and sailing through perfect chutes of water. Fabian said to me in Spanish, “Time to go, *Chandriya*.” I hugged him and then waved goodbye as he started back up the trail toward the truck.

I fell into a hole halfway through our run on the Piatua. More accurately, I got nervous and I failed to keep paddling downstream after coming off a rocky shelf. A hydraulic formed at the base of the drop, where the water falls vertically, hits bottom, and recirculates back on top of itself: a small but sticky hole. That hole grabbed my stern and, since I’d abandoned my forward momentum, pulled me back upstream into the pocket of inverted current.

My boat tipped over and I tried several times, without success, to roll up. The hole held me there: it was just wide and deep enough to keep my upside-down kayak at the base of the drop. I waited for the hole to release me but many seconds passed and nothing changed. I was uncharacteristically calm. The water was so shallow and clear there that the light never faded – it never got dark, as it so often does when I go underwater. I searched for an exit from the hole with my paddle, reaching for what I thought might be the green, non-aerated water downstream,

something solid to grab my paddle and pull me out of the hydraulic. The water in the hole was so aerated – bubbly and sparkly like champagne – I almost thought I could breathe it in. I didn't try, of course, and my lungs eventually demanded a breath, so I set myself free and swam. I banged up my knees on the way to the shore, and my borrowed kayak sustained significant bruises on its solo journey down through the next rock garden. I caught my breath on the side of the river as the boys chased down my boat – again – and tried to think of something funny to say once I'd caught up to them again. "I'm gonna need whiskey and a helicopter," I thought I might say.

I haven't spent much time in holes. I usually avoid them at all costs when I'm on the river. Some kayakers play in them, in even the biggest of holes, and find something akin to peace as the water thrashes and pummels them, keeping them more or less at one horizontal plane of the river, until they can exit the hydraulic and rejoin the main flow. It terrifies me, being stuck in a hole, being trapped by the water, trying unsuccessfully to find the exit. The water usually exits the hole from the corners or out the very bottom. I remember from all my years of raft guiding, I used to tell clients: if you find yourself out of the raft and recirculating in a hole, get into a ball. Ball up, keep your hands and legs in close, and let the vertical force of the water send you to the bottom of the river. When you feel yourself hit the river bottom, or come close to it, reach for the green water, the main current moving downstream and out of the hole. Going deep is your best bet for flushing out of the cylindrical turbulence, out of the spin cycle. You have to go deep, straight down the center and into the gut of the very thing that's tumbling you like a wet shoe in a washing machine.

Go deep to escape. If that fails, try again.

THE LAST NIGHT of Jondachi Fest was a Saturday. When I returned from the Piatua River, Libby took me to a costume rental shop on the main street in Tena. The shop was musty and crowded with frilly tulle dresses in which a 1992 Iowa prom queen might have twirled. There were other costumes, too: we tried on bumblebees and ladybugs but settled on a green forest fairy for her, an iridescent black snakeskin for me. We haggled the rental price down to ten dollars per costume and handed over the last twenty-dollar bill that we had between us. I told Libby I'd meet her at the discoteca at nine to set up and get ready for the Jondachi Fest disco party, which was slated to begin at ten p.m.; I was meant to have dinner with Joe Numbers and D beforehand.

El Buche Roto is an *asadero*, a place that grills meats and seafood atop a humungous carbon-coated bar-b-q out back. Meals there come with buttery white rice, potato fries encrusted in salt, a microscopic salad, and two brightly flavored incarnations of *aji casero*, one green with avocado and the other a citrusy red, heavily diluted by mayonnaise. Dave and I walked Joe and D through the poorly lit streets of Bella Vista Bajo to El Buche Roto. I was wearing board shorts and a black hand-me-down t-shirt from which I'd removed the sleeves. "I [heart] DERBY," it read, a giant Band-Aid slapped diagonally over the battered heart – a design Dave made years ago for his ex-girlfriend's roller derby league. I was sunburned and smelled terrible, but felt infinitely better than when I left for the Piatua that morning. D was dressed in an alabaster t-shirt and bone-colored quick-dry capris, her hair neatly combed; Joe had been wearing the same black cotton t-shirt and synthetic expedition pants since he arrived in Tena four days prior.

We arrived at the *asadero* and took a seat in a back room whose lighting – a couple of red lamps in corners and the flickering of the plasma television – we preferred to the bitter buzz of uncovered fluorescent lights out front. The owner and his wife hurried to turn on the overhead

fluorescents in the back room and we tell them we prefer the warmth of the red floor lamps. They were surprised but accommodating.

I asked the proprietor what *Buche Roto* means. *Roto* is broken, I knew. *Buche*, he explained, is your belly, and here we serve so much food in a meal that it breaks your belly. He stuck out his stomach and waddled theatrically around our table. Then he grinned politely as I translated for Joe and D, but we could see he's disinterested in our language lesson. His teenage daughter turned and glared at us from the couch in front of the massive TV; the mother had turned up the volume on the house speakers and the daughter was now having trouble hearing her program.

I said I'd like to order langostinos but that the \$24 price for eight decadent prawns (with extra plantains and some other bonus delicacy I can't recall) was out of my budget. I said I'd like to have the \$8 beef-chicken-langostino plate, but without the beef and chicken. I smiled, the buche man smiled, and he indicated that he had just what I needed. He even winked at me. I told Joe and D that whatever they ordered here would make them happy; I'd been daydreaming about this food for a year, since the last time I was here.

Over dinner we talked about the plans for tonight and tomorrow. Joe and D said they might skip the discoteca, given that it didn't start until ten and they were exhausted from a day of exploring down in Puerto Misahuallí. They handed me their admission passes and I promised to give them to someone who would appreciate the ticket to a sloppy, sweaty, late-night Ecuadorian dance party.

D told us about her sister, how she'd never left Kansas City for so much as brief trips away to visit family. D said, "That's her life, but it's not my life. I want to travel and see what's

out there. I'm glad to have this guy now to take me places." She nudged Joe's shoulder with her own.

"I've got you two spots reserved on the raft trip tomorrow. I can't wait for you to see these rivers. The Lower Jondachi and the Hollín are stunning. You're going to love it," I told them.

"Are you coming?" Joe asked me.

"Yeah. That's the plan. It depends on how things go with the festival, if I can find someone to manage the waterfront in town. But I want to come."

"All I want is to go down a river in South America with you. I sure hope you're coming."

"Yeah, Numbers. I want to."

Joe maintained eye contact and rocked back in forth in his chair as he does, unable or unwilling to contain his musical energy; his need to boogie or rejoice or wiggle hasn't mellowed in all the years I've known him. "I've been waiting for this day a long time, and it's finally here. Yeehaw."

The proprietor with the big belly and the half-smile brought us our food. I got four glistening langostinos, straight from the coast, an ocean ten hours away by bus, grilled to slippery, slithery perfection. Dave got two on his beef-chicken-langostino plate. Joe and D proclaimed that we are too far from any ocean to be eating seafood and their plates came with just chicken. They also left the negligible salads alone; wisely, they were watching out for their not-yet-broken *buches*.

We ate and digested and suddenly I was late to meet Libby at the discoteca and we had to run. Joe confirmed and reconfirmed tomorrow's meeting time as we paid our bills.

I STOP IN TO THE DISCOTECA to make sure we're set for the night; Libby's not there yet. Eric, the owner, gives me a kiss on the cheek and assures me that all is well, so we continue walking. On the way back to the hotel we pass Libby, who's carrying the Jondachi Fest banners and her green fairy costume, accompanied by the Argentine man-puppy that followed her home at 2 a.m. last night. He introduces himself and Libby and I agree to meet at the discoteca shortly after ten.

When we get back to the hotel, six kayakers are waiting; one of them is wearing a toga. We put on our costumes and then mobilize as a clumsy amoeba, oozing toward the waterfront with the eventual goal of the discoteca. It's well past ten, and I mention that Libby is waiting.

"She's *fine*, Chandra. What did she have to do? Hang some posters? She's got it. You've been working really hard. You deserve some drinks with your friends." I agree with Mike, Dave's Canadian filmmaker friend, and the amoeba gurgles on, rolling to a stop in front of a big group of international kayakers on the waterfront.

A couple of Canadians who run a kayak guiding outfit in the Quijos Valley offer me a swig of Ecuadorian "tequila," which I know to be rancid and painful tequila-*flavored* sugarcane alcohol. I decline. "That's not tequila," I remind them. They've been down here too long.

I tell the hoard that we should get on to the discoteca: Libby's been waiting and there's a party to attend. But the air is finally cool and the Tena River is sparkling beneath the illuminated make-out tower, where local teenagers gather on spiral steps to nowhere to consummate their infatuation in the azure glow of a giant *2016*, winking rhythmically from atop the tower. The remaining residents of the island park zoo – the lone wandering tapir and two caged and sickly boa constrictors – settle in for the night at the tower's base. I watch the people before me, dressed up in their best traveler party costumes. It's commendable and dedicated improvisation,

considering very few international kayakers travel with tutus or fairy costumes or faux snakeskin dresses. These people are happy. They're slapping high fives with local friends as they pass by, they're by the river, outside, breathing jungle air and reveling in what may be their last night in Tena. None of us can truly know when we'll be back here.

After a few false starts, the amoeba, now doubled in size, gains momentum and gurgles onward toward the discoteca. It's nearly midnight. We are on Ecu-time, we reason. The dance party should just now be getting started.

I tell Andrea, one of the tequila-toting Canadians, as she snakes her arm around mine, that Libby's been waiting since ten p.m.

"Libby...Libby's got to figure it out for herself. She could have come to find us, she could have left and come back since no one was there yet. She has this mentality that she's something of a victim. She hasn't figured out how to work for what she needs yet. I mean she's Irish – she's white – but she's *totally* Ecuadorian."

A hundred paces from the discoteca door, Libby comes storming into the nucleus of the amoeba, toward Andrea and me, her posture stern and her Argentine man-puppy trailing meekly behind her. She's got tears in her eyes. "I've been waiting her for two hours. In a fairy costume. Two hours! Alone! In a fucking *fairy costume!*"

"Libby, we were rallying the troops. We brought everyone. We're all here!" Andrea explains with happy hands reaching for a hug.

Libby slaps Andrea's arm away. "No. Goddamn it, you don't understand. I've been here for two hours, alone, waiting, in a fairy costume, and none of you came. You didn't come. No one is here."

“Libby, we were just up the street, spreading the word of the party with our togas and tequila. A lot of people are going to come to the discoteca tonight! Let’s go back in and dance...and where’s your fairy costume now?” Chris, Andrea’s perfect-postured husband and Libby’s long-time kayaking mentor, tries to spin her back around toward the club’s door.

“Fuck you, Chris. No. Fuck all of you. Two hours, alone, in a *fairy costume*...!” Libby’s fit is embarrassing. I want it to end. She keeps yelling. She cries for a minute to me, then her tears turn to fuck-you-Chandras and she moves on to another friend in the hoard, flitting from friend-island to friend-island, searching desperately for consolation or understanding. Finding none, she runs away, the tip of a glittery green fairy wing waving from her tote bag as she bumbles toward the waterfront, drunk and heartbroken.

DAVE AND I LEFT THE DISCOTECA around two a.m., when remixed salsa music was no longer enough fuel enough to keep us going. The party was well attended and the deejay’s laser lights flashed *Jondachi Fest* over the walls of the club, in time with the gyrations of the mass of sweating revelers. My plastic snakeskin felt like punishment – I couldn’t wait for cotton. We walked home through a sleeping Tena and I felt something like love, remembering this same night a year ago when Dave first kissed me outside Paul Sperry’s apartment, his hat brim smashing my forehead, both of us exhausted and surrounded by meddling dogs. We thought we were alone as we walked home this time, but as we latched the hotel door behind us, arrived in our air-conditioned paradise, a knock and a feeble “Libby?” came sneaking through the darkness. The man-puppy had followed us home. Dave diffused the situation, crushing the Argentine’s drunken dream and telling him Libby was asleep, unavailable. He sulked away, and we never saw him again.

Libby, with whom we shared our hotel room, sent a sleepy “thank you” through the darkness after Dave chased away the fan she no longer wanted. A tiny “I’m sorry” followed. “I was just too tired, and I lost it.”

Three hours later, I woke to meet Joe and D for breakfast. News came in the form of frantic late-night emails from Paul Sperry that the Lower Jondachi’s water level was too low for rafts; not enough water. We needed a change of plans today. I scrambled down to the waterfront, blurry-eyed and already sweating.

“Chandrita. We need more release waivers. Now.” Roberto – a charismatic Quito river guide who’d assumed responsibility for organizing the festival raft trips – grabbed my arm and smiled. “Sorry. *¿Cómo estás?*” He hugged me.

Early Sunday morning: no copy shops would be open.

I walked as fast as I could toward the *papelería* near Paul’s house, knowing it wouldn’t be open; I should have had made more copies yesterday. I flailed through a series of futile attempts to make copies on antiquated fax machines in various Internet cafes, wishing I were still in bed, hidden from human eyes and from the sun. Filmmakers from a Quito production company stopped me, demanding their interview – I’d successfully avoided it until now. The lady tried in vain to control my sopping curls with bobby pins before putting them on camera. My Spanish was sabotaged by heat and lack of sleep and I sounded inarticulate. While the disappointed filmmakers removed the microphone from my shirt, I watched as sanitation workers chased a terrified possum from the terra cotta steps of the waterfront.

Roberto called a quick meeting to discuss the change of plans: the trip would now be going to the Jatunyacu River, one drainage over, where there was always enough water for rafts. Jatunyacu, in Kichwa, means “big river.”

I stopped into Café Tortuga to tell the boys what was happening. Expert kayakers don't seem to care much for the Jatunyacu, and Dave suggested that we go instead to the Upper Misahuallí – a shorter, more dynamic trip, and closer to town – so that I could participate in and manage the daytime activities on the waterfront.

I then told Joe and D of the change in plans. “You're still coming, right?” Joe fidgeted, his eyes intent on mine. Only his body moved, his eyes were birdlike, fixed. He'd been watching the whole morning as I thrashed around the waterfront, chasing elusive copies, giving reluctant interviews, answering rafter questions, taking money, selling t-shirts, wiping Pilsener-flavored sweat from my face.

I looked away from Joe's eyes. “I was thinking of maybe sticking closer to town today, to keep an eye on the festival. There's so much going on at the waterfront and very few of us to help manage it.” That was the truth.

Joe looked straight ahead then, in the direction of the tents, at nothing in particular. His wiggling turned to nodding, and eventually that subsided to stillness in his body.

“I'll see you when you get back. I have a responsibility here. There's no need to worry.”

Dave had wandered over from Café Tortuga and looked at me now with expectant eyes.

“I'll get over it if you don't come...” Joe's voice cracked a little and faded off. “You do what you need to do. Fulfill your *responsibility*.” He paused, then said, “I'm here for you; you're not here for me.”

I looked at Dave for support; his face offered little. Frustrated tears started to well and I didn't stand a chance: I was going to cry. I was too hot, dehydrated, overcommitted, confused by my friends' inability to offer compassion. I looked around at the Ecuadorians lining up for this river trip, applying and reapplying bug dope and sunscreen; at Libby, slouched in a white plastic

chair in the shade of the tent, her tired eyes shielded by cheap sunglasses; at Paul, with his clipboard, anxiously sorting his unasked questions and solving number problems in his genius brain; at Will and Mike the Canadian in Café Tortuga, on their laptops with the café's little plastic fan offering some relief. And out here, on these steps seared by sun, I found no relief from guilt or Joe's watery eyes. He had no sunglasses to hide behind; I'd never seen him so old before.

I stood up and walked in circles, the way Libby had the night before, feeling crazy, insane, alone. I asked Dave if he could please buy me some snacks for the river: I was going to the Jatunyacu with the trip. I tried to find Fabian but he'd already left to run other taxi-driver errands. Oswaldo – the head of the taxi cooperative – pointed me toward a different driver, someone I'd never met before. His nickname was *Pescado* – which means fish, the dead kind that you eat, not the kind that's still swimming. I made a blubbering request to go to Paul's bodega to get my kayak. Another gringo friend asked what Dave was doing; I said he was probably going to the Upper Mis. "I think he wants to stay close to you, though, Chandra." He sounded like he was talking to someone who needed help, a crazy person, someone whose composure might catastrophically unravel at any moment. Dave ran over from the café, grabbed my hand, and pulled me into Pescado's truck. It was older and dirtier than Fabian's, and Pescado didn't talk to us on the way to Paul's bodega. My vision was blurred.

We arrived at the bodega in a hurry – the raft trip would be leaving soon. Will, unhappily, would be coming with us to the Jatunyacu to take photos. That was his responsibility. He was grumpy and pouting. Everyone was exhausted. I could no longer offer encouragement or smiles. My resources had been tapped.

We left Pescado by the truck. The cool darkness of the bodega. The relative quiet, only the crying neighbor baby and the barking of dogs out on the street. The absence of people. Almost stillness. Almost.

I stood in the darkness, the only light coming through the open door and the grated, glassless windows. Two weeks' worth of accumulated kayak stench, neoprene, all dank and human and carrying the odors of all these rivers and all their problems. All these boats, the boats Paul has collected and guarded and hoarded, and for what? Why aren't they being used? Remnants of the deceased Napo River Festival, an old wooden lifejacket, paddles, more neoprene. And our boats? Dave's and mine and Will's and the Canadian filmmaker, Mike's – we'd sell them to the North American outfitters at the end of our trip because locals cannot afford our boats. Not until more gringos beat them to hell, after more shitty boofs and swims and all the misuse that comes with using something that's not yours, something you don't care quite enough about, something you're not completely invested in protecting. *Then* the locals could afford them. In a season or two or four.

I stood staring at so much plastic, all those kayaks and all the plastic gear inside them, hanging on dry lines above, and I felt nauseous. I felt Dave's hand on my back and I turned toward him. I buried my face in the space between his neck and shoulder and the tears of the last two weeks, the last few months, the last two years fell out onto his skin. It was a shaking, wet, convulsing cry, the kind where snot pours out of your nose and drool oozes from your mouth and you don't do anything about it. I told him through sobs that I cannot make everyone happy. I can't please everyone, anyone, and I cannot do everything I said I can do. I want to do my job – is this my job? I want to be better, more generous, to follow through and achieve and leave my

legacy and fade into the background and avoid interviews but they had found me! They got their interview and I had sounded stupid and I couldn't stop sweating.

“I want *you* to be happy,” Dave said. He's patient.

I was well aware of how much time I could – or, rather, could not – spend convulsing and spewing face juices onto his shoulder, so I gathered myself and said thank you. Then we picked up our kayaks, Will's too, and met Pescado on the street, who by now was very anxious and ready to go. We didn't like him at all. And that was our fault. We just weren't in the mood for new people today.

On the way to the Jatunyacu Pescado played terrible music. Dave questioned his route-finding; Pescado made no move to explain himself. We all commented on how we missed Fabian. When we arrived at the put-in, it was significantly cooler and overcast: as much as I hated it, I was putting on neoprene. I looked across the crowd of rafters – maybe forty of them – and saw Joe clipping D's lifejacket, carefully checking to make sure it's tight, brushing the hair from her face. I made eye contact with him. I'd never seen him in this role. He was a client, a passenger, not a guide, not *my* guide, and he was so careful with her. She does not speak or understand a word of Spanish.

I delivered festival t-shirts to all the raft guides and the two safety kayakers. Then the raft guides lowered the boats to the river and the clients began the five-minute descent via slippery trail, tangled roots for traction, to the river.

I stood in my rancid neoprene, watching full rafts peel out into the current one by one, when I noticed one raft – Joe's raft – had no guide. I counted and counted again, and I realized then that we had one too many kayakers, one too few raft guides. I alerted Roberto, who hollered at a kid named Andres, throwing his arms up in the air. Andres looked around, eventually

realizing that this guide-less boat, half full of gringos, half full of cute Ecuadorian twenty-something girls, was in fact *his* boat. We now had to do something with Andres' kayak.

I told them I'd deal with it. Roberto blew me a kiss and a smile, Andres hopped in the raft and began to teach my friends his Spanish paddle commands. Will took off with the trip, exasperated and annoyed, while Dave sat stoic in his kayak in the shaded eddy.

I started to carry Andres' kayak up the steep trail. "*Pesa mucho, Chandrita,*" he shouted from his raft: it's heavy. I'd already noted that. A kayaker from Quito, along for the trip, scurried up behind me to help carry the boat.

By the time we got the boat to the top of the hill, I was sweating again and hating my neoprene, like everyone should hate neoprene, all the time. I told my helper that I was sweating out last night's discoteca and that it felt good. That was only halfway true. We hid the kayak in the woods and he protested, saying it was not our boat and that we should find a better solution. I told him that I'd done this once before on this river, in 2010. I hid a boat – also not mine, a rental – after I swam and decided I didn't have it in me to keep going.

We had hiked out, hidden the boats in the brush, and walked for hours down this very same dirt road until we passed a pickup truck full of farm volunteers heading upriver. The hike wouldn't have been so bad except for the crippling shame and regret that accompanies the decision to abandon the river mid-trip. In neoprene. Through the sweltering jungle. Once the decision's been made to leave the river, walking seems too easy and you feel foolish, reactionary. But when you're sponging the water out of your boat after you swam a big rapid – again – listening to the river taunt and tease and admonish you for your lack of skill or bravery, you want nothing more than to be dry. But here, in the jungle, you're never dry. Replace the river water with sweat, and vice versa.

We'll hide the boat, I said.

We caught up with the trip after thirty minutes of paddling, and I spotted Joe and D. They waved from their seats on the raft. I paddled over to them in the flat water.

“It warms the cockles of my heart to see you out there in that little boat.” Joe told me.

At the lunch beach, after all the rafts are dragged onto the sand, the rafters went up away from the water's edge to play rafter games. Local kids who live near this beach swam naked in the river. Dave and Will slept in their kayaks in imagined shade alongside the rafts. I wanted to sleep and easily could have – I was certainly not hungry for buffet-style rafter lunch – but instead I watched the games from a safe distance. I would have expected Joe to stay down here with us; he didn't need to play those games, he's not a normal client, he doesn't need to be entertained. But he was up there, with D, pretending to be a *cuy* – a guinea pig – running between the legs of other *cuyes* when Roberto called out prompts: *¡Mamá Cuy! ¡Papá Cuy! ¡Toda la familia Cuy!* All the rafters were covered in sand and merciless sand flies. In twenty-four hours their exposed ankles and calves would be aflame with bites: nickel-sized mounds of red skin pocked with a tiny pussing crater. The girls who were naked up to their bikini bottoms would have it worse of all.

They finished the game and all the rafters went to make burrito wraps beneath a thatched pavilion further on up the beach. The bugs would be at their worst up there. Dave and Will continued to nap. Gregarious rafters sloshed around in the water near the boats, splashing the sleeping kayakers. They opened their grumpy eyes but said nothing, then fell back asleep – or pretended to, anyway, to avoid conversation or human engagement of any kind. I walked up the beach and encouraged Joe and D to come down the boats where we could at least dangle our legs in the water to keep the flies off our lower extremities.

Joe and I moseyed back to the water together and he told me, “I’m sorry.” I looked toward his face and noted how hard his eyes were working to dam the tears building behind them. “Tell Dave I’m sorry, too. I’m sorry I was a bully. I just wanted to go down a South American river with you. I’m sorry.”

I put my hand on Joe’s back.

“You don’t have to play those stupid rafter games, Joe.”

“I know...but I was the *Papá Cuy!*” He puffed his chest and bobbed his head like a pigeon.

We sat on a raft with our legs submerged in murky water up to our knees, halfway watching the rafting clients chase each other around the beach, dropping bits of burrito in the sand, still playing games. The naked indigenous kids – some of them as young as three years old – walked up to the top of the beach, swam out into the current, and floated down through the riffle to where we sat on the boats. Joe eyed them silently, his head lifted high, while D told me about home.

7.

FALLOUT / OBFUSCATION

Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa’s “citizens’ revolution” – with its socialist proclamations, shiny roadside billboards, and colorful new national image – typifies a shift in global politics that many scholars call “post-neoliberalism,” a host of changes that are, collectively, a reaction to failed neoliberal development models that served mostly to compound poverty in already poor countries.

Ecuador’s political-economic history is marked by periods of ambition to jettison local natural resources into global markets. Each of those efforts is denoted geographically by region and historically by a distinct period of boom and eventual catastrophic bust. The 16th century Spanish gold frenzy came first. What followed was an early 20th century colonization of the Pacific coast by a mestizo oligarchy fueled by bananas and cacao. And in 1964 a little oil company called Texaco colonized the northern reaches of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Holst 2016).

In Ecuador’s *Oriente*, the Amazonian east, where oil exploitation has colored “development” trends since the middle of the twentieth century, remnants of colonial history culminate in a mess of alarming social problems. When someone is there to listen to and document their accounts of local changes, communities affected by drilling deliver haunting testimony. The lists of complaints are disquieting: lack of potable water, increased crime, prostitution, and economic desperation. Decades ago, roads and refineries fragmented or contaminated the land, leading to the food shortages that spurred the initial rise in crime. The proliferation of criminal activity throughout indigenous communities prompted “month-long

annual paramilitary *limpierrez* (cleansings) in which prostitutes, homeless children, and gays were executed in the night hours” (Holst 2016).

The environmental effects of Ecuador’s oil boom are perhaps just as heinous as the social fallout. As Susan Sawyer (2001), an anthropologist at the University of California – Davis, describes: “Researchers estimate that Texaco’s operations generated up to 4.3 million gallons of hazardous waste daily over a period of twenty years. Between 1972 and 1990 the Texaco-operated Trans-Andean pipeline spilled an estimated 16.8 million gallons of crude into the Amazonian headwaters – over one and a half times the amount spilled by the *Exxon Valdez*.”

I recall my third-grade reaction to the Exxon oil spill in Alaska’s Prince William Sound. Otters and seabirds were suffocated by crude not three hours from my own inland home. For a class project I wrote and illustrated a book about another third grade girl – someone who I’d wished was me – who went to wash the feathers of eagles and the faces of harbor seals. I remember a lot of tears. My parents had to switch off the news each time images from the blackened coast appeared.

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The term “Fourth World” might be used to describe internationally unrecognized nations, or those factions of the world’s population “whose descendants maintain a distinct political culture within the states which claim their territories” (Griggs, 1992). In sociopolitical discourse, the term has also been used to identify “(1) the poorest and most undeveloped states of the world or (2) any oppressed or underprivileged victim of a state” (Griggs). In his seminal 1974 publication, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, Shuswap Chief George Manuel explained his

notion of the Fourth World as “indigenous peoples descended from a country’s aboriginal population and who today are completely or partly deprived of the right to their own territories and its riches” (Manuel). Regardless of semantics or the details of the description, all Fourth World nations are “engaged in a struggle to maintain or gain some degree of sovereignty over their national homeland” (Griggs).

Many indigenous populations – the residents of the Fourth World – are implicit in the overhunting of endangered game animals, the apparent disregard for the “rules” of conservation. For many, this is surprising or disappointing. The misconception that indigenous people are, by nature, *ecological* is labeled by anthropologists as the myth of the “noble savage,” the notion that people who live closely to the land are inherently its faithful and flawless stewards (according to a modern Western definition of stewardship, of course). When we find that they overhunt and overharvest or mismanage their waste, we are stunned and perhaps compelled to judge. As an Alaskan child, I remember hearing stories of Inupiaq people hunting down entire caribou herds with high-powered rifles and snowmobiles, and taking bowhead whales with the help of motorboats, hauling them to the icy shores of coastal towns with powerful winches. I was often confused by the apparent abuse of modern technology in northern subsistence lifestyles.

Subsistence and semi-subsistence livelihoods, however, leave an ecological footprint that is incomparably smaller than that of urbanites, with their dependence on remote oilfields, factory farms, logging concessions, tropical plantations, and thirsty croplands (Rees and Wackernagle, 1994). And although Amazonian subsistence lifestyles are not entirely sustainable – population growth, changes in the landscape, and shifts in economic dynamics increasingly require clearing of forests, for instance – it’s important to remember that the ecological and social effects of

market economies are always more systemically destructive and widespread than those of subsistence economies.

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Oil exploration has fragmented fragile Amazonian ecosystems with the construction of access roads, refineries, encampments, and pits for the disposal of toxic waste. Petroleum extraction has also fragmented civil societies in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Susan Sawyer (2004), in her investigation of petro-giant ARCO, found that oil companies, when faced with a divided indigenous community and lack of common consent to drill, routinely encouraged the separation of the community into factions, pitting the ideology or agenda of one group against that of another's. According to sociologist Patricia Widener, "factionalism *within* the indigenous communities created a space for oil companies and NGOs to select among them, and then to reclaim a particular position as the indigenous position for their own audience." These fragments of communities often fight among themselves, exacerbating civil unrest and threatening cultural cohesion among indigenous groups.

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In a recent email update to two of the ERI's long-time North American supporters, Sperry wrote: "Ecuadorians remain short on voluntary support, and unpredictable in terms of follow-through and commitment. But, as always, we have had a couple of people on tap that have been helping out randomly but the paddling community remains divided and incohesive

[sic] as a group. Rumors continue to rage on the local level that the ERI is a cash cow and Chandra and I live large off of all the donations and sponsorships we receive for the Jondachi Fest.”

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In December 2014, in the Zamora province of southern Ecuador, near the frontier with northern Peru, Jorge Tendetza unearthed the broken body of his father from an unmarked grave. José Tendetza had gone missing just days before the COP20 climate talks in Lima, where he was slated to deliver potentially damning testimony against the Ecuadorian government. Tendetza was a leader of the Shuar people of southern Ecuador, the country’s second-largest indigenous group. His death was confirmation for the Shuar community of escalating pressure against environmental activists: the week before Tendetza’s murder, a bus carrying Ecuadorian protesters bound for the Lima talks was confiscated by national police en route to Peru.

Tendetza was a prominent critic of El Mirador, a massive open pit copper mine in the heart of the Cordillera del Condór, a swath of Shuar territory renowned for its biodiversity. El Mirador is operated by Ecuacorriente, a once-Canadian firm that was acquired by a Chinese conglomerate in 2010. The Mirador project has already displaced Shuar families and will, if completed, destroy 450,000 hectares of pristine cloud forest. Tendetza was working with indigenous federations to protest the displacement of local people and the contamination of local rivers by mine waste, and he had filed a formal complaint against El Mirador with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Local authorities initially ruled Tendetza's death a drowning, though his body displayed the unmistakable signs of torture and strangulation. Tendetza was 47 years old at the time of his death.

TWELVE HUNDRED MILES northwest of Tena is La Esperanza, the highest city in Honduras. It is the cool-aired heart of the Ruta Lenca, resting between two *cordilleras*, two rugged jungle mountain ranges, near the El Salvadoran border. The Lenca people have lost their ancestral language but organize in droves to protect their ancestral lands and rivers.

By the numbers, it's more dangerous to be an environmental activist in Honduras than anywhere else in the world. Between 2010 and 2014, according to Global Witness, an NGO that illuminates and condemns correlations between abuse of the earth and abuses of human rights, 101 Hondurans were killed for outspoken defense of forests and waters. Also according to Global Witness: across the world in 2014 there were 116 murders of international environmental activists, up 20% from the year before. Forty percent of those victims were indigenous, killed in their attempted protection of ancestral lands, waters, or territories.

Berta Cáceres was murdered at 1 a.m. Honduras time, March 3, 2016. She was killed, shot multiple times, while she lay sleeping in her home in La Esperanza, a city whose name means *hope*.

In murdering Cáceres, her assassins extinguished the light of a courageous champion for indigenous rights, a brave beacon for the disenfranchised, a mother of four. Cáceres organized her indigenous community to oppose – successfully so far – a hydro scheme that would, if built, eliminate the ethnic Lenca people's access to fresh water. She fought against one of Central America's most massive hydro projects: a complex of four large dams on the Gualcarque River,

originally financed by the World Bank and China's Sinohydro. The 65-foot tall Agua Zarca dam, already under construction, would essentially privatize the waters of the Gualcarque and its tributaries, severely impacting water rights and sovereignty of indigenous communities in the watershed. The economic independence and cultural heritage of the Lenca would drown behind the Agua Zarca impoundment.

The campaign against Agua Zarca has been both gruesome and moderately victorious:

Three years earlier, on July 14 of 2013, Lenca leader Tomás García was shot and killed by a member of the engineering battalion of Honduran armed forces. His 17 year-old son, Alan, was also shot and severely injured in the same incident.

After García's murder, however, Sinohydro abandoned the Agua Zarca project, citing concern for serious conflict at the local level; the World Bank also withdrew its funding.

Berta's fight pitted her against a U.S.-funded national police force and wealthy landowners, as well as what has been called a mercenary army of private security guards. She received regular death threats and publically acknowledged the risk she took in leading the grass-roots opposition. Her friends and colleagues kept a eulogy on-hand, at the ready, in case the threats one day manifested as atrocious reality.

Sometimes, in some places, when local people take accountability for their lands and waters, when they fight for their wild rivers, they risk death. With that in mind, with the direst of consequences lurking in the shadows of activism, how can we expect local people, often politically or economically disenfranchised or oppressed – to speak up for their rivers? How can we condemn them for their inaction, for their distance from the issue, for their apparent cowardice, apathy, and irresponsible political detachment? If all it takes is one bullet to end the protest, is the action worth the risk?

Berta Cáceres was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015. In her acceptance speech, she explained her cultural obligation to the rivers she fought to protect. “In our worldview, we are beings who come from the Earth, from the water, and from corn. The Lenca people are ancestral guardians of the rivers, in turn protected by the spirits of young girls, who teach us that giving our lives in various ways for the protection of the rivers is giving our lives for the well-being of humanity and of this planet.”

It probably won't ever be clear who is responsible for Berta's assassination. Her community strongly suspects the Honduran government or the corporations and funders behind Agua Zarca, but the police maintain that her death was the result of a robbery gone wrong. “It's the art of obfuscation,” her nephew told the *New York Times*.

“We must undertake the struggle in all parts of the world, wherever we may be, because we have no other spare or replacement planet. We have only this one, and we have to take action,” Berta told *The Guardian* in an interview after her receipt of the Goldman Prize.

THIS, COMING FROM AN INDIGENOUS LEADER whose earthly voice will never again holler out above the din of development, is powerful to me. Maybe it's because I have to see it as something of an invitation, a plea, to international citizens to band together for the sake of wild places. Multinational conglomerates of powerful, wealthy entities more often than not spearhead the destruction, and in the Global South, in the sometimes-desperate nations whose resources are hungrily ogled by foreigners, it is rarely the local population that benefits from extraction of resources or the development of yet-undeveloped spaces. These attacks should be countered by cohesive, unified groups of humans who seek to defend, rather than destroy or develop.

Of course there are countless perspectives on extraction and development, and the two practices are not inherently evil. But when development is initiated by parties who have no direct investment in ecological or economic consequences at the super-local level; or ancestral stewards of the resource have not been consulted, or their objections are disregarded; or the driving force behind the development is foreign indulgence; maybe at this point, when the stakes are high and corruption threatens to permanently destroy social or ecological systems, the notion of “local” – in the context of who is responsible for protecting a place – should be temporarily discarded.

I often feel insecure about my involvement in the conservation work in Ecuador. I worry that I am spreading North American – non-local – ideals and “solutions” to a country that’s been ruled by neoliberalism and exploitation on both sides of its political border for decades. I worry that, by working with a gringo-led organization, no matter how thoughtfully conceived its projects are, I am exacerbating racial and political tensions. Am I helping to promote a method of protecting local resources that is not the product of local cultural values or priorities?

But then again, if there isn’t any organized movement to protect the rivers in Ecuador, what will happen to them? If the local people who live alongside these waters are too afraid or oppressed to act (or, as I’m positive is the case in some situations: too apathetic, resource poor, or risk averse), who will speak on behalf of the rivers? Will they all go to hell without a fight, as Paul Sperry seems to believe?

BACK IN MONTANA, a little more than a month after our return from Ecuador, Dave sits across from me in this Missoula coffee shop, jobless but comfortable, his cherry red cap with the Werner paddle logo, his blue eyes, listening to his music. He’s too comfortable, I can’t help but think, supported by his family, his friends, his art, and the Internet.

Here, in this coffee shop and at home, we drink water straight from the tap. We are safe, or relatively so, from food-borne, mosquito-borne, and water-borne diseases. We slug coffee from stainless steel travel mugs, and we feel good about ourselves while others sip from plastic, cardboard, or Styrofoam cups. No use for one-time use, we say. I was proud of my mother when she stopped buying Costco-sized pallets of plastic, 8-ounce bottles of water.

I email Dave the Berta article from my seat at the other side of the table. He reads it – he’s got nothing else to do right now – and asks me with wide eyes, “Have you or Paul ever received a threat?” He’s suddenly very concerned. He mentions the Peruvian anti-dam activist – Rojas Gonzales – who was murdered just before we left for Ecuador this winter.

I tell him this is different. Paul is not an indigenous person. He has white skin and blue eyes like yours. Paul Sperry’s perceived and actual risks, it seems, are much less than they would be if he were indigenous, or if he were Ecuadorian by birth.

I had posted the official Jondachi Fest video – produced by professional Quiteño filmmakers – not an hour before I read the news of Berta’s assassination. “Do you think you should take the video down?” Dave asks.

“No. That video is not a protest. It’s a bunch of rich people kayaking. This is not the same thing.”

Recreation to promote conservation: it feels elitist and far from the real struggle. What a *privilege* it is to recreate! How many Ecuadorians will ever have the chance to kayak on the Jondachi, or on any other river for that matter? A tiny fraction of those 15 million someone-elses will ever know the joy of paddling their rivers. Did Berta ever think of knowing her Gualcarque from the cockpit of a kayak? Did she ever have the opportunity? Did any foreigners ever try to tell her that her ancestral waterway was a unique recreational resource, and that perhaps the

Lenca people might consider promoting the Gualcarque for tourism? Maybe that could dissuade the developers from constructing that Agua Zarca complex. I feel ill. I consider the sad notion that the argument for recreation – in all its privilege and frivolity – might trump the argument for indigenous rights, cultural heritage, and human equality in the fight against privatization of water and ravenous, unchecked exploitation of wild lands.

I am at this coffee shop table, furious, momentarily hopeless. Everything seems trivial: this coffee (which of those Central or South American countries did it come from, anyway?), these thoughts that I write from the safety of my cozy mountain town, the privilege of the white person sport of kayaking, the oblivious smiles all around me. I know that my home is not without its problems, and the places I've known intimately have all reaffirmed that my country has a dark and troubled underbelly. There are social and environmental problems here that deserve – require – the dedicated attention of unified and concerned citizens. But the comfort we are often afforded while we fight these battles at home starkly contrasts the conditions in which the battle is waged abroad, in places labeled the Global South or the Fourth World.

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Extractive economies are typified by the cycle of boom and bust, and Rafael Correa's administration has not been without its own booms and equally disruptive busts. Correa is handsome and charismatic – or at least he *was* at the start of his tenure. Presidency anywhere is sure to gnaw at the facade of youth. He has a strong jawline and a wide, symmetrical smile filled with big teeth. He studied economics at the University of Illinois.

At the start of his term, oil prices were soaring and Correa was eager to divert oil revenue toward infrastructure, education, and public relations (Holst 2016). In Ecuador, by 2006, the anti-American sentiment was strong and the Correa administration was well-positioned to challenge U.S. imperialism. In 2009 Correa closed the U.S. military base in Manta on the Ecuadorian coast; in 2010 the administration cut ties with U.S. oil company EDC; in 2011 Ecuador kicked the U.S. ambassador out of the country, post-WikiLeaks scandal; and in 2012 Correa terminated Ecuador's involvement with the controversial military training center, the former School of the Americas. And because the U.S. was then embroiled in two foreign wars and an internal economic crisis, a number of new investors were positioned to take the place of U.S. companies. Ecuador opened up opportunities to corporations from Canada and Brazil for development in multiple sectors. It was, however, the Chinese more than anyone that capitalized on the shift in power in Ecuador. Immediately after Correa's 2006 election, Chinese investment in Ecuador doubled. A year later, China was more invested in Ecuador than in any other Latin American country (Ellis, 2008).

The Correa administration certainly expanded public works and the country's infrastructure, all the while touting the goal of marketing Ecuador for eco-tourism. Urban or highly-mobile citizens enjoyed newly renovated social programs, health care, education reforms, and infrastructure; the rural areas, however, the very places from which the resources funding these improvements are amassed, did not enjoy the same reductions in poverty. As Holst (2016) summarizes: "Correa's administration has improved infrastructure, roads, hospitals, and education in Ecuador's heavily populated urban centers, but those improvements were funded by the colonization, exploitation, and environmental destruction of the Amazon."

By 2013, Correa had taken out \$9 billion in Chinese loans (Gill, 2013). His government's biggest, highest-profile expenditures were the construction of roads and hydroelectric dams. As the oil situation in Ecuador grows increasingly complicated, hydro beckons as a new option for the future of Ecuadorian energy.

By 2015, Chinese loans accounted for more than 60% of the government's financing and over 90% of Ecuador's oil was bound for China. In the wake of the most recent collapse in oil prices, Ecuador now finds itself entrenched in debt to China, owing more and more crude and more and more money to the new world superpower.

In a 2014 move that can be categorized as economically strategic or painfully, gut-wrenchingly desperate, the Correa administration auctioned off three million hectares of pristine Amazon to Chinese oil companies. Naturally, this was met with resistance – sometimes violent, always futile – from the indigenous groups who make the ancient forest their home (Washington *Post*, 2015).

There's less than a decade and a half of oil left in the ground in northern Ecuador (Holst 2016). Yet another bust looms heavily on the country's hazy horizon. As the administration anticipates the inevitable oil bust, Correa has begun granting gold, silver, and copper concessions to Canadian and Chinese mining companies at breakneck speed. The *New York Times* reported in 2012 that Correa simultaneously borrowed \$1 billion from China and began negotiations with Chinese investors over a \$1.7 billion copper mine in the remote southern Amazon. As Correa's ambition mounts, so does indigenous resistance in the south. As Tito Puanchir, president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon, put it: "When the mines come, it's going to be a civil war down there." (Holst 2016)

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Alongside oil money highways, billboards remind traveling citizens of what they are supposed to think about the changes in their country:

THE CITIZEN'S REVOLUTION IS ACHIEVED THROUGH PUBLIC WORKS.

YOU'RE TRAVELING OVER HIGHWAYS OF PEACE AND DEMOCRACY.

ECUADOR AMA LA VIDA.

Ama la vida.

It could mean "Ecuador loves life," as I believe it does on the billboards. It could also be a command, or *mandato* in Spanish, as in: Hey, you. Love life.

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There are two bracelets on my right wrist.

One is a thick band of blue and black twine, woven into a simple argyle pattern. In the very center is a single white bead, probably plastic but reminiscent of bone or alabaster or abalone. A longhaired artisan on a Nicaraguan beach made it for me. My best friend from our childhood in Alaska wears another just like it. We've worn them since 2008 and I've only taken mine off for surgery, and with some protest, when general anesthesia was necessary.

The other bracelet is cloth, black with bold rainbow-colored letters: ECUADOR LOVE LIFE, it reads, in English. I look at that bracelet and I wonder for how long I'll continue to wear it.

8.

HOME

I don't know where my Ecuador bracelet fell off, exactly. Somewhere in or on or near the Clark Fork of the Columbia, the river that flows through what is home, for now.

I'd gone kayaking, shortly after returning from Ecuador in mid-winter Montana. The river here is beautiful in winter: snow reaches toward the water from nearby fire-scoured slopes and bald eagles bat their eyes against sleet in riverside nests. The sky is the color of steel but so big that you can look far to the west and see blue just beyond the glacier-scrubbed hills. The river is extra quiet in winter – sounds are hushed by air dense with water and the muting power of gray.

In winter you have to wear something to separate your skin from the water, from the air, from the elements – something like a Ziploc bag that seals with latex around your wrists and neck, a dry suit, akin to what cold-water divers wear but maybe with a more flashy color scheme, something that appeals to the strange aesthetic of action sports culture. With numb and careless hands, I think, I'd pulled the gaskets from my wrists and at once I'd pulled off the bracelet, too. I didn't notice until a few hours later, as Arlo curled up on the floor between my feet and the little electric heater I employ to fend off chills when I'm at my desk. I looked down at my wrist and saw only one bracelet: the tattered, frayed woven bracelet from that Nicaraguan beach, the one collects lint and whose knot I can't untie since it's been fused by sweat, dirt, water, and years, the one whose twin encircles my best friend's wrist. I wondered if hers was in the same condition as mine. The bracelet from Ecuador was gone. Instinctively I looked at the floor, at Arlo, up my

sleeve – it wasn't there. I'd lost it, or it had fallen off. Maybe it was among the Ponderosa needles in the river gorge, or maybe it had been caught up in the sleeve of my dry-suit and had shaken loose onto some floor as I shuttled my wet gear from river to car to house.

I thought of Dave's wrist and his own Ecuador bracelet; how he still wears his and how he'd given me mine, on the banks of the Jondachi; and how I'd wished that the words on mine were in Spanish, as they were on his. *Ama la vida* / Love life – I'd preferred the first version.

For a second I wondered what it meant that I'd lost the Ecuador bracelet so carelessly. I'd only been wearing it for a year; the Nicaraguan bracelet, however, has been on my wrist for eight.

I wondered if there was a chance that it'd fallen off *in* the river. I liked that idea. I thought of it floating in the cold water of the Clark Fork, swirling and tumbling toward the Columbia, along Interstate 90, west and north through Montana – *montaña* – traversing fields of cows, windmills, and apple trees, toward dams and locks and struggling, hopeless salmon, toward a colder version of the Pacific. It would never make it to the ocean, I thought. The bracelet might come to rest in some lake or stagnant reservoir or back eddy or log jam. Or more likely yet, its Ecuadorian fabric would dissolve long before the river water stilled, frayed by floating ice and rock.

I thought about the lost bracelet, and I thought about the future. I thought about staying closer to home to focus on what's in front of me: my relationships, my dog, my rivers. I thought about remaining in a place where I am invested – where I live – and where I understand, at least a little better anyway, politics, history, and social dynamics. I wondered then what my desire to step away from the project means for those Ecuadorian rivers, and for the Jondachi. I haven't yet had the conversation with anyone in Ecuador. No one there knows yet about my hopes to back

away from Jondachi Fest. What will be the cost of letting it go? Another abandoned project? Abandoned faraway friendships? An abandoned river? If the goal all along was to establish the infrastructure for the event, it's been done. Someone else can step in and do my work and probably even do it better. When I left my first teaching job in Alaska to move to Ecuador, several friends, including my mother, reminded me that we are all replaceable. Somebody else will take your place, do your work, leave a new legacy that eventually supplants or overshadows your own.

My hope is that I can provide support from afar in the form of encouragement, feedback, connections to sponsors, media resources, new ideas, and love. But I want to stay home. Also I want to see a new place this year or next, to seek out a new experience that might open my eyes a little more, build more context for what I've learned in Ecuador, maybe make me a better, more effective advocate for rivers in Ecuador, for rivers everywhere. I still don't know what it feels like to be without the utility of language fluency: selfishly, I want to go somewhere where the local people speak something other than Spanish.

On the wall above my desk at home in Montana, I have photos from the first Jondachi Fest: one of young, sweet Alvaro Andy holding his race jersey before the competition, another of Diego Robles accepting his prize on a makeshift podium alongside three of the world's most talented kayakers. My favorite photo of the lot, though, is of Diego's nephew, Brayan, on the Hollín River, the day after he competed in the first-ever Upper Jondachi Race. He's floating out in front of the group, alone in the flat water beneath the last of the rapids. An afternoon thunderstorm has just subsided and a misty rainbow arches over the river corridor. His back is to the camera, and Brayan's borrowed yellow kayak is pointed downstream, toward the rainbow and toward whatever waits around the bend.

Earlier that same day, my kayak was swallowed by a hole, a consequence of complacency, exhaustion, and my lack of skill. After a few failed attempts to roll my boat in the aerated water, I swam out of my kayak and out of the hydraulic. Downstream, Brayan helped me collect my gear and my wits, and once I was safe he paddled away with a smirk. I swallowed enough of the Jondachi River that day that my outsider insecurities, for a while, were washed away. The jungle water that flows through Brayan's veins now sloshed in my stomach and burned in my sinuses.

I struggled with my contact lenses for a while and when my vision cleared I watched as Brayan floated away, downstream. I watched and I was flooded by the desire to do better: to be a better, braver kayaker; to speak Spanish better under stress; to connect to people better; to come back to this river, over and over, to prove my commitment to this place and to these people. To be really good at just one of those things would have been fine with me.

Sometimes I think that maybe it doesn't matter who does the saving, who does the swimming, who does the talking or the blaming, or who does the fighting for wild rivers anywhere, everywhere.

Other times I am left immobile, unable to move for fear of overstepping my bounds, of working to effect change in places that aren't mine to change. My fear of being an outsider – having my intentions misunderstood, being insensitive or oblivious to cultural undercurrents, failing in or abandoning my work – is often debilitating. I think about the places that are my home: Alaska and, for now, Montana. Does that mean that I'm local here? Do I have a right to fight for the places that are sacred to me? That word, though, *sacred*, is intimidating. It connotes religion (of which I have none), holiness (what *do* I regard as holy?), and tradition (often what I mistake for tradition, I fear, are simply patterns, habits, or ruts). To fight for the sacred, I must

first identify what I'm willing to sacrifice for. *Sacer*, holy, is the Latin root of both words. And what should my sacrifice be? Time, comfort, money, energy? Or, like Berta, *life*? Who's to say that this action we've initiated – the model that Paul Sperry's ERI has developed – is the correct one? How would things be different if *he* were different, or if I were more tolerant, or if I understood him better? If Ecuador understood him better, would his work be more effective? Or is the battle too much for one man, genius or otherwise? And at what point will he decide he's had enough, grow tired of being lonely, of sprinting headlong into walls, of living as a perpetual outsider?

It's too complicated, too big, for answers.

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Joe Numbers is back in Whitefish. He takes care of his grandchildren on Mondays and goes snowboarding for a couple of hours each week. Since he turned 60 nine years ago he gets a free pass to Whitefish Mountain resort.

Dave is at my house, recovering from a knee surgery. It's been hard – his construction job wasn't here when he got back from Ecuador this time around, and he's been unemployed, broke, and crashing at my house. I don't know where this will go. I try to remember that it's all temporary: the emotions, the physical conditions, the good and the bad of both – it will all eventually pass. Nothing stays around for too long.

When Dave is well enough to hobble around and drink beer, we'll go up to visit Joe Numbers and deliver his winning race bib to the Stonefly Lounge. I wish that could happen tomorrow.

This year, I resolve to see more of the rivers in Montana.

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I got scared a few times in Ecuador this last trip: when Makanaki yelled at me, and when I yelled at the children with the duck and the dog; I hadn't recognized my own voice.

I got scared when I left Ecuador – I don't know the next time I'll be back. I don't know when I'll see those friends again, Marcia and Edison, Libby, or Diego.

I got scared kayaking with professional paddlers as I ran rivers beyond my skill level. On my last day of kayaking in Ecuador this year, on a river called the Cosanga, I hit my head so hard I felt sick. I sat on the side of the river and fought back tears. I was tempted to hike out – in over my head and terrified – but didn't. Later that same day I fell backwards, screeching Dave's name, through a slot between huge boulders, unable to see where the fissure led, imagining the worst. Then, with only a mile left in the run, just after the Cosanga's confluence with the Quijos River, I got tumbled in a big hole and swam. On that swim, I swallowed a lot of the Quijos River, and the next morning I woke up shaking and feverish, unable to lay my head on the pillow for the aching. I wasn't sure at first whether it was a concussion or an illness, but my intestines soon clarified the issue for me, and I spent the remainder of my time in Ecuador sleeping in the hammock at La Ponderosa, watching professional kayakers come and go, my own mind swerving in and out of consciousness, so wrecked by fever I couldn't even read my book. Ecuador's parting gift for me this year: a full-day river thrashing and a gringo-sized dose of Río Quijos Fever.

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Arlo likes to stare at his stuffed bear, whom we've named Fernando, who stares back without blinking. Fernando's missing an ear and the seam down his spine has been ripped open to reveal white cotton entrails, most of which stay tucked inside his little grey body. Arlo positions himself a foot or so from Fernando's face and drops his own head to the floor in a dramatic *thump*. He looks longingly at his bear, as though waiting and wishing, willing Fernando to wiggle to life, suddenly animate, a buddy to play with while I persist at my desk.

Arlo eventually dozes off, tiny snores issuing from his graying muzzle. Fernando will be there when he wakes up, until one day the rest of his fabric seams have ruptured beyond repair.

I look out the window toward winter. Intermittent flurries of sleet remind me that it's okay to be inside, at this desk, right now. Tomorrow I'll go to the river.

Arlo stirs on the floor and I put on another layer, settling into the chill.

We're home, for now.

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Water flows through us, through physical and metaphorical channels, through our blood and our towns and our memories. It's surging downhill, from some high mountain to some valley, somewhere, past somebody's home, over somebody's sacred ground and by somebody else's mineral claim, through some lowland delta to some ancient sea. It all eventually flows to the ocean, and we see it reborn as the rain that falls on a jungle canopy or boreal forest or rangeland or golf course or desert, somewhere, everywhere. The water continues to flow

downhill. The momentum is still and always there, it's persistent, it's already in motion. There's simplicity in the chaos, connection in the conflict. Those connections, the relationships, are what save me when I falter. They might also be what save the river.

The Jondachi still flows freely, for now.

POSTSCRIPT / DOWNSTREAM

In September 2011, a year and a half after the flood that Libby described, the Tena and Pano Rivers flooded again, this time affecting around 560 families in the Tena area. The newly constructed gabions, the government's celebrated solution to the problem of flooding, were put to the test. Several walls failed catastrophically, and two young girls were killed in unrelated incidents when the walls collapsed.

12 March 2016: Tena floods anew.

Paul Sperry's bodega is coated in 10 cm of sludge. Libby worries for her hometown. Local authorities react by threatening to build larger, longer gabion walls to retain and restrict the river.

The ERI identifies indiscriminate extraction of gravel by material miners as the root of the flooding problem. Gabion walls do not correct hydrologic or ecological function of rivers, and rivers affected by gravel mining are in need of very different types of remediation. The ERI says that gabion walls channelize the rivers, increasing the risk of flooding, especially when the rivers are high.

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16 March 2016: Lenca leader Nelson Garcia is murdered days after Berta Cáceres' funeral.

Garcia was shot four times in the face after attempting to return to his home after the forceful eviction of 150 indigenous people from their ancestral land in Rio Chiquito. Garcia and his community had been protesting the Agua Zarca dam project with a two-year occupation of the land when bulldozers and riot police initiated the eviction.

Human rights activists call for USAID to withdraw funding from Honduras.

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16 April 2016: A 7.8 magnitude earthquake levels coastal Ecuador.

Buildings crumble, hundreds of people die. Potable water and food supplies dwindle all too quickly. Dams and oil pipelines in the country are shut down as a precautionary measure. Scientists say it's too early to know if there's a connection between the seismic events in Ecuador and the 7.3 earthquake that shook Japan, 9590 miles away, and just one day earlier.

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12 May 2016: In Alaska, the Susitna still flows freely.

As does the Talkeetna. For now.

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