

BÉBHINN RAMSAY

# *The Walking Flute*

A PILGRIMAGE THROUGH SOUTH AMERICA  
FROM THE ATLANTIC TO THE PACIFIC



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FLORIANÓPOLIS, 2023

To those who walked the earth before me;  
to my father Liam Ó Dónaill, who set me a challenge;  
to my mother, Nora O'Donnell, for the glory of serendipity days;  
Aguyjevete to the Guaraní who welcomed me to sit at their sacred fire;  
And to Nhandecy, mother earth, for showing me how to live.

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Peru

América do Sul



Irlanda

Machu Picchu  
Palpa  
Puerto de Lomas  
NAZCA  
Copacabana  
Cusco  
Ollantaytambo

LAGO TITICACA  
Illa do Sol  
Carabuco

LA PAZ

SANTA CRUZ DE LA SIERRA

SUCRE  
POTOSÍ

SAMAIPATA

PUERTO SUAREZ  
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VILLARRICA  
Yaguaron

CIUDAD DEL ESTE

FOZ DO IGUAÇU

FLORIANÓPOLIS

São Miguel das Missões

BARRA DE IBIRAQUERA

Brasil

OCEANO PACÍFICO

OCEANO ATLÂNTICO



WB YEATS: "THE JOURNEY INTERNALLY IS NOT ONLY AN  
IMPORTANT JOURNEY, IT IS THE ONLY JOURNEY."

## THE WALKING FLUTE

In this book I share the conversations I enjoyed along the 10,000 km of the Caminho de Peabiru, starting from my native Ireland and moving through South America. I had conversations with the Guaraní and with juruá/non-indigenous researchers and I read their publications. I am especially grateful to Rosana Bond, whose books formed the basis for my itinerary and a lot of its content. I also had conversations with walking guides and different types of shamans, with my family and friends, with my social conditioning and mySelf, with God, with Satay and with Nhandecy, mother nature. Thank you to all who walked with me, especially my co-pilgrims — my parents, my sons Tom, Liam and Eoin and my sons' fathers, Alastair and Tahmid and my friend Maria. As you read this book, you too join this conversation. Welcome! [bebhinnramsay@gmail.com](mailto:bebhinnramsay@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

### OPEN SECRETS

The indigenous people of South Brazil are almost invisible. I lived for seven years in Brazil before I began to see them. I had passed them occasionally in the centre of the town of Florianópolis where I lived — usually a woman lying on the dirty pavement next to her handmade wares of bows and arrows, spotted wooden animals and straggly dream catchers. Sometimes she nursed a child at her breast. Other young children ran about barefoot and dirty-faced, holding up colourful woven baskets towards me with blank expressions, as I smiled at them. I had passed them, but I hadn't seen them. I knew the main tribe in the area where I lived was called Guaraní (pronounced GUAR-a-NEE) and in the recesses of my mind, I remembered that this was the same tribe that was depicted in the 1986 film 'The Mission' of my youth. I knew that many local places had indigenous names — Sambaqui, Jurerê, Itacorubi, Ibiraquea, Garopaba. I memorised the names of these places with difficulty, without asking their meaning. My three sons were in a local Waldorf school with a Guaraní name. Again, I didn't ask its meaning. At school each year, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, the children dressed up in headdresses and grass skirts and streaked their faces with paint to celebrate The Day of the Indian,

singing simple, rhythmic songs to the beat of a drum. By bedtime however, they had reverted fully to their European uniform of pijamas, Grimm's fairy-tales and Christian prayers.

When my third son, Eoin, was born in the island of Florianópolis, my parents came from my native Ireland to Brazil to help me through the first few weeks. I was sitting on the sofa, nursing my newborn baby, when my father admonished me, *'I can't believe you know so little about the indigenous people here. You should find out more about them.'* I felt a wave of defensive exhaustion ripple through me but his words resonated and found a place within me.

It doesn't surprise me that it was my father who first set this challenge. He was born in 1940 in an Ireland that was still part of Great Britain. For 400 years, the Irish had been colonised by the British. Over the centuries, our land had been confiscated and our language, traditional sports, indigenous beliefs and hedge schools had all been outlawed and beaten almost to extinction. My father had been baptized William O'Donnell, an anglicisation of his indigenous Irish name. When he was nine years old, three quarters of the island of Ireland became a free Republic. At the age of 16, he left his birthtown of Limerick and hitch-hiked around Ireland. He ventured into the coastal areas on the west coast, where story-tellers still gathered crowds at the crossroads and the native Irish was still spoken. The Irish language is not a dialect of English. It is as different to English as Portuguese is to Guaraní. There in these coastal villages, an awareness and love for his native language and culture took hold of my father and by the time he went to study engineering at university two years later, he was calling himself Liam Ó Dónaill, reverting to the Irish version of his name and had become adept at speaking the language. Although he raised his eight children in the more Anglophile capital city of Dublin, he enrolled us all into the fledgling all-Irish language schools in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, where we were forbidden to speak English under threat of expulsion. There we were able to fill our cultural backpacks with the remnants of a once vibrant indigenous heritage.

Now baby Eoin is one year old and I take him along with me in the sling to celebrate his brothers' lantern festival at school, which is held in June, at the peak of the Brazilian winter. The festival begins in the school's sandy courtyard at dusk. Hushed into a reverent silence by their teachers, the children stand in a large circle and each child holds out his or her hand-crafted lantern to be lit. A chain of tiny



lights emerges. The teacher B stands in the middle of the circle and speaks briefly to the gathered children. 'Each one of you comes from the same light,' she says slowly to her silent audience. 'Each one of you is a unique expression of this light. Each different light is as precious as the other.' Lanterns glowing now, we begin to walk in a long snaking line through a patch of Atlantic forest nearby, singing songs in low voices to honour Saint John's festival as we go. When we arrive back in the courtyard, night has fallen. We form a circle in the darkness and a teacher sets a bonfire ablaze in the middle. The light from the rising flames mingles with that of the children's lanterns around the periphery. Huddled together, illuminated, again and again we sing the refrain *'in the sky, the stars shine; on earth, it is we who shine.'* With a sleeping Eoin strapped in the sling at my chest, I melt into the gentle beauty of the moment.

Just then, I make out the forms of the lanterns of the children in Class 4 and I am jolted to attention. While the other classes have simple round or square lanterns, made of coloured paper, tins or ice-lolly sticks, the Class 4 students have a more elaborate design. From the other side of the circle, I can just make out that the lanterns are in the form of caravels, the ships of the conquistadors when they arrived five hundred years earlier in this New World of South America. A strong, clanging dissonance rings through me, dispelling my former peace. In this moment, I recognise consciously for the first time that the great majority of the students at this school in the South of Brazil are descendants of the European conquerors and immigrants. There is not one indigenous child in the school.

I, who had always identified myself as one of the recently-liberated, but historically oppressed natives, one of the good guys, have become one of the colonisers here in Brazil. I realise with a jolt that my boys and I are the most recent wave in five hundred years of European colonisation. In contrast to Ireland, the indigenous here are in a minority and are still in the arduous process of reclaiming even patches of their ancestral land. They continue to be marginalised and treated violently. Their war for independence and reassertion of their indigenous culture continues, mostly unnoticed by modern Brazilian society. I myself have bought a house in Brazil, taking ownership of a part of the indigenous ancestral land. I haven't personally thrown off anyone to get the land but I know that the island used to be populated by the Guaraní and now, they are no longer living here. I have brought my children to Brazil and ensured that they learn fluent Portuguese,

play football and take part in the traditional Brazilian festivals like Carnival and these June/Saint John festivals. Not once did it cross my mind to encourage them, or motivate myself, to learn Guaraní, play a traditional Guaraní instrument or study the indigenous history. As I stand there in the half-light of the lanterns, my father's words from a year before echo within me and I feel the weight of my own ignorance. I came to live in Brazil and made myself at home, without asking permission or making even a gesture of thanks towards my original hosts.

#### CAMINHO DE PEABIRU

Six months later, one hot afternoon in early January, my three sons and I escape from the summer sun in the tiny community library in our local village. As the boys pull out some colourful kids' gibi comics, my hand falls on a thick ring-bound book with a bright orange cover called 'The History of the Caminho de Peabiru'. In this unceremonious, everyday way the Caminho de Peabiru enters my life.

I buy the book and the saleswoman informs me that the author, Rosana Bond, lives in our very own village of Sambaqui. She gives me Rosana's phone number and a few days later on a clammy afternoon, I ring her and invite her to meet me at a local seaside bar.

As I sit waiting in the bar, I see Rosana slowly approaching and I rise to greet her with the customary kiss on the cheek. She is in her fifties and has some mobility difficulties. Her brown hair, shorter than mine, frames a smiling face. As she settles herself at a small round table, she jokes with the nearby waiters, who know her well. She orders two beers, a dark one and a clear one, which arrive quickly. Mixing the two beers in her glass, she then lights the first of a chain of cigarettes, before turning her attention to me.

Forgoing any preamble, she invites me in a conspiratorial voice, 'tell me how the Caminho de Peabiru found you?' I smile at her choice of words, before answering in my accented Portuguese.

'By chance,' I tell her, 'I came across your book in the local community library and I have been feeling a growing call to learn more about the indigenous Guaraní, to pay my respects to them somehow.'

As I talk, my intentions become clearer even to me. 'I walked the 800km of the Camino de Santiago in Spain in my early twenties when I first left my native Ireland and started out on life. Walking is a passion for me. It strikes me that the Caminho de Peabiru is a type of South American Camino de Santiago. So even though I have three young sons and logistics are complicated,' I half-laugh, 'I feel a strong pull to walk out my door and follow the Caminho de Peabiru wherever it leads me.'

'You know,' she begins, without taking her eyes off me, 'I have a strong sense that I can be clear and open with you.' I smile at her reassuringly. She continues. 'I am a very intuitive person. No doubt, my prolonged experience with the Guarani strengthens this side of me.' Her voice lowers slightly and I pour myself a glass of beer before nodding my head. 'The sudden appearance of the Caminho de Peabiru in your life could mean that they have a mission for you,' she concludes, watching carefully for my reaction.

I nod my head, unfazed. 'Well,' I tell her in an easy lilt, 'I am a writer. I published my first book earlier this year in Ireland. My embryonic plan is to write a book about my experience on the pilgrimage and donate any author royalties to projects connected with the Caminho de Peabiru and the Guarani.'

She beams a smile at me that tells me I have passed the test and then asks with a hint of challenge.

'What does your husband think about you following the Caminho de Peabiru?'

'No husband,' I reply with a wince, 'I am a widow to the father of my first two sons, girlfriend to the father of my third.'

She looks directly in my eyes for a moment and takes a drag of her cigarette. She seems to be inhaling me. I hold her gaze as she lights her second cigarette. She then graciously shares her story with me. She has been researching the Caminho do Peabiru with the Guarani for fifteen years. Her knowledge on the subject is near-encyclopaedic and her enthusiasm contagious. 'This is what I do now,' she tells me, 'I was a journalist for many, many years and have published sixteen books, five of which are about the Caminho de Peabiru. I don't make much money from it and I am always broke. The wealth that the Caminho de Peabiru offers is of a

different sort.’

She orders another two drinks and I gesture to the waiters for another one too.

‘This Caminho is over 4000 kilometres long and it links the Atlantic to the Pacific,’ she tells me ‘it is a network of indigenous trails that, from the 1520s onwards, was used by Europeans who had arrived here on the East coast of the Americas and were hungry for the gold and silver that was rumoured to be in the West. The legend of El Dorado seduced them.’ She stops speaking for a moment and lowers her voice slightly, ‘Above all, however, this path is a sacred, spiritual path. It is the route that the Guaraní use up until today, sometimes en masse, from West to East in search of *Yty Marã Ety*; the Land without Evil. The Guaraní are *tapejara*, a walking people. Walking for the Guaraní is sacred. It is a central part of their way of life, their *ñande reko*. By walking, the Guaraní purify themselves to reach a state of *aguyje* or lightness, which enables them to access the Land Without Evil, their paradise, which lies somewhere beyond this coastline, in the Atlantic to the East. Unlike the Christian heaven, it can be reached while still alive.’

‘When I was on the Camino de Santiago almost 15 years ago,’ I confide to her, ‘after three weeks of walking every day, I slipped out of memories of past and projections of future and the remaining reruns of TV programmes in my mind and I finally fell into a glimpse of Presence. Simple, pure, intoxicating Presence. Walking became a pure joy — I felt as if I had springs in my feet and could walk forever. At times, I felt I was floating through the ever-changing landscape in ecstasy. Every breeze seemed to be caressing me personally and the contented hum of nature embraced and intoxicated me. There was magic to every tiny interaction — unlikely buddhas and prophetic words at every bend in the road. Laughter bubbled out of nowhere as I walked.’

She looks at me directly for a moment — ‘a taste of *aguyje* perhaps,’ she says before continuing her tale.

‘The Guaraní say that the path was opened by Sumé, a tall, light-skinned, bearded man-god who arrived on the Brazilian coast hundreds or thousands of years before the European conquistadors. He arrived walking on the water of the Atlantic ocean and inspired the Guaraní in their way of life, their semi-nomadic *ñande reko* which is infused with a deep spirituality, a tight sense of community,

the reverent cultivation of their sacred crops — corn, mandioca and maté — and an emphasis on walking. The Europeans that arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century heard about Sumé from the natives and quickly equated him with St. Thomas (São Tomé in Portuguese), who was sent off by Christ to evangelize in the far corners of the world for doubting his resurrection. Brazil was invaded by the Europeans in 1500 but by 1515, there was even a news publication in Germany claiming that St. Thomas had passed through South America, where he was known as Sumé. ‘

‘Was he St. Thomas?’ I ask.

Rosana sighs, lighting another cigarette. ‘Look, nobody knows who he was or whether or not he is simply a divinity from Guaraní mythology that was appropriated by the evangelizing Christians. If he was an actual person, it could have been St. Thomas. There are so many similar stories about this light-skinned, bearded figure throughout different tribes in Latin America, that it would lead you to believe that this goes beyond myth to an actual person or group of people. Between here and Peru, a similar figure was most often identified as Sumé and Tumé by the Guaraní and Tunupa and Viracocha by the Incas. The Europeans equated him with St. Thomas or St. Bartolomew. But there are several hypotheses surrounding his identity: Vikings, Fenicians, Sumerians, Asians.’

She winks at me and says, ‘There is even the possibility that it was an Irish saint.’ She smiles at my look of surprise and finishes off another dark beer.

I search my mind for who she could possibly be referring to. ‘St. Brendan?’ I suggest, unsure. I remember remnants of a story about the early Christian Saint who sailed out from the west coast of Ireland over a thousand years ago in search of the Celtic Paradise, Tír na nÓg; the land of Eternal Youth. He is said to have sailed for seven years in his wood-and-canvas rowboat and discovered paradise. ‘Exactly,’ she says, her voice lighter now. ‘Why not? He is as likely, or unlikely, a candidate as St. Thomas.’ I laugh along with her, nodding my head and clock up one more sign leading me to follow this Caminho do Peabiru.

Night has fallen as I take my leave from her. A beer-hazed friendship has been ignited between us and my determination to follow this path of an Irish and Guaraní Sumé is a flame within me.

## MY AMULET OF THE FOUR BREATHS

As I go through my everyday life, the idea of following the Caminho de Peabiru, the path of an Irish and Guaraní Sumé sings within me now, becoming more and more insistent. Five years ago, when I was suddenly widowed, I felt an unshakeable urge to walk out my door, like a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Forrest Gump, and keep walking until I was whole again. I read of the Peace Pilgrim in the USA who started walking in her mid-40s and kept wandering around the country for 28 years, deepening and sharing her own simple, inner peace. I too wanted to go out from a profound longing to go in.

My single-parent responsibilities for my two toddler sons stopped me from following the urge then. Now, five years later, with the boys older and surrounded by a network of friends, a blessed chink has opened in my life to follow the call as best I can.

The idea begins to materialise into plans and plane tickets. I ring my mother in Ireland and tell her of my pilgrimage. She sighs approvingly — ‘this is just the kind of adventure I imagined when I was a young girl sitting high up in the branches of our oak tree in County Cork.’ When I tell her how I hope to include my sons where possible but of the inevitability of leaving them with my boyfriend and friends for short bursts of time, she quickly reassures me. ‘There will always be some practical reason not to follow the path that calls you,’ she reminds me, ‘it sounds like you can make good arrangements for the boys. Remember, you gave the boys life, but not *your* life.’ I smile in agreement. When she was my age, 36, she was already a mother of seven children and I, her youngest child at the time, was three years old. She put me into kindergarden a year earlier than my siblings so that she could embark on her Masters in Business Administration in a still patriarchal Ireland of the 1970s. She was one of only two women in her class.

I feel the strong support and encouragement of both my mother and my father as I embark on this pilgrimage. I plan my route largely based on the path outlined in Rosana Bond’s *History of the Caminho de Peabiru* and the timetable starts to take shape, winding itself around school holidays and friends’ availability to babysit.

During this time, I make a simple wooden cross as my symbol of the



pilgrimage, an amulet to protect me. The Guaraní traditionally carry an amulet made of two sticks tied to each other called a *Popyguá* on pilgrimage. This cross is my *Popyguá*. A friend of mine gives me a piece of sassafrás, a native Brazilian wood that can be crushed and made into a blood purifying tea, as the European colonisers learned from the Guaraní. I make the simple cross with the wood and when I cut at it to round its edges, it exhudes a sweet smell.

The cross strikes me as the perfect symbol for my pilgrimage. When St. Brendan sailed from Ireland in the search of paradise, pictures depict him holding forth a cross. When Tunupa, a Sumé doppelganger, arrived at the shores of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia, legend says that he was carrying a wooden cross, which I hope to see three thousand kilometres away. It is also apt for a pilgrimage associated with Jesus' disciple, St. Thomas.

The cross that I am carving however is, at its core, an indigenous symbol. In South America the cross was widely used in pre-Columbian times; a representation of the Southern Cross constellation in the night's sky. The Guaraní cross is made of two lines that intersect in the middle of each line, forming more of a plus sign than the traditional T sign of Christianity. It represents the four directions — North, South, East and West. They are referred to as the four breaths of the Great Mother, Nhandecy. Where the two lines intersect is the zenith. The Zenith represents Nhandecy herself.

In a creation myth of the Guaraní, they talk of Tupã — one of their Gods. The first man on earth was called Tupã-mirim or little God — divinity in human form. Tupã-mirim was too ethereal, disconnected from the earth and did not know how best to live. He asked the God Tupã for guidance. Tupã told Tupã-mirim that to learn how to best live on the earth, he must go to the North, to the South, to the East and to the West.

I will follow the advice of the Guaraní God Tupã, going out in each direction along the Caminho de Peabiru in an attempt to finally see the Guaraní more fully and to gain some wisdom from them on how best to live on earth.

First, I plan to go **North**, flying to my native Ireland where the possible Irish Sumé, St. Brendan, is said to have set off for paradise on his wood and canvas rowboat in the 6th Century. I plan to follow an ancient pilgrimage, the Saint's Road, on the glorious Dingle península in the southwest of Ireland, that is

dedicated to St. Brendan's memory. On this peninsula, our native Irish language is still used as a first language and the remnants of sacred pre-Christian and early Christian sites abound. It makes sense to start my pilgrimage from my native home. Traditionally, all pilgrimages start from home. Pilgrims move from the comfort of the known towards the promise and the danger of the unknown.

From there, I will come back **South**, back to South America, where I will follow the heart of this pilgrimage, the Guaraní's Caminho de Peabiru. The Tupí-Guaraní call this area Pindorama, the land of the palm trees. This name predates any modern versions and borders such as Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia.

In Pindorama, I will follow the path of the sun. I will start on the **East** coast of Brazil, where Sumé is said to have arrived walking on the Atlantic ocean and where I have lived for seven years.

I will follow the pilgrimage whenever I can steal time from child-minding and other commitments in my day-to-day life. I plan to walk as much as possible along the coast of the state of Santa Catarina and go by car, bus, train and plane where necessary to go inland through the state of Paraná.

Afterwards, I plan to travel through the **Zenith** of the Caminho de Peabiru and Guaraní world, Paraguay. Then I will go **West** through Bolivia to Lake Titicaca, where I will cross over to Peru before descending the Andes to the Pacific ocean, where the Guaraní are said to have arrived in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century and Viracocha, Sumé's Inca doppelganger left on the ocean in the same way Sumé arrived on the Atlantic ocean; walking on the water.

I buy a red backpack for my pilgrimage and begin to fill it with a few clothes and a notebook. In its folds, I tuck an openness to the new, my tailormade cultural conditioning and a heart that is still raw after my husband's death five years ago. I hang my cross amulet off the back off the back of it and place my battered tin whistle in the side pocket. The Irish whistle is a simple flute made of tin. I bring it on picnics and walks with me and play a handful of tunes on it, in gratitude to nature. It was always with me on the Camino de Santiago and other pilgrims started calling me the Pied Piper. This nickname fit me well, as my name, Bébhinn, means melodious woman in my native Irish language.

The Guaraní are a branch of the Tupí-Guaraní indigenous people. Tupí means 'sound manifest'. For the Tubuguaçu, a branch of the Tupí-Guaraní, a person's body is called an *u'mbaú*, which means 'walking flute.' As I pack my tin whistle in the side-pocket of my backpack, I acknowledge with a smile that I *am* a walking flute.



Saint Brendan in a German Manuscript, c. 1460. Fons: Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, Cod. Pal. germ. 60, fol. 179v Brandans Reise



NORTH – STARTING OFF FROM HOME



Top of Mount Brandon, South of Ireland, May 2012.

## IRELAND : FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF AN IRISH SAINT

Wind whistles about me on the mountain top. I am standing on the base of a large wooden cross, over a thousand metres above the spectacular coastline of the south west tip of Ireland. I hug my body to the cross to shelter from the wind. The miniature waves of the Atlantic ocean break foam-white below me against jagged cliffs. I strain my eyes to see the Americas, as legend tells that Saint Brendan did from this very mountain in the 7th century. I strain and strain my eyes against the horizon that stretches out and blurs before me; looking westward, always westward. I peak my hand over my two eyes to focus all my ocular power in this one direction until my eyes begin to ache. Celtic Ireland believed that Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth, was in the Atlantic ocean to the West. I long to glimpse some vestige of it as I look westward, but all I see is the blue-green endless expanse before me, hiding its treasures beneath a placid exterior. The cliffs below are broken up by long curling bays. The sea glistens like silver in the curves of Stradbally to the north and Ballydavid to the south. The relentless waves lick the strand with their foaming tongue and withdraw hurriedly again towards the deep sea, evaporating in a fizz along the shoreline. This is the sacred place where sea and land meet, melting into each other. Some Irish mythology says that the first inhabitants of Ireland were mostly female descendants of Noah, landed here on this southwestern coast. Behind us the moss-green hills of the Dingle peninsula fan out, rolling softly into each other. Clouds move their shadows across the mountain faces — dancing slowly, provocatively.

Five paternoster lakes are draped like a string of rosary beads along mountain ledges. Below me lie 'An Triuir Drifúir' — the three sisters' peaks — flowing out towards the sea, bookended by Ceann Sibéal — 'Sybil's head'. An Fear Marbh — 'the dead man island' lies beyond them, brooding, abandoned. The smaller basket islands lie moodily about, overshadowed in their gloom. Further south, Scelig Micil juts jagged out to sea — a monastic island of early Christian material deprivation and prayer; the monks living on the edge of human life, rejecting physical life in an effort to become one with the divine.

Paradise lies somewhere in the Atlantic ocean — ancient celts believed it, Saint Brendan believed it and so did the Guarani on the other side of the world.

The large wooden cross I am embracing is one of a trinity of sacred



monuments at the top of Mount Brandon on this cold and bright May day. The second monument is a ruined beehive stone hut, dating back to the time of St. Brendan, where he is said to have prayed before launching his *naombóg* rowboat off St. Brendan's creek, several kilometres below. The third monument on the hill-top is a large cairn of stones; prayer lain on prayer by the thousands of pilgrims who follow the Saint's Road for centuries to celebrate St. Brendan's feast day. I placed my own small stone on the mound on top of generations of others and take out my tin whistle to play my simple musical prayer. I battle with the wind for control of the tin whistle.

St. Brendan was one of the early Christian saints, before the organized Roman Church became directly involved in Ireland in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. These early Christian saints were a community of initiates who bridged the path between the Celtic and pre-Celtic spirituality of the Druids and Christ consciousness. It was a golden age for the Christian Church, when the saints still recognised that God shone through nature and people kept rhythm with the changing year, celebrating solstices and equinoxes and the four cross-quarter days in between. Before the Christian Church draped its purple robe of sanctity on this path, it was an ancient pilgrim route to celebrate the festival of the sun-god Lugh on the August cross quarter day. The month of August in the Irish language is called Lúnasa in his honour, and the feast is still celebrated annually on this península. A few months ago, a walker came across a perfect spiral engraved into a rock along this Saint's Road, which has been estimated at four thousand years old. This spiral, often interpreted as the sun in motion, whispers of the ancient nature of this pilgrimage. This Saint's Road is much older than the saint. As I walk this road, I walk in the footsteps of four thousand years of my ancestors.

My parents are with me on this mountaintop. My father takes a photo of me hugging the cross against the wind and then calls me down for a cup of tea from his well-travelled flask. I jump down and warm my hands on the yellow plastic beaker he offers me and sit between him and my mother, sheltered from the wind by the cairn of stones at the foot of the cross. My father is over 70 and my mother is a year away from 70, but they have led me nonetheless, wrapped in well-worn rain jackets, on the 18 kilometers of the Saint's Road, before starting the steep, two-hour ascent of Mount Brandon.

This glorious day's walk, culminating on the top of Mount Brandon, has

been a walk through my origins, flanked on each side by reminiscences from my parents. The road was lined with red dangling fuchsia, introduced to Ireland from South America in the 1930s, flourishing and weaving themselves among the ubiquitous stone walls. In Irish, these flowers are called *Deora Dé*, the tears of God. I start my South American pilgrimage on an Irish Saint's Road lined with South American tears of God.

Delicate white flowers, wild garlic, and baby sprigs of nettles swayed in the wind among the overgrown grass, purifying me as I walked.

As we trudged northward on the Saint's Road along bohareens and muddy paths, the sea and its hidden mysteries lay quietly beaconing to our left. Thrushes and robins trilled along beside us. From time to time, I turned towards the sea and my jaw dropped audibly, surprised again and again by its swirling splendour.

We came to the ancient ecclesiastic site of the Gallarus Oratory, just off the Saint's Road, that basks in the shadow of St. Brendan's sacred mountain. We entered the stone house of worship, which rises like the bow of a boat from the ground. It was over a thousand years ago, with stone placed tightly on stone with no mortar. How many of our modern houses or temples will still exist intact like this in a thousand years time? The warbling 'oo' sound of *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* ignited the single-room oratory, as my mother echoed the pilgrims that rested here on their way to the summit of Mount Brandon long ago. I added my voice to hers and it faltered for a moment before it found her voice and the entwined melody reverberated around us. As the song ended, it escaped through the small east-facing slit of a window in the back wall.

Once outside, my parents and I circled the oratory three times in silence to the curious stares of American tourists and the nonchalant glances of bored tour guides. As I completed the third circle, I whispered my heart's simple prayer in my native Irish in silence. 'Go n'éirí an bóthar linn, may the road rise to meet us.'

Nearby, a simple cross was carved into a standing stone, more ancient than the Gallarus Oratory itself. I placed my wooden Peabiru cross, my amulet, in its grooves and it fit perfectly.

When I first suggested to my parents that we walk the Saint's Road together,

they snapped up the idea with enthusiasm. Before I had even come back to Ireland on holiday from my home in Brazil, they planned the route and the accommodation with nothing short of religious fervour. When we set off in the early morning, it dawned on me that this is one of the first times in my life that it is just the three of us together on a trip. Even now, in my mid 30s, the child-from-a-large-family in me rejoices.

Like nearly all Irish of their generation, my parents are practicing Catholics. They studied in boarding schools run by Christian Brothers and nuns. Every Sunday of their lives, except in the event of childbirth or serious illness, they have gone to mass. As good Catholics, they have eight children. Having so many children must have frustrated my mother, a woman of the 1960s, hungry as she was for some independence and liberation. Only in her mid-thirties did she find the space to get her own MBA and have a career, but it always played second fiddle to my father's career. All eight children were baptized and celebrated their holy communion and confirmation. When I was a child, we ate fish every Friday, said grace before Christmas dinner, prayed in the car before a long journey and were coerced into giving up some vice during Lent. Religion though, like politics, was never discussed in the home of my childhood. Conversation on either subject was limited to stern insistence that we meet the obligations of the church without question and vote for the candidate of our choice. 'You were lucky you were born into our family,' my father would joke, lightening any complaint from his growing children, 'the next soul in line was born Chinese. Imagine, if we hadn't had you, you would be speaking mandarin right now.' I would laugh with him, picturing the line of souls, waiting in turn for the next human opening. My father is right. I have a strong sense that my soul predates their union. My essence did not come from them. As Kahlil Gibran wrote, I came through them, not from them. I am grateful to my parents for surrounding me with so much love and care. Growing up, they gave me all of what I needed and some of what I wanted.

Like all of us, my parents encountered their trials along the way. Their children grew up and tested my parents' traditional religious values by falling in love with divorcees, living with boyfriends, having children outside of marriage and falling out of the Catholic church. I was a teenager when they started to face these challenges with my older siblings, and this intergenerational clash of values shook my adolescent certainties. My parents' ability to eventually accept their

children's decisions, without necessarily condoning their actions, was a pivotal lesson for me in tolerance. By the time I moved out of home, my mother's parting advice was 'to thine own self be true' and I cling to it now as the most precious of heirlooms she could bequeath upon me.

For the last twenty years, my parents' second religion has been hiking. Like the Guaraní, they have become *tapejara*, walking people. If every Sunday they spend 40 minutes at mass, they spend at least 4 hours hiking. Though my father sometimes falls asleep in the church, he will lead a walking group up a hill for hours, fired with insatiable energy and joy.

They walked along the Saint's Road today with a youthful energy. We started off from the seashore at Ventry and after three hours walking, stopped for a picnic in the ruins of the church at Cill Maolchádair. My mother often visited the ruin as a teenager while staying nearby on holidays with her cousin Cáit and hospitable Auntie Jo. Auntie Jo is buried in the graveyard of the church. We found her grave among the wobbly headstones and fading inscriptions and said a prayer for her soul.

We ate our sandwiches and drank our tea from my father's flask, while sitting on an old altar, next to a ledge with a long thin arched window, a so-called eye-of-the-needle window. I was still eating when my mother jumped up to the window and squeezed through the opening. I could see her on the other side, standing on a mausoleum, in the shade of a resplendent pink cherry blossom tree, her hands on her hips. 'Made it,' she laughed, 'I'm still going to heaven.' My mother and her cousin used to squeeze through easily in their teens. My father stood up now for the challenge and tried to squeeze through, but got stuck in the middle. He persevered, pulling in his stomach and managed to pass through. My mother caught his hand to steady him as he jumped onto the mausoleum beside her: one simple gesture capturing the love and support they share. Their nimbleness belies their advanced ages.

I squeezed through to join them. 'Me too,' I beamed at them, as they pulled me into a hug, 'I'm going to heaven too.'

A short while later, we closed up our backpacks and passed under a stone arch ornately decorated with floral patterns. A large alphabet stone stood to my right, engraved with a large cross, twirling at its edges. I traced my fingers along

the rounded grooves of the cross and connected with the thousands of pilgrims that have passed here before me. We left the chilly shade of the ruin and stepped into the early afternoon sun.

In front of me in the churchyard, I could see a tall celtic Ogham stone, a pre-Christian upright slab of stone, rounded at the top, about one and a half metres tall. Near the top, there was a small hole in it, where two people standing, each on one side of the stone, can entwine their fingers through the hole. The local custom is that those who do that, bind their lives together for eternity. I haven't seen a stone like this in ten years, since I entwined my fingers and my life with my brand new fiancé Alastair in Glencolmcill on the northwest of Ireland on the day he asked me to marry him.

Beyond the stone, the Atlantic ocean curled around the fingers of southern Ireland's peninsulas. The large Blasket island — known as An Fear Marbh — lay motionless in the sea directly in my sight-line. 'The Dead Man,' I translate to myself, making out the well-known contours of this island. Little had I known when I entwined my fate with Alastair, that five years later he would be like the Blasket Island — the Dead Man — leaving me and our two young sons to mourn him. The sight of the island and the standing stone together in the same line of vision made me cry despite myself. Big bulbous tears poured from my eyes, my heart struck unexpectedly with grief once more.

A memory of Alastair assailed me — the memory of our first meeting in London.

I was twenty three at the time, fresh off the boat from Ireland. I bounded with a youthful confidence into his office, looking for a job. As the interview wound to a close, he wrote my name down on a yellow post-it and promptly stuck it on the wall above his desk. I smiled inwardly as he did so.

Two years later, we married and we quickly became parents to Tom and then to Liam.

It was seven years after we met that he died, while we were on a family holiday. Suddenly. No goodbyes.

His death heralded the end of my perfect-score life. When I was growing up, I used to play simple videogames on our Vic 20 computer. When I played, I

was only interested in a perfect score. If I lost a point, I would end the game and start again, honing my skills until I could produce a flawless game. My life up to Alastair's sudden death had been pretty much a perfect-score life. With his death, the whole game fell apart. My internal gut reaction was to end the game and start again. But two toddler boys held on tight to my hands, pulling at me to continue. I couldn't end game. I couldn't start again with a blank slate.

My parents saw my distress now and pulled me to them. Through tears, we put our fingers through the hole of the stone, entwining ourselves together for eternity.

As we moved away from the stone, I sighed deeply. Alastair's death was before me again, assailing the pit of my stomach with the visceral reminder of the transience of life. Next to the ogham stone there was an ancient sundial, worn and weathered by the centuries, and like my marriage, no longer clocking time. As I stood there amid the crumbling ruins of Cill Maolchédair, his death slapped me awake once more and filled me with overwhelming, clawing sense of vulnerability.

When Alastair died, nobody around me, not church, not parents, not older widows or well-meaning friends had any convincing answers to offer. The flimsy illusion of life as safe, predictable and controllable was slashed irrevocably to shreds.

As the sharpness of the pain has subsided over these five years, the visceral awareness of the transience and insecurity of material life has remained.

Death has become my unwanted bedfellow. At times, I can feel his rancid breath on the nape of my neck, chilling me to the core and casting a foreboding shadow on my children. Stomach-churning questions, unanswered and unanswerable, assail me on sleepless nights and in rare quiet moments — will I die suddenly, unawares? Will my sons get sick and die? Am I doomed to face again the desperate pain of loss? In these five years, I have tried to sidestep this awareness and return to an earlier ignorant innocence. I have busied myself, desperately. I threw myself into honouring Alastair's memory, moving with our two sons from London to the island of Florianópolis in Brazil and setting up a project in his memory for children with chronic illness. I wrote a book and published it with Alastair's name on the cover, clocking up another of his life ambitions. I met my boyfriend and gave birth to my third son. I got on with life. I had beaten death,



right? All the while, death leered at me from the sidelines of my life, waiting for me to finally stop.

As I stood in the church ruins at the start of the Caminho de Peabiru, Death gave me a lecherous wink and slipped into my backpack.

## WALKING THROUGH MY ORIGINS

We walked on with the early afternoon sun blessing us as we passed a field with a holy well dedicated to St. Brendan, dry now like the fervorous Celtic spirituality that once abounded on this peninsula. We passed two bullauns, stone basins with manmade cavities ground into them to hold water for blessings and curing illnesses or perhaps as a mortar used with a stone pestle to grind healing seeds or grains. These bullauns abound throughout Ireland, usually near monastic sites, but many are much more ancient than Christianity. Like the cross, the bullaun is another sacred element of Irish paganism which Christianity has appropriated and integrated. As I ran my hand along them, the contours of the stone basin were cold and velvety smooth to the touch.

‘It was close to here in Muirioch where I first crossed paths with your father,’ my mother confided to me with a laugh, as we hiked along, ‘my cousin Cait and I were down here in the summer school holidays to learn the Irish language. One evening, we heard that there were some college boys down for a couple of days, so we combed our hair and put on our best clothes and went down to the corner, where a seanchai, a story-teller, was going to tell stories. We sat on a low white-washed wall, positioning ourselves either side of the seanchai, so that the college boys couldn’t miss us.’ My father laughed from a few steps ahead and turned around, walking backwards as he took up the story’s strand. ‘Well, I do remember the storyteller and maybe some kids hanging around.’ My mother was sixteen at the time, an attractive, red-haired bookworm that felt shy in groups. My father was nineteen and had already finished a year of his engineering degree. I imagine him brimming with the natural confidence of newly emancipated youth. ‘I noticed your mother only about three years later,’ my father continued, ‘I wowed her with my Irish language fluency at a debate, when she started university herself.’ ‘The eternal romantic,’ my mother retorted, laughing out loud, ‘he bought me a bag of chips after the debate and then asked me out. I was already going on a date the following Wednesday, so he asked me out on the Monday and Tuesday.’

By Wednesday, the other fella didn't stand a chance.' My father stopped in his tracks and kissed my mother dramatically — a gesture I witnessed often with embarrassment during my youth. As we started walking again, my mother added with a laugh, 'Mind you, I should have known what was ahead of me. A man who knows how to get what he wants!' My father laughed with her and they walked on with arms linked. How intertwined my parents are! As they walked in an embrace before me, their steps finding the same rhythm, they merged into one indivisible whole like an intricate Celtic wedding knot. In two years time, they will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary surrounded by their eight children and twenty grandchildren.

Life-long marriage, I had assumed since childhood, was my birthright and I realised once again with pain that I can no longer emulate them. Their enduring love and companionship both delights and dismays me.

It was mid-afternoon by the time we came to the foot of Mount Brandon. Our joints were sore and our toes blistered from our 18 kilometer walk, but nevertheless we started the ascent along the sheep-dappled green hills. Being a Catholic pilgrimage site now, there are the traditional stations of the cross winding up along the mountain. After ten minutes' sharp climb, we came to the first cross. 'Only 11 more to go,' I told my mother, encouraging her along. She stopped abruptly, leaned against her right knee to catch her breath and looked at me sceptically. 'Bébhinn,' she panted, 'don't tell me that you don't know there are 14 not 12 stations of the cross. Did your school teach you nothing?' I laughed, slightly embarrassed. My strongest memory of religious instruction at school is always arriving late for morning prayers that were murmured monotonously in Irish by rows of bored teenage girls in bottle-green uniforms. All the time, I was concentrating on easing myself inconspicuously into a line and calming my breathing so that no teacher would notice my late arrival.

Even though it was early on a Sunday morning, I liked going to mass however. I savoured the moment of reflection and silence that I could sense amidst the tumble of familiar prayers and ritual. When I left home in my early twenties, I stopped being a practicing Catholic, caught up as I was in my everyday material world of creating a career and a family. Even though I married in the Catholic Church and baptized my first two sons in it, I was confronted with my own hypocrisy after my husband's death. I could no longer be part of a church

for cultural, rather than spiritual reasons. When I began to feel deeply the tangible reality of my own mortality, I couldn't pretend any more or carry on lacklustre. I couldn't let inertia carry me along with the status quo. Spirituality became important, vital for the first time. I could no longer simply accept inherited beliefs. My husband's death made me blatantly aware of the spiritual vacuum in my life.

Two years ago, in church with my parents and children at Christmas, somewhere in the middle of the liturgy, it struck me that the Catholic Church called me to obedience rather than offering me tools to awaken the divine within. The Church urged me to act like Jesus, without helping me to awaken the Christ consciousness within me. I haven't been to mass since.

On the mountain with my mother now, the remaining crosses wound upwards, levelling out the climb but lengthening the distance. Tired now, I beseeched my father who was leading us. 'Can we not just walk straight up the mountain rather than twist and turn like this?' 'The altitude, cold and effort would be the end of us,' my father replied matter-of-fact, without slowing his pace. 'When I came here at the age of sixteen,' he boasted with a laugh, 'I won the race running straight up to the top, but I have less energy and more sense nowadays.' I imagined my father as a sixteen year old boy, his thin, lithe body awakening to manhood and his cheeks between his protruding ears flushed with effort and pride at being first to the top of the mountain. In a split second, he changed before me from the sixteen year old back to his septegenarian self, age pouncing on him at lightning speed before my eyes. How fast life whistles by!

We moved up through a mist as we crawled closer and closer to the mountain top. My mother was feeling a sharp pain in her legs but continued onwards. A silence descended upon us, as we concentrated on reaching the summit. All I could see was the green grass at my feet and my father's backpack in front of me. As we reached the final cross on the top of the mountain, we broke out of the mist and the late afternoon sky cleared like magic before us. Eighteen kilometers of hiking, followed by two solid hours of uphill slog — we had made it together to the top. As I caught my breath, I watched the mist dissipate below us, ephemeral and transient against the steadfast slopes of the mountain.

## ATLANTIC MYSTERIES

That evening, after a shower, a hearty meal and a glass of wine, we drive down to St. Brendan's Creek, the L-shaped inlet, where a small concrete harbour has now been built. This is where St. Brendan is said to have launched his wood-and-tar naomhóg rowing boat. The inlet forms a natural launching spot for boats. It is surrounded by low and uneven rocks that rise into jagged spikes where they meet the opening to the Atlantic. Even now, there is a traditional wood-and-canvas naomhóg upturned to dry on a verge of grass. The traditional boats are still used by Irish fishermen today. Next to the boat, I read memorial plaques to fishermen who died in recent years on the treacherous waters of the Atlantic.

My mother and I walk down to the edge of the stone harbour as the sun sets late in the May sky. A streak of red and orange light enters the inlet, spotlighting where Saint Brendan's voyage began as he literally sailed into the west, into the sunset. I imagine St. Brendan and his monks filling up the boat with supplies, slowly, painstakingly, before finally holding the cross aloft and rowing out of the protected inlet of the known world, over the threshold of jagged rock into the great unknown of the Atlantic ocean. The Atlantic owes its name to Atlas, the astronomer titan from Greek mythology, whose island Atlantis was discussed by Plato. Plato said it was a continent with an advanced civilisation that sunk into the Atlantic ocean twelve thousand years ago, scattering its survivors and influence throughout western Europe and the Americas. The indigenous Irish placed paradise in the west, in or beyond the Atlantic ocean and their Guaraní counterparts in Brazil placed paradise in the east in or beyond the Atlantic. Both peoples looked in the same direction. This debate about Atlantis rages on even now, more than two thousand years after Plato's time.

St. Brendan's first trip on the Atlantic, like a lenten penance, lasted forty days and he returned without success. Summoning courage and faith once again, he set out again and this voyage lasted seven years as he and his holy crew travelled to fantastical lands.

The mythical St. Brendan's Isle lies south of the Azorian islands, off the African coast and the ninth century travelogue in Latin, the *Navigatio*, recounts how St. Brendan and his monks disembarked there and said mass. Could they have been on their way to Brazil? The island appeared on maps up until the 18th century

but has never been seen in modern times. It is similar to another mythical island called Hy-Brasil which was plotted on official maps off the southwest of Ireland for centuries, before literally falling off the map. Could it be that St. Brendan sailed to South America and walked from East to West, sharing with the Guaraní and other tribes his sacred Celtic version of Christianity and the prevailing 6<sup>th</sup> Century Irish knowledge such as agriculture, Ogham writing, building with stone? I strain my eyes as I look out onto the Atlantic from Brendan's creek but see little before me in the failing light.

I echo St. Brendan's own prayer as I whisper into the near-darkness —  
*protect me God; my boat is so small and your sea so immense.*



My parents on Cosán na Naomh, the Saint's Road, South of Ireland, May 2012.





Cill Maolch adair, South of Ireland, May 2012.



Gallarus Oratory, South of Ireland,  
May 2012.



St Brandon's Creek (where he set off to the Americas),  
South of Ireland, May 2012.



SOUTH



South America — South Brazil, Rosa Beach — starting  
the Eastern Caminho de Peabiru, May 2012.

## PINDORAMA : ARRIVING ON THE COAST

A week later, I cross the Atlantic. I forgo following St. Brendan's route in a replica of his rowboat, as Tim Severin successfully did in 1976, arriving alive and well with his crew in Newfoundland off the North American coast. Severin relied on his skills, a strong team and a generous serving of intuitive 'Brendan luck' to succeed in his venture, moving St. Brendan's voyage to the Americas convincingly from the category of myth to that of history.

I however opt for the ease and speed of an airplane in my contemporary pilgrimage. I fly out of my native city of Dublin with my boys and watch Ireland's patchwork fields disappear below me as the plane is engulfed in a cloudy sky. We fly towards Florianópolis, the island in the south of Brazil which is our home now.

The arrival by plane to the island of Florianópolis is breath-taking. The plane approaches from the north and flies the length of the worm-shaped island before turning and landing on the south coast. On a bright crisp day, the island is a flurry of crashing white surf, long stretches of sandy beach and ice-cream swirl green hills nestled around the lake. The paradise discovered by St. Brendan's was described in the *Navagatio* as '*a thickly wooded mountainous island (); the flora were abundant, the trees bore rich fruit, the rivers ran with fresh water, and the birds sang sweetly in the trees.*' This description captures perfectly how Florianópolis and the east coast of Brazil must have been before colonization began. The Guarani saw this eastern coast and its islands as a portal to their paradise, Yvy Marã Ey, which lies eastward in or beyond the Atlantic. Breath-taking beauty still abounds here but in many places now, its former pristine purity is tainted by leering, lecherous mega-hotels and haphazard high-rise apartment buildings.

This continental landmass, the Guarani Pindorama, the land of the palm trees, spreads out in borderless vastness, bursting beyond the legal borders of today's Brazil. Cabral, the Portuguese explorer who encountered it called it Terra da Vera Cruz, the land of the true cross, when he sighted it at Easter in 1500 in an effort to find a new route to India. The name alluded no doubt to the zealous intentions of spreading Christianity to these new lands. In a mere ten years however, this religious zeal was overshadowed by commercial interests. The country came to be called Brasil after Pau-Brasil or Brasilwood, the valuable, fire-hearted tree that grew in abundance in the Atlantic Forest and was felled and exported to Europe

for hundreds of years. From a situation of abundance at the time of colonisation, the Brazilwood tree is now an endangered species. The spiritual objective of the conquest, which provided a compelling rationale to lay claim to huge swathes of land and its inhabitants here, was overshadowed as quickly as the land's name by commercial, exploitative objectives.

The Brazilwood tree is called *ibirapiranga* in tupi-guarani. I wonder why then the early colonists call it *Pau-Brasil*. Is it possible that the country, or more accurately the tree, *Pau-Brasil*, got its name from the phantom paradisaical island west of Ireland, *Hy-Brasil*? Roger Casement, one of our Irish 1916 martyrs, made a speech in Rio de Janeiro in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century suggesting so and increasingly in Brazil, I am hearing reference to this Irish origin of *Brasil's* name.

The island *Hy-Brasil* was registered on early maps for centuries until it was removed and relegated to the status of myth. The myth was that the island could be seen only by those who had eyes to see it and only once in every seven years. I have been living in Brazil now for exactly seven years; three years with my husband Alastair in Rio de Janeiro and four years without him in Florianópolis. Perhaps it is now time for me to really see Brazil and its indigenous inhabitants.

As the plane descends, I look out of the window and see a huge mass in the sea, with water gushing around it. Maybe it is one of the Right Whales, that use these waters along the Santa Catarina coast to give birth and nurse their young. I point it out excitedly to my eldest son Tom who peers through the tiny oval window of the plane. After a moment, he slays me with his best eight-year-old condescension, that he reserves only for me and his six-year-old brother Liam. 'No Mum,' he says exasperated, 'it's not even *moving*. It's just a tiny island. Anyway, it is far too early in the year for the whales. Don't you know they arrive around August time and it's only May?'

'I'm not as silly as you think,' I laugh at him lightly, 'even St. Brendan himself mixed up a whale and an island. He landed on an island, lit a fire and started to say mass, when all of a sudden, the island began to move. It wasn't an island at all of course, but a huge whale.' This story begins to disarm Tom's condescension, 'did the whale shake him off into the sea? Or swallow him whole for lighting a fire on him?' 'Not at all,' I tell him, 'the whale became his protector and travelled along with his boat, warding off sea monsters.' 'Sea monsters!' Tom

is visibly engaged now, 'were there really sea monsters?' 'Sea monsters?' six year old Liam looks up from his comic, his face stricken.

'No sea monsters,' I assure him, 'just make-believe.' I flail around for a different story to avert their attention. 'Did you know that the Guarani indians on the island, the Carijós, talked about flying contraptions like planes over five hundred years ago?' Liam is interested in the Indians that he learns about at school on Indian Day each year, an exotic shadow of a half-forgotten past. 'Really?' he gasps. 'Yes,' I reply, 'they said that the Gods came down to the coast on a type of flying boat called an apiká.' Liam squeals with delight: 'a flying boat!'

As we approach the Brazilian coast, I think of the Guarani natives that stood steadfast for generations on this coast, looking out to sea in search of their paradise Yvy Marã Ey. When the Europeans first arrived, many indigenous were exported as slaves. There are reports that it was often easy to convince Guarani to enter the boats that were headed eastward to Europe. Children were given willingly by their parents in the hope that they would be transported to Yvy Marã Ey. Little did they know that death at sea or a life of slavery awaited them. In 1912, a Brazilian ethnologist with a strong rapport with the Guarani, Curt Nimuendaju, found six Guarani standing motionless on a São Paulo beach, staring out to sea. They had walked hundreds of miles along the Caminho de Peabiru from Paraguay to reach the São Paulo coast and were now awaiting the last lap of their journey to paradise. The social worker tried to coax them inland to the reserve set up for the Guarani indians but the six men ignored his efforts. They saw Yvy Marã Ey as a physical destination and they awaited some form of flying boat or apiká to transport them there. If they had seen us arriving in this metal box in the sky, would they have mistaken us for gods as they did the Portuguese when they arrived in their imposing caravels five hundred years ago?

As if glimpsing for a moment from the perspective of these earlier Guarani, it dawns on me suddenly how miraculous it is to be arriving in our modern-day flying boat. If I begin to think about what is actually happening, it strikes me as incredible that I am thousands of metres above the ground and moving at a speed of 800km an hour, crossing the Atlantic in hours compared to the year or so it would have taken in St. Brendan's naomhóg rowing boat. Everyone about me is glued to their screen, as unconcerned as if they were watching a film in their sitting room. Even six year old Liam finds little wonder in travelling by plane anymore.



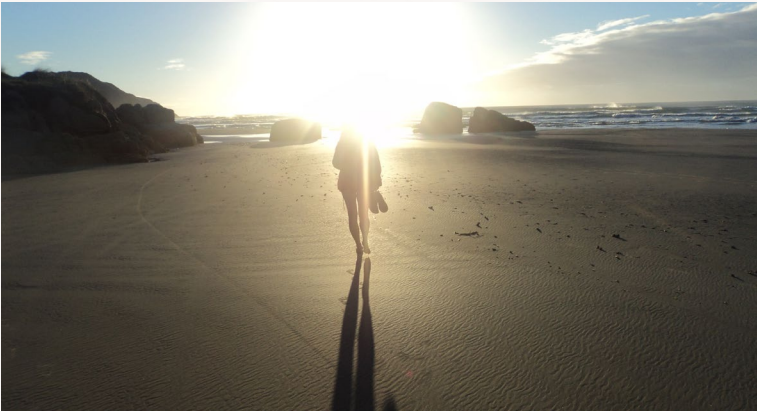
When I first started to fly in my teens, at least we used to clap every time the plane landed. Now, we just sit watching the seatbelt sign, waiting for the earliest opportunity to jump out of our seats, gather our bags and get on with our journey.

We land in Florianópolis with a bump and the plane shudders several times before settling into a whoosh that makes me palpably aware of the great speed at which we have been travelling. As the plane slows down, I start to clap loudly, attracting curious glances from nearby passengers and Tom's embarrassed glare. Only my two year old son Eoin claps along, gurgling with laughter and sharing my wonder.

THE WALKING FLUTE



EAST



The beginning, in the South Atlantic.

## SACRED COAST

The sky rises up from the Atlantic ocean before us in a haze of dark blue, dim blue and pastel green with brushstrokes of pink and pale-red streaking across it, heralding the sun's rise. The colours move like a southern aurora borealis behind the forest-green islet in the bay, flowing over the sea and now the lake that spills into it. We are in a canvas being painted.

The waves of the sea crash on, crash on, passionately engrossed in their own beauty. Across the sea water, a path of light streams out from the blazing red sun as it rises. It looks like the path that the Guarani's prophet Sumé walked upon to arrive on this sacred coast, stepping serenely over the chaos of the waves.

The surface of the lake is perfect stillness, holding its breath. Four dark dots, fishermen, stand ankle deep in the lake, holding their tarrafa fishing nets silently, facing eastward out to sea. Nearby the snow white egrets, slight and elegant, stand on one leg and wait.

The nightlights of the B&Bs scattered around are still lit and everyone sleeps on, unaware of the majestic show unfolding about them. As we walk down to the lake, the red-eyed quero-quero birds caw their protective caw. Birdsong abounds, singing a delirious joy. Flocks of swallows fan out, swoon and regroup to fly north. The lake shimmers with their reflection, as they whirr above us. A couple of stragglers beat their wings furiously to catch up and I will them onwards with my gaze.

I am starting the Eastern leg of the Caminho de Peabiru at Ibiraquera, a paradise beach on mainland Brazil, 100 km south of the island of Florianópolis. There is an estuary here, where the freshwater of the lake meets the sea. The lake is a haven for mullet, the salt-water fish that live in its waters. The estuary is open now, and the lake and sea intermingle, sharing their waters and shoals of the season's mullet fish between them.

The headland next to this beach is the start of a 140km stretch of coastline and islands decorated with ancient rock art.

I am walking this first stretch with Tahmid, my Brazilian boyfriend, father of my third son, while a babysitter minds the three boys for a couple of days.

Tahmid and I stop on a stretch of grass under a tree next to the beach to savour the sunrise, while preparing some maté, as the Guarani do every morning. It is said that Sumé himself taught the Guarani to plant the maté herb, or caá as it is called in Guarani, a sacred and healthy daily stimulant. It is packed full of vitamins and medicinal agents. As the maté draws, I am distracted by a hummingbird flitting among the red hibiscus flowers that are slowly opening. After a few minutes, the maté tea is ready to drink and Tahmid takes the first drink, always the most bitter, before filling the gourd with water again and handing it to me. I suck the maté tea through the straw and it stirs me gently into full wakefulness. When the straw makes a snoring noise in the gourd, I fill it once again with water and pass it to Tahmid. Drinking chimarrão is a Guarani morning tradition, the gourd shared among the community around the morning fire, while they discuss the night's prophetic dreams. In the last five hundred years, it has also become ubiquitous among the gaúchos from the south of Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay, maintaining largely its social, peace-pipe sense of everyday ceremony. This Guarani ritual is integrated into the everyday of the Juruá, as the Guarani call non-indians, yet most are unaware of its origin.

Tahmid is in his mid 40s and his full mop of dark hair and his cropped beard are starting to turn grey. Even after three years together, I still smile at how handsome he is. He was born in the South of Brazil, but has lived in many countries, including India, the US, England and speaks good, charmingly-accented English. We move from Portuguese to English as we speak, without noticing. I met him four years ago, a month after moving to South Brazil from London, when I signed up for an evening yoga class he offers in the local village. When we met, I had no room for another husband, but fun company with very little commitment from this Brazilian yogi was a blessed balm for me as I started a new life in a new country with no family or friends. The unexpected pregnancy that ensued and the birth of our son Eoin cast our relationship into a more committed affair, but we both still struggle forcefully to maintain our independence. Even now, Alastair overshadows Tahmid and my relationship. By chance, we are starting this eastern leg of the Caminho de Peabiru on the 27th of May, the fifth anniversary of Alastair's death.

My attitude to the place of a partner in my life has changed dramatically too with Alastair's death. I see that I was following in my parents' footsteps by

putting my partner at the centre of my life. We used to whisper to each other often: 'all is ok, as long as we are together.' His sudden death left me at the shore of myself, bereft of my centre. I stood shivering in a crowded churchyard in South London, feeling the clammy weight of my sons' toddler hands in mine. I watched the bustle about and within me, as if from a gaping distance. I was confronted with the realization that I had put him in a dangerous place. Putting a husband, or even children, at the epicentre of my life is burdensome for them and unstable for me. It is too much to ask for someone else to be the ground of my being.

After a quarter of an hour of sharing the chimarrão between us, Tahmid shakes the leftover ground maté onto the grass and tucks it back into his backpack. We walk onto the beach where the sand is wet and compact and shells crunch beneath our feet. We cross the channel between the lake and the sea and walk directly into the sun. We very soon come to our first Sambaqui, a huge mound of sand and oyster shells, created by the first inhabitants of this coastline, the Sambaqui man, up to 7000 years ago. The Brazilian coast is dotted with these Sambaquis, which are older than the Egyptian Pyramids and up to 30 metres in height. They were used as territory markers, look-out points, and places of burial and often contain a lithic workshop to work wood, leather and fibres and to sharpen stones. Ceramics, tools and necklaces have been found buried in them. Archeologists also found delicately carved stone animals about 30 cms by 20 cms, which appear to come from the more technologically advanced Andean region. These Sambaquis on the coast with their carved stones are our first pointer to the use of the Caminho de Peabiru, showing interaction between the indigenous of this eastern coast and the Andean cultures of the west. Sambaquis are a little known treasure of Brazil. Here on Ibiraquera beach, the lithic workshop is made up of seven circular bowl-like cavities up to 30 cm in diameter, ground into sleek black stones on the sand. They remind me of the bullaun stones that are often found near sacred places in Ireland, like I found on the Saint's Road. Tahmid and I rub our outstretched palms along the smooth surfaces, asking an ancient permission to follow the Caminho de Peabiru.

The Caminho de Peabiru hugs the Brazilian coastline from here in Ibiraquera until the Itapocu river, just over 200 km away in the north of the state of Santa Catarina, with the island of Florianópolis as a halfway point. This coastline is the Guarani's sacred land, the thin boundary between this material world and the

divine. It was here that their prophet Sumé arrived, walking on water, and the coast is dotted not only with these Sambaquis, but also with possible reminders of Sumé's arrival, from footprints on rocks, towering Priest Stones or Guardians looking eastward on the edge of the sea, and ancient symbols engraved on the rocks, one even depicting a man with a halo. Sumé created the Caminho de Peabiru as he passed along this coastline. In Australia, the aborigines say their ancestors walked the land along songlines. This ancient coastal trail that we are embarking on in the South of Brazil also strikes me as an indigenous songline.

We have no idea if we can walk easily from beach to beach now or whether we will be cut off by cliff edges or open estuaries. No maps or travel agencies we have contacted offered any clear information, but we are walking anyway, open to whatever lies ahead.

#### COASTAL MYSTERIES

We are walking over dunes covered with the green rubbery restinga vegetation and tiny, discrete flowers when Tahmid suggests with a laugh in his voice, 'maybe we will find treasure today.' I continue towards the next beach and dismiss him with a chuckle, 'no way. If there really was buried treasure on this coast, it has been well and truly found by now.'

Stories and myths of buried treasure along this coastline abound, because of the many European ships that sank here. After being shipwrecked on this coast in 1516, the young portuguese sailor Aleixo Garcia, and a couple of other sailors were rescued and welcomed by the Guarani into their coastal village. Seven years after the shipwreck, they walked along the Caminho de Peabiru in the company of 2000 Guarani, crossing through modern day Brazil, Paraguay and Bolivia. They fought with several tribes along the way, plundering villages as they went, before encountering Inca warriors in Sucre and near Potosi in Bolivia. Seven years before Pizarro had arrived in Peru from the Pacific ocean, Aleixo and the Guarani had encountered the Inca empire in Bolivia and had sent part of the gold and silver they amassed there back to the Atlantic coast.

This treasure was put into a rowboat with indigenous men and Europeans who planned to join a waiting ship anchored offshore. The rowboat never made it to the ship. It capsized along the way and the treasure sank to the bottom of the



sea. Rumour has it that the indigenous recovered it swiftly and buried it onland. Researchers suggest that the gold and silver was found, put on a ship and lost again on the north coast of Brazil, but this has not deterred five hundred years of treasure hunters from digging up the ground with shovels and picks and even dynamite on this coastline in attempts to recover the gold and silver, vandalising several sacred indigenous sites in the process.

We trudge along the soft sands of the Praia do Luz, a pristine curving bay popular with surfers. Some surfers in black wetsuits are already greasing their boards at the sea edge, chatting sparingly. We follow a sandy trail over the cliff towards Rosa beach. The trail winds upwards and then levels off on a short forest trail, before opening out on a hill-top. Here, we have a perfect view of the curvaceous coast from the port of Imbituba to the south to the sweeping bays of Rosa, Vermelha and Ouvidor Beach to the north. The green open pasture on the top of the hill is sprinkled with cows and bullocks, who eye us suspiciously before moving slowly off to the side to let us pass. We follow the path strewn with cowpats and stingly rosetta shrubs down to the beach, where a traditional fisherman hut or rancho, made of planks of wood roofed with reddened tiles, stands poised for action. May to July is mullet season, a high-point among these communities of fishermen, where traditional fishing methods, a mix of Guaraní and Portuguese methods, are used to catch thousands of the salt-water mullet fish that are so popular in the local restaurants. Portuguese settlers from the Azorian islands were the first to colonize this coast en masse in the middle of the 18th Century. Their descendents are the owners of these fisherman ranchos and the number of fish in each year's catch, up to tens of thousands per small beach, is engraved proudly on the rancho's wooden beams. On Rosa beach, as in all beaches we will pass, a large colourful rowing boat stands on the ready on the sand, a huge tarrafa fishing net and eight oars poised for the haul. The native Guaraní and the Azorians lived peacefully for some time. This is evident in the fact that much of the coast still uses the indigenous placenames and in the many ways Guaraní traditions have become Azorian traditions. The Guaraní taught the azorian colonists to make a canoe from a single garapuvu tree, one of the symbols of Florianópolis. The tree explodes in yellow blossoms in spring that bring welcome colour to the swathe of green of the Atlantic Forest that hugs the coastline. By using only one single tree, the canoe is more subtle, less likely to break on the unforgiving waters of

the Atlantic. The Guaraní also taught the azorians to weave the traditional tarrafa fishing net. They used a natural vine from the forest, while now the fishermen use a nylon that is more resistant and can be used to make bigger nets to increase the size of the catch. The Azorians seem to have been well received by the Guaraní. The Guaraní disappeared from this coast however and the Azorians flourished here. The descendants of the Azorians are even called *nativos* or natives in this strip of the South Brazilian coast.

As we come to the end of Rosa beach, we are surprised by an organised walkway over the rocks, complete with red arrows carved into wooden signposts, stone steps cut out of the rock and hand-woven rubbish baskets. These baskets, woven with natural fibres, are another example of the Guaraní skills transferred to the azorian settlers.

On the top of the cliff that leads to Ouidor beach, we go through a dark, dense forest trail for ten minutes before breaking out to the awe-inspiring tapestry of sea, sun and curving bay. The pristine beauty makes me stop in my tracks. I inhale it deeply, shading my eyes from the intensity of the light. I take out my tin whistle and start to play in response. When nature sings at me, all I can do is sing back, even if my repertoire is limited. When I finish playing and the music dissolves into the air, Tahmid and I continue onwards through an open trail on the top of this coastal hill. Turning a corner, I jump with surprise as I come face to face with three brooding men, their naked chests dark brown in the sun, as they look out to sea in silence. They seem to scowl at me when I wish them a *bom dia*, so I scurry rapidly on. 'Friendly!' I remark sarcastically, as we move out of earshot. 'They are *olheiros*, look-outs,' Tahmid explains, laughing, 'their job is to spot shoals of mullet fish that look like dark shadows out to sea and then signal down to the fishermen waiting in the rancho below to pull the boat into the sea and drop the huge tarrafa net in a circle around the shoal to make the first catch of the season. They can be up here for a week or more before they spot anything.' 'Why so unfriendly?' I ask, irritated, 'I'm hardly going to steal their fish.' Tahmid points to the tin whistle in my hand and laughs. 'Romantic notion to play your tin whistle in nature, but it could really put off the fish!' I grimace, almost repentant. As we

walk down to the beach, where I can spot a group of fishermen in the rancho behind the big garapuvu rowboat stationed on the sand, I tuck the tin whistle back into my backpack.

In the rancho, a group of fifteen fishermen sit around, playing cards and drinking coffee, laughing and joking as they wait for the look-outs to spur them into action. There is not even a shadow of hurry on them. Two men sit quietly to one side, mending a tarrafa net. The rancho itself is a jumble of oars and nets, simple wooden tables and short stumps of trees as seats.

The fishermen in the rancho return our greeting guardedly through yellow teeth. 'I know your face,' Tahmid says to a large fisherman in his forties. 'He is a wanted man up North,' one of his friends retorts, making everyone laugh. 'Weren't you our waiter a few weeks ago on a beach restaurant on Rosa beach?' The man studies Tahmid's face and nods in agreement, breaking the ice. With that, they welcome us into the group, gesturing for us to sit on tree stump stools and offering us thick, black coffee in chipped mugs, which we slurp gratefully.

As Tahmid starts up a conversation with the group of bantering men, I turn to the man next to me, who is quietly looking out to sea. He is in his late sixties and has the typical short, stocky build of an Azorian fisherman. His skin is like tanned leather, coarse and weathered. As he turns to me, his eyes are merry and alert.

'Are you from here?' I ask. 'I was born and bred here,' he smiles at me broadly, 'we had the only house here on the beach, just over there.' He points to a line of invasive pine trees just beyond the sand. 'It's been torn down now of course and I live further off the beach with my wife.' 'Do you have any stories about the place?' I ask him, sensing his openness to talk. He nods his head slowly, thoughtfully. 'This place,' he answers in a low voice, looking straight at me, 'is a haunted place. It has quietened down now since so many people have started to come here, but you would never see me fishing at night here. No, not me.' 'Why not?' I ask, sipping my coffee intrigued. 'One night I was fishing alone there in the corner of the beach,' he points at the rocks at the end of the beach to our left. 'It was getting dark and I had my tarrafa net already in the water. Behind me, I sensed someone come close to me and throw a tarrafa net in the water next to mine. I could hear the sound of the net falling and see the ripple of the water. But I saw nothing: no tarrafa net and no man beside me. The hair stood up on my

neck and I dropped my tarrafa net and ran for my life. That's why I would never fish here at night-time. Not for all the buried treasure in the world.' 'What is he filling your head with,' one of the men playing cards shouts up from the table. 'You know nothing about these things,' the man next to me answers defensively, 'you never lived on the beach, but my family and I saw giant balls of fire coming out of nowhere and landing on the beach beside us. We saw a huge, tall man, a giant of a man crossing the beach in three strides.' The other man waves his card-filled hand at him and laughs. The man next to me goes silent, used perhaps to his stories being dismissed by the others, but convinced of his own experiences. He has imbued the beach with a sense of the extraordinary for me.

### BECOMING A PILGRIM

We finish our coffees and hand back our cups with thanks. I shake the man's hand and congratulate him on the huge, brightly-painted guarapuvu boat on the beach before us, which bears his name.

We wave our goodbyes to the other men and continue on down to the end of the beach, where the trickle of a red iron-rich river stains the sand and flows into the sea. We walk along the marked pathway off the beach and up to the coastal cliffs, lain with a dark green cover of low, compact grass. The day is warm and dry, about 20 degrees: ideal walking weather. We walk over the dunes that lead on to Barra beach, which is lined with glass-fronted beachhouses with immaculately manicured lawns sloping down to the beach. Each one has a sign plastered on its wall, warning that the house is protected by a private security company. There are more people on the beach here. A father plays with his young daughter, who waves and smiles at us. I wave back and think of the boys, imagining them playing on the beach with their babysitter now.

A long, tawny fisherman in his fifties is hauling a net out of the back of an old pick-up truck on the edge of the beach. We stop to offer help and together we haul the heavy tarrafa net from the truck and carry it onto the yellow and blue garapuvu boat near the sea. A friendly conversation begins and we tell him of our walk along the coast and our conversation on Ouidir beach. 'He's right, he's right,' the fisherman says in a low, steady voice. 'Strange things happen around these parts. I don't know how to explain them, but I have witnessed them too.' He points to a circular rocky mound about 30 square metres in size at the end

of Barra beach. This mound separates the beach from its neighbour Ferrugem beach. Half-way up one side of the mound, there is a wood-and-slate fisherman's rancho, just as we have seen on other beaches. 'I have been fishing here for 20 years and sometimes, we sleep right there in the rancho if we have been fishing at night or want to get out early in the morning,' the fisherman begins, 'a couple of times, while sleeping there, I heard strange noises at around two or three in the morning. First they were low sounds, but they grew louder and louder and then, things were being thrown at the rancho. We took our torches and went out to see who it was, but there was nobody there, just these strange sounds.' Tahmid and I exchange glances. 'We call that mound there where the rancho is, Morro do Indio, the Indian's hill, because it is an old Indian burial place, a Sambaqui. It's a strange place,' the fisherman continues, 'a protected place. No-one is allowed to dig there.' 'Have people tried to dig there?' I ask, surprised. 'Lots of people have come here looking for treasure,' the fisherman tells me, his face stern and serious, 'but any treasure there is not for the white man. Anyway the treasure was found 30 years ago and it brought nothing but bad luck.' 'Who found the treasure?' Tahmid asked, his curiosity awakened. The fisherman seems happy to be whiling away the time waiting for the mullet fish to arrive and he leans on the edge of the boat as he tells us the whole story. 'Mané, an old man who lived here all his life was cutting down a butiá palm tree over there where you arrived on the beach from Ouvidor. He was cutting down the tree and he hit against some metal. Instead of digging it up, he told a neighbour of his, a younger man, Zé, who went down to see what was there. After seeing that it was some kind of treasure, Zé told his old neighbour that it was nothing at all, just a rusty old pot. In the middle of the night, Zé stole down to the tree with a friend called Raul and dug up all of the treasure. Zé and Raul sold the treasure and became very rich and bought lots of land. All this land along the beach and back as far as you can see, belonged to them. But the two men got sick and died. Their children inherited the lands, but the lands proved useless for any kind of planting, so they sold it on for nothing, for the price of a banana.' 'What about Mané, the old man?' I ask, 'what happened to him?' 'He died here of old age. He never touched the treasure, so nothing ever happened to him. But that treasure was cursed, everyone around these parts knows this story and knows the people involved.' Some other fishermen come into view further along the beach and he moves towards them, waving goodbye to us.

‘Let’s check out the Sambaqui,’ I urge Tahmid, hugging his arm, ‘do you think that was Aleixo Garcia’s treasure from his escapades in Bolivia along the Caminho de Peabiru five hundred years ago?’

‘Who knows, who knows,’ Tahmid says, shaking his head and smiling.

As we arrive at the Morro do Indio Sambaqui, three people are huddled around a man who is pointing to a large, dark diabase rock at the foot of the mound. I look down at the rock and see that it has a basin-like cavity carved into it. It reminds me of the bullauns, the holy basin stones that I saw along St. Brendan’s Saint’s Road in Ireland, but this one has a shallower cavity. I sidle up to the group and loiter beside them, eavesdropping on the man explaining about the rock. He tells them that this rock was used by the indigenous people to sharpen stones, make clay plates and as a mortar to grind seeds and grains. ‘See how a large part of the side of the rock has been deliberately cut away,’ I hear him say, ‘people come and take off part of these rocks and grind them down to make teas to ward off illnesses. But I would never take anything from these rocks. That is an unbelievable sacrilege.’ The man speaks gently but so firmly that I feel a dismay at whoever vandalised this sacred rock. I tut-tut out loud and the small group turns as one towards me. I smile at them, slightly embarrassed at being found eavesdropping. As I look up, I notice that the man who is speaking is Guaraní. He is old, though it is difficult for me to say how old and there is definitely some European blood mixed in his, but for the most part, his features are Guaraní. Although it is their ancestral land, it is unusual to meet Guaraní along this coast, unless you are near an indigenous village or see them selling their handicraft in a town or city. I gasp internally and pull Tahmid in towards the group. ‘I can’t believe someone would break off part of the rock,’ I finally say, breathless. The Guaraní grandfather, dressed in comfortable modern clothes, smiles at me and points to the layers of oyster shell that are visible under the green vegetation covering the mound. ‘You see the bits of shell there, the whole mound is covered with oyster shells and many Indians have been buried here. They were buried in waist-high ceramic pots and put curled up in foetal position inside the pots, facing east for a new life.’ People are standing on the mound, looking out to sea. ‘Is it ok to walk on the mound?’ I ask, ‘is it not disrespectful?’ One of the group, a woman in her fifties laughs and links her arm with the Guaraní grandfather. ‘There is no problem walking here,’ she says. The Guaraní grandfather adds, ‘but it is good to say a prayer for all



those buried here and who have passed here. These Sambaquis were built by our grandfathers, before the Guaraní came here from the northwest, but we continued to respect and revere these places, even burying some of our own people here.’ ‘Our European ancestors showed respect for these sacred places by removing layer after layer of oyster shells to make lime to whitewash their houses and palaces,’ the woman adds with sarcasm, ‘there were once thousands of these mounds of shells all over the coast and near rivers and waterfalls, but now so many have been destroyed or reduced to almost nothing.’ Our Guaraní grandfather sighs and nods.

The small group begins to move away from the mound and the woman pulls at the Guaraní grandfather’s arm, leading him off the beach. ‘Is there no protection for this sacred site?’ I say, grappling for a question to keep them talking longer. ‘Hah,’ the woman spits out, ‘I have lived here for eight years and the place is just left to waste away. There is a sign just over there that marks the spot as a Sambaqui with over 7000 years of history, but that’s all. We are campaigning with the local government to put up some kind of protection and an information board about the history as well.’ ‘Is the local government likely to do it?’ I ask. The woman lets out another dismissing Hah! ‘I have even offered to pay for the information board myself, but the local government hasn’t given permission.’ As they move away, the woman turns around and calls back to me, ‘before you leave, make sure you check out the lithic workshop on the north side of the mound, but be careful, it’s slippery.’ I nod back to her and wave goodbye.

We circle round to the north side of the mound as she suggested and walk carefully among the rocks. ‘I can’t believe we met a Guaraní today, on our first day walking the coast,’ I say breathlessly, ‘without even passing a Guaraní village or a place where they sell their art and craft.’ Tahmid cannot contain his excitement, ‘I *knew* something magical would happen, I knew it. It’s because we just went for it,’ he says to me with emotion, ‘we didn’t know for sure we could find paths between the beaches or hadn’t overplanned anything, we just trusted that everything would work out and went for it. The universe has conspired in our favour today to show you that you are on the right path following this Caminho de Peabiru.’

A favourite quote from Goethe comes to mind and I recite it aloud with aplomb: “*what you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.*”

Just at that moment, we stumble across a large flat slab of dark, diabase rock, about ten square metres in size. All over the black rock, there are bowl-like cavities and innumerable grooves cut into the rock, where knives and spears must have been moulded and sharpened. The sheer quantity of the ancient man-made indentations on the rock takes my breath away. I have never seen anything like it before. We have tripped across an astounding archaeological treasure. We sit at the edge of the rock and I place my fingers into the long grooves. There is water in the bowl-like cavities and Tahmid flicks some on me laughing, blessing me with the holy water of the Guaraní's sacred ocean. All around us, the sea swells and crashes against the rocks. The sun is high in the sky and its warmth envelops us, as birds and insects swarm and buzz around us. I am in an orgy of nature. I imagine the indigenous women sitting here and sharpening utensils, preparing foods and medicines as their children ran naked all about them. I can almost hear their laughter, rippling through time to include me. I am part of this beauty. I am part of this mystery.

'This is a perfect serendipity day,' I laugh out loud. 'When I was young, my mother would collect me and my brothers from school some days and tell us it was a serendipity day. We would have nothing planned and just see where the day would take us, following signs as we went. I always loved those days. I *love* serendipity.'

We sit in silence for a few moments. 'Will you plait my hair?' I ask Tahmid quietly. 'When going on an *ognatã*, a pilgrimage, the Guaraní women plait their hair,' I tell him. 'I think I'm ready to plait my hair now.' Tahmid sits behind me and wets my hair with water from one of the rock basins. I feel the pleasurable tugs at my hair, as I look out eastward on the endless rise and fall of the sea. The crash of the waves whooshes around us, cocooning our silence. It takes him two or three attempts to pull in all of the stray hairs, but soon my hair falls down my back in a tight plait, signalling that I am a pilgrim on the Guaraní's Caminho de Peabiru.

#### GLIMPING AN ANCIENT MYSTERY

From the end of the beach after the Indian's Hill, a steeply rising cliff of rocks compels us to move inland and find the King's Path, the Caminho do Rei,

which will take us over the high cliffs that lead to Silveira beach. Though originally a path used by the indigenous people, the Portuguese king Dom Pedro II is said to have used this path on horseback to explore this southern part of Brazil in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It is a public path, but nonetheless a private gated community, aptly called Caminho do Rei, has been built illegally around it and we need to ask permission from the doorman to open the gate and allow us pass. We show him our IDs and walk up the paved path that rises steeply up before us. We walk in silence. Tahmid and I still immersed in the mystery and excitement of the morning. At the top of the cliffs, there are no signposts or markers, and we do not know which way to turn. There is a cow standing nonchalantly between two roads. ‘Which way should we go?’ I ask the cow on impulse. The cow’s tail swings decidedly to the right. The road to the right seems to lead straight to the large corrugated gate of a private house but we follow it anyway. Just before we arrive at the gate, we find a hidden opening in the fence to our right, which opens on to a path worn into the grass that slopes sharply down to the road running parallel to the long, pristine Silveira beach.

We walk down the path before cutting onto the beach to make our way to the rocky cliffs that divide it from the next beach, Garopaba. The sea is throwing itself deliriously against the rocks, its spray exploding near us on the cliff-edge. This is a protected area, but wooden stacks mark the territory of a solitary private house built on the headland. No doubt a man of local political influence. We come to Galeão rock, an outcrop of black diabase rocks that falls down into the sea. We leave our backpacks by the edge and lower ourselves down onto the rocks that form a rough stairs as we descend. I have read that somewhere here, there is an ancient treasure, but it is not easy to find. There is no information, no yellow Camino de Santiago arrow to point us in the right direction. Down on the outcrop of rocks, we scour them passing our eyes and hands over the surfaces, searching. We come to a tall flat rockface that rises up before us leaning slightly towards us. I gasp with delight, my heart beating fast. There it is — the ancient treasure I have been looking for. Engraved on the rock are the worn outlines of two concentric circles. Below these, I can see the matchstick image of a man with his arms held up in the air. Could this be an ancient Sumé arriving from the Atlantic ocean? I call Tahmid, shining with excitement. ‘Look,’ I point to him, ‘our first sighting of Sumé. And look at these concentric circles, they are similar to the spiral found a

few months ago near the Saint's Road pilgrimage in Ireland. They are a similar age too, about 4000 years old.' 'What do these symbols mean?' Tahmid asks, intrigued. 'These symbols are often associated with the sun both here and in Ireland,' I tell him, 'Sumé was a solar figure. Guaraní myth tells that when he died, his body became corn, their sacred *amali* and his head expanded into the sun.' 'But Sumé was much more recent, wasn't he?' Tahmid asked. 'The Guaraní only reached the coast around 1000 AD, which would suggest Sumé, if he was an actual man or group of men, appeared around that time. It could be a much more ancient myth though, passed down from indigenous people to indigenous people. Given that the Guaraní still revere these rock art symbols made by earlier indigenous tribes, even incorporating some of them in their pottery designs up to the present day, they could easily have taken onboard earlier myths too.'

There is moisture on the rocks, making the black surface shine in the sunlight and making it difficult to make out the symbols engraved on the rocks. As I pass my hand over the rock, I can make out the figure of two wavy lines, perhaps celebrating the waves of the sea that are crashing about us. Lower down, there is a glut of rock art, rows of triangles pointing downwards and sun shapes with faint rays emanating from the central circle. 'Look at this,' Tahmid says, taken aback, pointing to a symbol above us. Here, there is a circular eye surrounded by triangles, pointing in the four cardinal directions, like a cosmic compass orientating us. 'Incredible,' I nod at him, my voice hushed.

We sit down on the rock, amidst the sea and the ancient rock art and I take out my tin whistle. The tinny sound mixes with the crash of the waves against the rocks, creating a novel cacophony.

From the Praia do Rosa headland, just after Ibraquera beach where we started our walk, all the way up to the island of Porto Belo, 140 km away, rocks have been carved with a variety of concentric circles, geometrical forms, crosses and simple figures of match-stick people. These rocks are mostly at places that are difficult to access, right at the edge of the sea, looking out eastward into the Atlantic.

The rock that the indigenous used here to create its art is diabase, as in most areas along this coast. It is a flat, black rock that lies in long strips on the sea-edge. Diabase is the same rock used in Stonehenge, hauled over 200 km from

Wales to create the famous stone circle. It is created when vertical flows of lava spit through fissures of older rock and move out horizontally to create a strip of dark, black diabase that is softer than its older host. The vertical manifests itself on the horizontal.

Hoisting ourselves up onto level ground again, we leave this natural outdoor museum of rock art and walk on further along the coast. Nearby, we stop to briefly cool off in the delicious rockpools, immersing ourselves in the water trapped by the rock formations. The sea rises like geysers where it meets the rocks, spraying us with temporary waterfalls as we bathe in the protective crook of the cliff.

Refreshed, we move on towards Vigil point, where more fishermen look out to sea in search of the shoals of mullet fish. The rocks below us create a huge face, locally called The Indian, that protrudes from the cliff's rockface, looking eastward out to sea. The Guaraní say that these guardians protruding from the rocks on the edge of the sea await the arrival of the apiká, the flying boat that will lead those who have achieved lightness, aguyje, to Yvy Marã Ey.

Walking along the road now, we come to an old, crumbling azorian-style church overlooking the small square of the historic centre of the village of Garopaba. The church was built in the mid-nineteenth century on top of a stone that was part of the whaling station that existed in the town. I pull at the door of the church but it is locked. The church is in a bad state of disrepair, with long cracks visible across the walls, peeling paint and black stains of damprot: a relic of the Catholicism that the azorians brought with them to the new world. The north-facing part of the stone cross on top of the steeple has fallen off and two shabby black vultures perch beside it, leering.

Down at the seafront, the fishermen are gathered together among their boats, chatting and laughing as they await a sign from the look-outs on Vigil's Point. The sea continues to breathe heavily, exhaling its foam onto the wet sand. There are many boats in the bay here and several fishermen repairing tarrafa fishing nets. There is still truth to the place's name Garaopaba, a Guaraní name meaning *the place of canoes*.

In the charming historic centre, we buy a big ice-cream to fuel us on our way and walk the whole, extensive curve of Garopaba beach before climbing up a wall of rock to get to Siriu beach.

Siriú is yet another perfect beach that extends before us, flanked to the left with high, hilly dunes covered with rubbery restinga vegetation, that give way to a lake at the northern end of the beach. There is an abundance of crab in the lake, which the Guaraní call siri and from whence the beach gets its name. We are tired now and the sand is soft and difficult to walk on. We pass by two dead tortoises, that will soon be devoured by the circling vultures overhead. We trudge along the beach as the sun begins to set over the dunes, silenced by the sea that roars like a plane interminably taking off. The whole sky is on fire with a supernatural light that spotlights a tiny island out to sea. Egrets and seagulls abound, flying a dance in the air before hopping along the edge of the sea, pecking between squawks at cockles and the tiny tatuira insects that scurry into the sand and announcing the end of day. We find three perfectly intact sand-dollar skeletons and pick them up carefully to give as presents to the three boys. Darkness falls as we arrive in the tiny village of Siriú, which is in its out-of-season slumber.

We find the only open B&B, which has a room with a varanda overlooking the sea. After we eat, we sit together quietly on the varanda. An owl's hoot is all that dares break the silence. The night is clear and ablaze with stars. For the Guaraní, the earth is a reflection of the sky. I gaze up at the stars, eager to decipher these indigenous codes. The hazy strip of the milky way, the home of the Guaraní gods, stretches out above us, guiding us along the Caminho de Peabiru. The Guaraní call the milky way *the way of the tapir* and I try and make out his fat, squat body and extended anteater-like nose in its mists. Along the tapir's body, I make out the five stars of the dazzling Southern Cross, the Guaraní's *Kurusu* and my *popyguá*, my protective amulet in the sky.

#### PULL OF THE OCEAN

The morning sky is streaked with yellow, topped by a flash of fire red that dissolves into a pale pink. The grey-blue clouds have swirls of red in them. The sky melts into a deep pink, almost purple, with a shivering v of swallows soaring, flapping, soaring against it. We have our breakfast of bread and maté in silence, wrapped in our fleece jackets, watching this spectacular sunrise. As we start on our day's walk, the sky turns to yellow and then a light green before suddenly, we are surrounded by a light blue and we are in daylight: as if the flickering light has now been switched on. The air is heavy with butterflies of every colour. The endless



sound of the thunderous sea is joined by the hum of crickets and the wheeze and trill of birds on the day's first flight.

Our walk takes a frustrating turn early on as we walk up a steep concreted road inland to try and cross to Gamboa beach on the other side of the jagged cliffs. Instead of way-markers, we find only eroded paths and fields full of shoulder-high grass. Soon, our clothes are wet through from the dew and I am imagining snakes into every step. We are lost. We retrace our steps and try three different routes, before finding an almost invisible entrance to a forest trail. "This trail is so abandoned and disorganised," I rant, "what a wasted tourist opportunity for the local community — no information, no preservation of this eroding indigenous heritage." I sigh deeply, frustrated. "We're still a young country," Tahmid reminds me gently, "most people are more interested in surviving or securing their future than preserving the past." By the time we come out of the forest trail, ten minutes later, and into an open field that looks down on the sweeping bays of Gamboa and Guarda da Embaú, I am calm again and enjoying the walk. The trail ends in a small field which is heaving with huge white, large-horned bullocks that bay at us menacingly. An old, sinewy farmer appears behind them and tells us to slip under some barbed wire and cross the enclosure a safe distance from the bullocks. We stop to talk to him, admiring his strong herd. "I knew you were coming down the trail, because the bulls became uneasy a good ten minutes ago. They could sense you long before I could hear or see you," Seu Pedro tells us. I look at the huge bullocks and nod to the intelligence in their eyes. Seu Pedro turns away, muttering. "Young people don't want to keep herds anymore. There are no young farmers left. There is no difference now between a young one from the city or from the country. They all look the same and talk the same. Television I suppose. Bloody soap-operas." His short tirade finished, he spits some grass from his mouth and moves past us, picking up a hand-woven basket of straw to feed the bullocks. We call our goodbyes as we hustle away from him and walk down a paved road through the backend of the village to the beach.

The beach in Gamboa is empty and it stretches endlessly before us. We move near to the sea edge and walk on the wet, more compact sand. I take off my shoes to bathe my hot and sticky feet in the seawater. As I walk, thousands of tiny tatuira insects tickle my feet and I jump quickly away from the seawater. I think of the boys catching tatuira to use as fishing bait and I wish them a good morning in

my mind's eye. The sea is deafening, a thunder constantly roaring by my side. This is followed by the effervescent hiss of foam on the beach. The waves leave a pattern on the sand as they retreat, which remind me of the squares of the fishermen's tarrafa net. Here there is a pattern on the sand that reminds me of a piece of bobbin lace that the Azorian women make with their round, stout cushions and wooden pegs; nature and culture mirroring each other perfectly.

We climb over the rocks to the neighbouring beach of Guarda da Embaú, where we find a man with a hand-woven basket poised to scrape mussels from the rocks. The sea is too wild for him to get close; it spits at him every time he approaches.

Guarda da Embaú is over fifteen kilometres of soft sand and its dunes stretch endlessly inland. The locals say that the beach gets its name from the treasures hidden along this coast 'guardado em baú' or *kept in chests* but embau sounds Guaraní to me. As we leave the fisherman on the rocks, there is no other sign of human activity anywhere in any direction. This is how the coast must have looked five hundred years ago: a perfect, isolated spot to hide treasure. Part of me longs not for treasure, but for the short bays of yesterday's walk and the relief of grassy hilltops. Out to sea, I spot Coral Island, where more indigenous rock art ornates its eastern coastline.

Five kilometres into the Guarda da Embaú beach, Tahmid stops suddenly, takes off all his clothes and runs naked into the sea. I look around on an empty beach, strip my clothes off too and join him in the crashing waves. We whoop with delight as we jump each wave. The sea is wild around us and I feel its seductive pull lulling me further and further out. The current grabs strongly at my feet, slapping me from my reveries. I am not a strong swimmer. I thrash back to the shore against the current with all my strength. When I finally wash up in the foam of the sea, I am breathless and fully alert, my heart pounding loudly.

#### WALKING FLUTE

We let the sun dry us off before we get dressed and continue our desert-like walk, our shoes in hand — totally silent now. As I walk, I focus on my breath. It enters through my nostrils and reaches deep down into my belly, relaxing my whole body. After a few kilometres of conscious breathing, it feels like the air

enters through the top of my head, the crown chakra. It descends and breathes out through the space between my eyes, my third eye chakra. It feels as if the breath is cleaning out these chakras. The air enters again through the top of my head, descends and exhales through my throat chakra, loosening, lightening all tension there. Breath after breath reaches down further and further, exhaling through my heart chakra, then my solar plexus at my bellybutton, then my sacral chakra at my pelvis and finally my root chakra at the base of my spine. Then the air enters my crown chakra and breathes out through all of my other chakras in one breath. I feel a lightness, a subtle inner shining. I feel like I am being breathed rather than breathing. For a moment, I am a walking flute.

Soon, we can make out the dots of a few tourists and fishermen further down the beach. One fisherman is waiting by the edge of the Madre river with a boat on the ready to ferry people across to the colourful hippie village of Guarda de Embaú, a popular tourist destination since the 1970s. After coffee and sweet bread in a bakery, Tahmid and I continue onwards towards our day's destination, Pinheira beach, to the north. We take a forest trail uphill, heading northwards, where someone has placed a hand-written sign saying: 'Have a conscious hike.' I smile and bring all of my attention to this moment here and now.

The ground is strewn with dead, brown leaves, turning slowly back into soil and there is scarcely a crunch as I step through them. The forest is dense and little light from the sun-drenched day makes it through to the forest floor. The branches of the trees stretch higher and higher to reach the sun. The green-blue of a hummingbird flits in the corner of my eye but when I turn to look at it, it's already gone. Butterflies abound, fluttering before me as I walk. A large blue butterfly is caught in a ray of sunlight that spotlights it to my right. I stop and watch it flap its great wings slowly, feeling their weight. I push on through the hum of insects and the smell of moist, rotting plants until I come out to a clearing of rocks that leads us down to the tiny beach of Prainha. Surfers dot the sea in front of us, catching waves with audible whoops. Again, we follow the sand to the rocks on the other side and climb onto the grassy hill towards Pinheira beach. A large bullock stands in our way and Tahmid grabs a stick to scare it off the path. Unimpressed, decidedly bored, the bullock moves slowly aside and we follow the path to the valley. Here, in what is known as the Utopian valley, we stumble across a patch of paradise with green rolling hills dotted with yellow and

purple wildflowers and white grazing bullocks, that slope straight down to a blue, crystalline sea. I have stepped into an alpine scene from *The Sound of Music*, dropped by some cosmic mistake at the edge of the sea.

We follow the cattle trail down towards the upper Pinheira beach, where a group of fishermen sit outside the rancho, laughing. We wave to them as we pass, with no time to talk to them or to look for the rock art on the headland. There is too much beauty and history on this Caminho de Peabiru for us to unearth, so much buried treasure still waiting to be discovered.

#### ATLANTIC FOREST DISMAY

My close friend Cida and I join a group from the local Camino de Santiago association on this same C-shaped Pinheira beach to continue the Caminho de Peabiru. The group is led by F, a local man. In these years of living in Brazil, Cida and her two sons have become family to me. Our friendship is a meeting of souls, welded by the inexplicable synchronicities of life. We were both pregnant with our third sons, when we first met. Our friendship lept beyond the superficial when her third son Miguel, born three months before my third son, died at five days old from streptococcus. Streptococcus is the same random bacteria that killed my husband Alastair years earlier, when we were on holidays in San Francisco with our two toddler boys. The transience of life has erupted into the centre of both our lives and we struggle together to accept it and find meaning in it. Cida is godmother to my third son Eoin and we share our daily lives together now in a sisterly intimacy.

The forty members of the Camino de Santiago Association are dressed in high-tech walking gear, with branded backpacks and black plastic water bottles. They speak loudly and jovially. How fitting that I would walk a part of the Caminho de Peabiru with pilgrims of my beloved Camino de Santiago. The Camino was a precursor to this Caminho de Peabiru for me. On the Camino, I was looking for direction in life, looking outwards for what to do, where to go, who to love. Now, twelve years later on the Caminho de Peabiru, I am finally looking inwards. On the Camino I was on the horizontal axis of the cross of life; on the Caminho de Peabiru, I am delving into the vertical axis.

Cida and I are the only ones of the group to take off our shoes and wade our

feet in the sea as we walk along the beach that curls up all the way to Parrot Point, which almost touches the southern tip of the island of Florianópolis. Live sand-dollars speckle the seashore and I pick them up, examining their red tentacled feet before carefully dropping them further out to sea. Numerous coloured garapuvu canoes are pulled up on the sand. Little shacks and fishermen's ranchos huddle together behind the boats, where the beach gives way to the green restinga-covered dunes. We walk under a line of modern fishing lines, propped up in the sand like a guard of honour saluting us on our Caminho de Peabiru and wishing us *Oguatã Pora*, the Guaraní wish for a good pilgrimage.

We follow our guide off the beach and over the dunes, where Cida and I hurry to put our shoes back on and scurry after the group that has walked on along a dirt road. Along the road dozens of houses spread out in the usual unplanned, higgledy-piggledy of Greater Florianópolis' semi-regulated residential areas. One of the group, a man in his fifties, hangs back to walk with Cida and me and holds out a small flask of slightly off-colour liquid. 'Banana?' he asks cheekily, 'to remind you of your husband.' Husband is a tricky subject for both Cida and for me, but we both laugh easily with him.

I take the flask from him. 'What is this?' I ask cautiously, before drinking it. 'Cachaça with banana, the women's favourite,' he winks at me. Cachaça is the Brazilian sugar-cane rum with a potency similar to the Irish potato-stilled poitín. I take a swig from the flask and wince. My throat heats up with the flame of alcohol. I hand the small flask to Cida, who drinks quickly and gives it back to him to reattach to his belt, which has three more flasks of liquid attached. 'What is that?' I ask him pointing to his belt. 'This, my friend,' he says patting his belt, 'is the belt of happiness. It comes on all of my walks.' There is a small group of us gathered around his belt of happiness now, warming ourselves internally with his little flasks.

As we begin to walk again, he asks, 'who drinks more, the Irish or Brazilians?' I laugh at the question. 'I think it's tied,' I smile at him with a wink, 'maybe that's why the two cultures have so much in common — an innate ability to celebrate life by drinking too much alcohol.' The cachaça from the belt of happiness unites most of the group quickly and I'm grateful to it as a quick way of falling into rhythm with the group.

I am still chuckling from the banter, when I notice those ahead of us have

stopped talking. They are at the fence of the Serra do Tabuleiro national park and have suddenly stopped dead. I have been looking forward to the day's walk and the chance to see some of the wildlife such as anteaters and skunks that are plentiful in the reserve, as well as the renowned vegetation of bromelia and a broad array of native trees. Before us now though, lies a charred wasteland. As far as the eye can see, brown stumps of burnt bromelia smoulder in black earth, thousands of ashen tree stumps spike out of the scorched and scarred landscape. 'A fire?' I cry dismayed, my throat catching. There is no movement at all around us to suggest that any animals are alive in the remnants of this inferno. The air is heavy with the desolate hush of an still-smouldering, abandoned cemetery.

There are several grooved paths through the wasteland where strips of grass have survived. We choose one of these and walk along it, silent among the debris of this national park. The only trees that seem to have survived are the pine trees, an invasive species imported here from Europe that threaten the sustainability of the local vegetation. 'It's the resin,' Cida explains to me in a low voice. 'The resin of the pine tree is less flammable than that of the native trees. That's why it survived.' In a sea of native ash, the invasive, foreign pine boasts supremacy.

I feel sickened as we walk. I am relieved when we arrive at the visitor centre and can escape the smell of charcoal and destruction. In the centre, we see photos of native animals, wild cats and pumas that live on the reserve; the abundant anteaters, gambás which are like Brazilian skunks and the armadillos, sacred creatures to the Guarani. We are invited to attend a short talk about the reserve and the whole group sit down in the standard issue white school chairs, some of the larger members of the group laughing as they struggle to fit on them. The young presenter starts by showing us a map of Brazil, outlining in green the areas of Atlantic Forest in the country. The whole coastline is green, as is the interior of some states, especially the southern region. 'That's not right,' one walker objects, confused, 'I am from the state of Paraná, north of here, and there are endless plantations of soy bean and other crops, not Atlantic Forest.' 'Excellent observation,' the presenter agrees. 'This map shows where the original atlantic forest *used to be* in Brazil, but 90% of that Atlantic Forest has now been destroyed. We now have only between 7 and 12% of the Atlantic Forest remaining.' He moves to a new slide with a map weakly dotted with green. 'In our state of Santa Catarina, a sizeable strip of Atlantic Forest remains because it is on the slopes of



the mountains, which reach up to 1200 metres above sea-level. These mountains are difficult to build on, so the advance of so-called progress has been halted here. The Atlantic Forest has been designated an area of protection by UNESCO but this is a moral rather than a legally binding form of protection. Only last year, several areas were removed from the protection of the park due to pressure from local developers. Local development plans for this coastline have already been approved that are in direct violation to the protection of the Atlantic Forest and the marshlands that are so rich in bio-diversity.'

'What happened to the part of the forest that we walked through?' Cida asked, perplexed. The presenter flicks to a map of the reserve and circles a sizeable area to the south. 'All of the vegetation you see here in dark green was burnt in the fires,' he says and with a tightness in his voice. 'Over the last two weeks, there have been fires that have decimated the vegetation and the habitats in this area.' The next slide is a picture of an ant-eater running to escape a blazing fire. Flames five metres high span out behind him, eliciting sharp gasps from the whole group.

'These fires were deliberate. Although it is difficult to know who actually started them,' he begins, 'we know they were criminal and deliberate acts. When we were fighting the fire in one direction, suddenly a fire would start in a completely different direction. Probably someone on a motorbike. The marshland vegetation was dry and combustible because of the lack of rain due to the La Niña effect over the last few months, so it burnt like kindling.'

'Who would want to start a fire in such a beautiful place?' I stammer incredulously.

'Let's just say that commercial interests see environmental protection as an unnecessary block to progress,' he says with pursed lips. 'One local municipality has approved a plan for population to grow from 6000 to 80,000 in the next ten years and others are fastforwarding similarly aggressive development plans. This area that was burned is extremely attractive for real estate investors. What they don't understand or care about is that this area is not only of great importance for biodiversity and the flora and fauna in the reserve, this particular area is of historical interest also. Did you notice the C-shaped grooves on the earth as you walked? You walked along one of them.' The whole group nods and grunts in the affirmative. He points again to the map, to a green swathe of flat-lands at the base of

the mountains, where many semi-circle grooves in the earth can be seen, identical to the C-shaped curve of the Pinheira beach to the east of them. They look similar to concentric semi-circles or semi-circle age-rings on tree barks.

‘These grooves are an extremely rare and interesting phenomena. They mark where the sea-shore has been at different points of time over the last 4000 years. As you walked here today, you walked through 4000 years of history. That is why the Sambaqui here or indigenous burial ground is so far inland near the BR101 motorway. It used to be on the sea-edge, where most are found, but the coastline has moved outwards considerably over time. These grooves are being studied by many universities to understand the movement of the sea over this time. They are a geological treasure.’

‘Did the police find out who set the fires? Have any arrests been made?’ one walker asks indignant.

‘No,’ the presenter snorts, shaking his head, ‘nor are they likely to. To top things off, if this area is re-zoned as a residential area because of the fires, it will be environmentally unstable for people to live. It is subject to flooding and could be an area of natural disasters in the future, as is happening increasingly in the north of the state.’

There is a hushed silence among the group. All of us had seen the seen the distressing images of mass floods that killed many and left thousands homeless in the North of the Santa Catarina Coast last year.

As the presentation ends, the group disbands in a hum of indignant murmuring. I already had some idea about the destruction of the Atlantic Forest and have seen first-hand the chaotic, uncontrolled expansion of Greater Florianópolis, but to walk for an hour through a deliberately burnt nature reserve makes it viscerally real and repugnant to me. I feel nauseous as we leave the park.

## FIRST ENCOUNTERS

We pass underneath the BR101 motorway and walk onto a wide dirt road, which leads us away from the oppressive air of the park and into glorious countryside. Huge white bulls graze solitary in endless fields dotted with wild yellow flowers. The air is perfumed now by the sweet aroma of lilies and the

sound of a healthy flowing river usurps the ever-distancing sound of traffic, as we walk. The trees are heavy with fruit; pink and white guavas litter the path before us. Cida and I pick up ones that are in good condition and eat them. We pass a spattering of houses, a few are old mills now being renovated and others are wooden houses, built high off the ground, because of the rising water levels in winter on this marshy land.

Ahead of us, the group stops abruptly before a pile of rubble and a parked JCB. Next to the pile of rubbish, there is what looks like a tiny, sparse classroom. The leader of the walk F calls to someone in a house beside the classroom. Cida and I scurry up to stand next to him. A broad Guaraní man in his fifties walks towards us. He is wearing shorts and a t-shirt and he shakes hands with a few of us at the front of the group. This is the first Guaraní village I have ever visited and I am glad our guide F is here to make the introduction. I feel a shyness about stopping, uninvited, at a Guaraní village, unsure of how welcome I would be. The word Guaraní means warrior and I have no idea if these warriors are peaceful now or not.

F presents M to the group — ‘this is M, the caçique or leader of Piruabá, the Massiambú indigenous community.’ M nods towards us, without saying a word. F continues, addressing us walkers. ‘Aleixo Garcia, the first European to follow the Caminho de Peabiru probably stayed with the Guaraní community in this traditional area of Massiambú, which has now been resettled by their descendants.’ I look to M for some confirmation, but he stands silently by, head down.

When the Portuguese mariner Cabral encountered Brazil in 1500, there were an estimated 2 million Guarani living along the coast and inland in the south and southeast of the land. Now there are just over 50,000. After enjoying the hospitality of the Guaraní and learning from them how to survive and thrive using local materials, the Europeans gradually took full possession of the valuable coast, pushing those Guaraní living on the coast more and more inland towards the Guaraní strongholds of Paraguay and Bolivia. Only in the last seventy years have the Guarani begun to return to their ancestral lands on the coast and their ownership of the land is still controversial and hotly disputed.

‘Are you building?’ F asks M, pointing to the JCB. ‘The government is building new houses,’ M replies quietly, almost inaudibly, his voice out of step with the huge size of his body. We stand there awkwardly for a moment, unsure

of what to say or do. M continues to look at the ground, saying nothing. Jurua, or white people, are met at the periphery of the community, as was mostly done five hundred years ago also. Colonial European officials marveled at the Guaraní bringing food to them, accrediting it to the high esteem in which the Guaraní held him. Little did he know that it was a tactic used to keep the Jurua away from the sanctity of their community. F flails around for something to say. 'How many families are in the community now?' he asks. M does not look up but answers slowly, 'Thirteen families.' He does not elaborate, so F asks another staccato-ed question. 'What does Pirarúpa mean in Portuguese?' 'Fish Scale,' M answers, almost under his breath.

Unsure of what to ask next, we take our leave from the caçique, walking away from the awkward, monosyllabic conversation. This is the first indigenous community that I have encountered on the Caminho de Peabiru and I feel an ocean of distance between me and them. During my research over the last couple of months about the Guaraní culture and spirituality, I felt such a sense of solidarity and warmth towards them, romanticising them somehow. Although I knew that the Guaraní no longer live in houses made of mud and straw, nor dress in any way that distinguishes them from other Brazilians, I had read that they continue largely on the periphery of society and have kept certain elements of their culture. As I walk on in a glum silence, I admit to myself that I had hoped for an invitation to join them around their communal fire and a chance to hear their own version of the tale of Aleixo Garcia. I imagine the Portuguese Aleixo walking before me now — his broad, bare back burnt dark from seven years of living in the South American sun with the Guaraní at their village here. What a relief it must have been for this shipwrecked sailor, who had lost his whole world, to be welcomed into the life of the Guaraní. As I imagine him, his hair hangs down his tattooed back; intricate swirling designs made in the dark blue colour of the jenipapo berry. I imagine him turning to reassure me and I see his lower lip is pierced with a tembetá, a long strip of metal that tells me he has been initiated into Guaraní manhood. His eyes are shining, charismatic. I almost hear his words on the gentle breeze: 'They only told me of the Candire in the West, the origin of their gold and silver after I had proven myself, planting and hunting with them for seven years and marrying a Guaraní woman who bore me a son,' he seems to whisper to me through the ages, 'and that was before we Europeans had spent five hundred years

trying to annihilate them. Be patient, Juruá. Enter slowly and respectfully into Guarani time and wisdom.'

During my seven years of living in Brazil, I have noticed that most local people have been as blind as I was to the Guarani presence. Those who mentioned them to me most often dismissed them as a lost race. 'They live off free food and a stipend from the government and live in filth,' I have often heard. 'They have become lazy and have lost their old ways. They don't plant food even when they have land and their schools and houses are falling apart. They hang around town centres, looking for a free shot of alcohol or to sell their handicrafts. They neglect their children, letting them smoke from an early age and letting them run around with their hair unkempt and snotty-nosed.' When I asked these people, all admitted however that they had never actually visited an indigenous village personally. As I got to know people better, some admitted that they have some indigenous blood. In general, it was admitted and not celebrated. Many if not most Brazilians, even in these strongly European enclaves of the south of Brazil, do have some indigenous blood. Indigenous women were mostly taken by force, sometimes even lassoed into submission by the cowboys of colonial Brazil. People in general seem hesitant to discuss their indigenous bloodlines and most are unaware and uninterested in them. All the while, all of us here in Brazil, most often without knowing, use Guarani words, eat Guarani traditional food and stomp unawares on Guarani medicinal plants and indigenous sacred sites. Now, I feel aware of the chasm of ignorance that divides me from the Guarani.

As we walk further along the dirt road towards the BR101 motorway, one of the walkers interrupts my internal whirrings. 'The only time there was real partnership between the Guarani and the European was in the Jesuit Missions,' he confides to me.

I nod my head at him with interest. 'I saw the film 'The Mission' when I was 11 years old and it somehow called me to South America. I am hoping to visit the missions in the south as part of my pilgrimage,' I tell him.

'The Jesuit missions were a great achievement of mankind, a form of Catholic communism,' he continues with great pride, 'they spanned from the South of Brazil, through Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay and even Bolivia, with food distributed fairly and universal access to the school, church and medical care.'

I listen to him, not questioning his interpretation. I still know so very little about the Guaraní.

We turn off the dirt road and come to the verge of the BR101 motorway on the top of Morro dos Cavalos, Horse's Mountain. The passing traffic nearly knocks me over. Trucks hurtle past, swaying dangerously. The smell of rotten fish spikes the air. The day before, a truck carrying a cargo of fresh fish over this steep mountain pass overturned, splattering hundreds of fish along the ditch. The truck has been removed but the stench bears silent witness to the accident.

Three metres from the edge of this national highway, Guaraní children play football barefoot and attend classes in their neglected school building. They breathe the putrid air of carbon monoxide and dust, their delicious peels of laughter drowned out by the drone of traffic. Itaty is the name of this second Guaraní village on the Caminho de Peabiru. Itaty means White Stone. Five hundred years of white stones have pummelled and pushed them until all that is left for them is to cling to the edge of Horse's Mountain at the razor edge of the BR101 motorway. The ancestral land of this village was slowly reclaimed between 1930 and 1950, by a family guided by their aged grandmother along the Caminho de Peabiru in search of Yvy Marã Ey, the Guaraní paradise.

I cross over the footbridge and enter the indigenous school, which is teeming with Guaraní of all ages. The Camino de Santiago association delivered a post-walk meal earlier in the day and it is a generous spread laid out on the table before us. The Guaraní women and children hug the table, ignoring the Jurua around them and concentrate solely on buttering and eating slices of white bread and drinking coffee from plastic cups. The Guaraní men hang to the sides, leaning on pillars and watching the newcomers warily. All are wearing jeans and t-shirts and the old women pass by silently in long skirts. The children are unkempt, barefoot and raggle-tagged. They play with a little mongrel dog as they eat, passing him between them giggling. I am delighted to be eating with the Guaraní, here in their school on the periphery of their village. When I ask questions about the dog, the children shy away from me, turning back into the group, laughing hysterically.

Cida and I meet E the young, female *çaçique* or village leader. We thank her for receiving us and congratulate her on being the female *çaçique* of her community. I was inspired by Dilma, she jokes quietly, referring to Brazil's first



female President of Brazil. K speaks fluent Portuguese and has studied in the local federal university on a specially designed indigenous teacher training course. She tells us that her first school as a child was outside of the community and she demonstrates an ease and gentle banter with us that strikes me as unusual for an indigenous woman, while hugely gratifying. I ask her if the children speak Portuguese. 'These little ones speak only Guaraní,' she says pointing to a gaggle of three year olds, 'and they learn at the school mostly in Guaraní in their early years. The older women do not speak Portuguese. My mother and grandmother never spoke a word of Portuguese. Now with television, the children all hear Portuguese, so they pick it up quickly.'

'Is this village connected to the Massiambu village that we passed earlier?' I ask her.

'In Guaraní, the word for village is *tekoá*, a place where you can *be*, a place where we can practice our traditional way of life, our *ñande reko*, 'E explains gently, 'yes, we are connected to them. We Guaraní are more than 250,000 in South America but we all know each other from here all the way to the places you call Paraguay and Bolivia and we know where each one fits into the community. We are a people who move from *tekoá* to *tekoá*, a *tapejara*, a walking people. I was born in the far west of the state, in Chapecó and lived in the community in Massiambu when we first came here to this coastal area.'

'We just passed there after walking through a burnt part of the nature reserve,' I tell her. 'The fire was bad,' she says, lowering her voice, 'our Atlantic Forest, or what little is left of it, needs protecting as much as the Amazon that you foreigners are so interested in saving.' Her voice was calm but laced with a hint of defiance. I nod silently in agreement with her.

Listening to E talk in her confident, gentle voice bridges somewhat the distance I had felt between me and the Guaraní by the brisk meeting with M, the *çaçique* from Massiambú. As the *tekoá*'s female *çaçique* and a fluent Guaraní and Portuguese speaker, E is a representative of the living Guaraní, not shackled by my romanticised tourist view from the film 'The Mission' nor by the dismissive colonial view that still abounds here in the South of Brazil.

(Years late, I meet E again in the *tekoá*. She now uses her Guaraní name openly with the *jurua* Kerexu Yxapyry which means dewdrop. Ater being *çaçique*,

she got involved with local politics as a means of protecting the rights of her people and the Atlantic Forest and has become known nationally and internationally. She was appointed head of the Secretariat for the Indigenous Land Rights under the Federal Ministry for Indigenous People. As we have a drink of water together in the tekoá, she tells me that since becoming involved with politics, she has been the constant target of threats and attacks on her community and family. Behind her, her mother is tidying up the kitchen — a short, silent woman. When I am introduced to her, she offers me her hand and I notice the sleeve of her other arm hangs empty. Kerexu looks at me challengingly with a look forged in deep suffering. She tells me that her mother lost her hand when she was attacked by men with knives one night walking home. The attackers had mistaken her for her daughter.)

#### COLONIAL COAST

A couple of weeks later, Tahmid and I take up our walk again at the entrance to the Itaty tekoá. A couple of teenage Guaraní are leaving the tekoá as we start off. They are both wearing baggy jeans, t-shirts and new trainers and have dyed the top of their hair blond. They are part of a global culture of adolescence. As we stop them and shake hands, I wonder to myself whether these teenagers genuinely seek to continue the Guaraní way of life or whether they want to integrate into modern Brazilian society. We ask them if we can go through the indigenous tekoá to walk down to the beach below. One of the boys is from another Guaraní tekoá further inland and says he doesn't know where the path leads. The other shakes his head. We nod goodbye and walk instead along the verge of the BR101 motorway, which is a harsh wake-up call on a Saturday morning. There is no hard shoulder and certainly no footpath along the motorway and the gush of air from the trucks hurtling past at over 100km an hour nearly knocks us over. After 200 metres, the road bends mercifully down towards the village of Enseada do Brito. There are houses on each side of the paved road, but in the gaps between them, we can see the sea, riled up and foaming with each crash of its waves. The sea is awash with blue and white plastic floats that are used in the cultivation of oysters and mussels and beyond them, further out to sea, the south end of the island of Florianópolis is already visible. This is a protected bay with the mountainous península to the right, the Cambirela mountain behind and the island of Florianópolis in front, protecting it from the wild Atlantic. The oysters and mussels are less tasty from

this region because the easy, protected life has left them fatty rather than muscly. Adverse conditions, difficulty and risk make for a tastier life, it seems.

A south wind blows through the residential streets as we walk, chilling both of us. The surroundings are not particularly interesting, as the houses block out the seaview for the most part, so we fall into conversation. ‘What a pity the Guaraní won’t let us walk through their tekoá,’ I lament to Tahmid, ‘last time, we were received at the school at the edge of the tekoá and I would really like to see the inside of the tekoá itself.’ Tahmid is third generation Brazilian, his great-grandfathers arrived here from Italy and Spain. ‘There is still huge mistrust of the European descendants,’ he says, ‘the indigenous are still harshly judged and badly treated by many and remember, Indians are still killed as they protect their ancestral land to this very day.’

‘Surely, that hasn’t happened for hundreds of years,’ I retort. ‘No, it still happens and was a regular practice much more recently than that,’ he informs me, ‘at the time of my great-grandfather, about a hundred years ago, my mother tells a story about a group of settlers who fought against the Guaraní in the south of this state. The Guaraní were apparently robbing from their crops of corn and beans and provisions of the liquor cachaça, so a group of settlers came together to deal with them. They allowed the Guaraní to steal a big quantity of food and cachaça and then waited while they had their night-time jeroky celebrations. When they were in a deep sleep, helped no doubt by the cachaça which has a strong effect on them, the men swooped down on their village and killed as many as they could. When they were returning to their homes, they came across a little indigenous girl and they allowed her to run away. She however alerted another village that came to avenge the death of their people, which led to another bloody fight.’ ‘Sounds like the wild west from the films,’ I say in disbelief. ‘It *was* like that,’ he insists ‘and that wasn’t so long ago and it went on for hundreds of years. The last bugreiros, or indian-killers, were active in the mountains only fifty years ago. To this day, armed henchmen of big business threaten and kill Guaraní that are trying to reclaim their ancestral land. I imagine it is hard for the Guaraní to forgive what has happened and the violence that continues to this day. I can really understand that they don’t invite us into their homes.’

I think about Ireland and the four hundred years that we spent under British domination before we became a Republic in 1949. How deeply I felt animosity

towards the British empire when I was a child growing up in Ireland of the 1970s and 1980s, hearing the stories of repression of our language and culture, the potato famine that killed a third of the Irish population while the wealthy absentee British landlords exported food from our ports, the Irish martyrs who were shot dead or hanged in 1798 and 1916 and more recent murders such as Bloody Sunday in the 1970s. When I was a child, it seemed that a kind of impersonal anger and animosity towards the British had seeped into my blood. When I went to work in London in my early twenties, I felt a sense of insecurity, unsure of whether or not the English would discriminate against me. Cautionary tales were often rehearsed in Ireland of signs appearing at the doors of English pubs saying — No dogs, No Irish. When I met my late husband Alastair, who was born in England, I had to consciously overcome my aversion to English accents to open up to him. My efforts proved so successful that I fell in love and married him, accent and all.

Alastair himself had no idea of the unspoken animosity that many Irish felt towards the English. On his first visit to Ireland, he got talking to the local taxi-driver, who engaged him in some banter and asked him why he was doing in the country. Alastair told him that he was coming to visit his Irish girlfriend for the first time. When he mentioned my unusual Irish name and said that I had seven siblings with equally traditional Irish names, the taxi-driver started to shake his head. When Alastair said that we had all been educated through the Irish language, the taxi-driver suggested, only half-joking, that Alastair return to the airport with him and forfeit the whole trip. When Alastair arrived at my house, I was waiting for him at the gate. He gave me a quick hug and told me what the taxi-driver had said. ‘Will your parents mind that I’m English?’ he asked, clearly flustered. ‘Don’t worry,’ I reassured him with a smile, ‘I’ve told them all you’re Scottish.’

Alastair was welcomed full-heartedly into my family as he was, the English-born son of a Scottish man and English woman. The story of his first visit quickly became one of his funny stories that he liked to tell to illicit laughter from friends and family in Ireland and the UK. Like a lot of humour though, it hits on a kernel of lingering contention. It hits on the impersonal animosity that was still latent even decades after we were no longer being treated like second class citizens on our own soil.

I wonder now to what extent the Guaraní feel still the history of their struggle and the ongoing challenges they face. They experienced illnesses that

wiped out huge parts of their community. They were hunted and killed in their forests. They were massacred by bugreiros to clear land for the colonists, train tracks or roads. They were unwillingly herded into government reserves and even today, they are engaged in a violent struggle to reclaim their ancestral land. They have endured five hundred years of colonial efforts to separate and alienate them from their land, their way-of-life, their spirituality.

It seems to me that most Brazilians, like Alastair coming to Ireland, are totally unaware of the volcano of unredeemed injustice that lies ignored and unaddressed under the flimsy exterior of the Brazilian flag. In Brazil there is a saying — the one who strikes the blow, forgets; the one who receives the blow, remembers. I wonder if the injustices in Ireland in the past continued into the present time, would I invite a British woman, fascinated by my ‘exotic’ heritage and aping my ancient traditions, to freely walk through my home?

The path winds down towards a colonial style catholic church looking out on an unkempt square and beyond that, the sea. Many crumbling colonial-style houses, with their low roofs, thick square windows and white-washed exteriors huddle around the square, hanging on to their Azorian culture by the fingernails. Over a few doorways, clay or cloth doves are a reminder of the recent traditional Azorian celebration of the Holy Spirit.

Enseada de Brito was the third azorian village established in the area of Greater Florianópolis, when the large scale settlement by Azorian couples began in 1750. In front of the church, there is a mosaic depicting the caravels, with crosses on their sails, arriving across the Atlantic, to the backdrop of the rising sun in the east. The image of the caravels reminds me of the lanterns at the boys’ school that shook me to attention last year and I once again recognise how my boys and I are the most recent wave of Europeans in the ongoing colonisation of Brazil.

## AWAKENING

We walk along the seafront now, but the strip of sand is almost non-existent and the sharp southerly wind whips us as we move. We return to the cobbled streets of Praia de Fora and Pontal, but there is no joy in walking through dusty streets of rundown villages. The only pleasure is to look behind the villages to the Cambirela mountain range behind them. The lush eternal green beckons us from the busy streets.

Tahmid, trying to cheer me up, points the mountain out to me. 'Do you see anything in the mountain?' he asks. I look up and see nothing more than uneven peaks of a mountain range. 'I can't see anything,' I say, dismissively. 'Look again,' he urges me. I sigh and look again, calming myself. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, bringing my attention to the crown chakra as I breathe in, sensing the exhale through the other six chakras, one by one.

A few minutes pass before I open my eyes and look again. Suddenly, the profile of a woman comes alive in the mountain peaks before me. There she is, lying on a slope, reclining, as if resting, basking in the slits of sun shining down on her. My heart skips a beat. I make out the delicate curve of her snub nose, the deep-set indent of her eyes, the slightly protruding lips, the slope of her bosom and her hands on her chest that roll down to the hill of her feet. I feel a lurch in my heart, a love for her. I recognise her. She is *me*, resting in the sun.

At her feet, a scurry of ant-like humans have built houses and shops over generations, but if she woke up and got to her feet, she would flatten them in seconds, without even noticing.

I walk on in a haze, a light switched on within me. I name her silently 'Manika in the mountain'. Nhandecy, mother earth, has been awakened within me.

## TOMÉ POINT

We are nearing the periphery of the urban sprawl of Greater Florianópolis and the air about us has changed. We will need to walk a few kilometers along the BR101 motorway to get to Tomé Point — the end of our day's walk. The thought of walking along the motorway however fills me now with growing lethargy. Tomé Point is named after Tomé de Souza, who was the first governor general of Brazil. The Caminho de Peabiru had been used by Europeans since Aleixo Garcia first followed it in 1524 but Tomé de Souza ordered the trail to be closed thirty years later in 1553, on pain of death for any Portuguese caught using it. This sacred trail had in thirty years become a well-worn informal commercial route between the Portuguese on the Brazilian coast and the Spanish colonies in Paraguay and beyond. This was enabling contraband to flourish and causing the tax coffers of the Portuguese in Brazil to suffer and represented a possible threat of attack by the Spanish on Portuguese lands. The first three hundred years of colonisation in the



South of Brazil were an ongoing battle for ownership between Spain and Portugal.

The early colonists believed that one Tomé, São Tomé or St. Thomas, opened the Caminho and it is therefore apt that another Tomé, Tomé de Souza, closed it.

As we arrive at the thin stretch of sand that is Tomé's point, we take a bus back home. Relieved to escape the noise and precarious conditions of walking along the BR-101, I decide to avoid the outskirts of Greater Florianópolis and take up the Caminho de Peabiru on the verdant island of Florianópolis.

#### WINTER SOLSTICE ON MEIMBIPE

The island of Florianópolis, or Meimbipe as it was called by the carijós Guarani that lived here in 1500, is a Peabiru pilgrim's delight; a glut of paradise beaches, shady forest trails and indigenous treasures. In Guarani mythology, Yvy Marã Ey, paradise, is an island, just as St. Brendan described the paradise he found in the 7th Century. Many islands all along the Santa Catarina stretch of the Caminho de Peabiru have evocative names, such as Coral island, Parrot island, Spiders' island, Beautiful Port island, Tree-filled island, Campeche island and most of the intricate rock art that characterises this sacred coastline can be found on their eastern headlands. My third son was born here two years ago. As it is for the Guarani, Florianópolis is a special place for our family too.

The June winter solstice is approaching. For the Guarani, whose year is separated into the two seasons of old time and new time, the winter solstice is the maximum point of the ara ymã, the old time.

It is due to be celebrated on Florianópolis island at a Pedra do Frade, or Priest's Stone, a huge stone that resembles a man or priest that stares eastward out to sea, towards the Guarani paradise Yvy Mara Ey. This stone is aligned with the sunrise at the winter solstice. There are about 50 Priest's Stones in Brazil, some of which are called Ita Sumé by the indigenous people, or 'Sumé's Stone'. Could this be the Peabiru's Sumé immortalised in rock formations?

The Priest's Stone is on an easterly point that penetrates the Atlantic. These points are called Iparavapy by the Guarani — the endpoint of the earth and the beginning of destiny. It rekindles in me the memory of Finisterre, on the western

tip of Galicia in Spain, where I went after finishing the Caminho de Santiago in my early twenties. Finisterre too means the end of the earth. I imagine Guarani pilgrims 1000 years ago standing at the end of their earth, looking expectantly eastward towards Yvy Marã Ey, while their European counterparts stood at Finisterre, searching westward beyond the horizon. The two, on the same search, separated by the chasm of the Atlantic ocean as we are now separated by the chasm of five hundred years of violence and deep mistrust.

At 5 a.m. on the solstice morning, my friend Cida and I drive through the mists on the Lagoa hill to go on a walk to a Priest' Stone to watch the solstice sunrise over the Atlantic. Tahmid stays behind to mind the children. As we start on our trail, we are in a deep darkness. We take out our mobile phones and use them as flickering torches to help us find the path. It is a trail through thick Atlantic Forest, by the edge of the trickle of a river. I read a sign with my phonelight, which tells me we are on 'The Prayer Trail'. We follow the trail, tripping from time to time over the gnarled roots along the way. A rustle in the bushes to my right makes my heart thump faster and I have to exhale deeply, before I can keep walking. I imagine snakes and spiders in every dark corner and the weak light from the phone does little to dispel my fears. I walk slowly, holding the phone in front of my face, which shines a thin light on the path. My raised hand also protects my face from the night cobwebs that might have been built across the path. The climb is steep and our breathing becomes louder and louder with each step. Soft pink light is creeping into the sky and it is getting easier and easier to see the path. A cockerel crows in the distance, followed by echoing howls of waking dogs.

We come out of the dense forest on the hilltop and I sigh with relief and pleasure. The swirling northeast coast of Florianópolis lies pristine at our feet, pummelled by the roaring Atlantic breaking over its rocks. There are three rocks before on the hilltop, creating a miniature dolmens as we have all over Ireland. A wooden sign beside the rocks tells us we have arrived at the 'prayer table.' We kneel and say a silent prayer of thanks for the vigorous walk. When I open my eyes again, I can see now a tiny fishing boat chugging out to sea, another early bird catching its worm. We stand up and walk further on until we reach a clearing where there is a circle of Stones, a replica of a Guarani sunclock like we saw on the cliff in Garopaba. There is nobody else on the hilltop. There are only some megaliths dotting the clearing, large rocks aligned to the solstices and equinoxes, looking

eastward. I try to work out which stone is the Pedra do Frade, or Priest's Stone to position myself for the rising of the sun. The sky is turning from black to dark blue as light diffuses night. Above us, the stars still create the image of an Emu with dark plumage in the east, as it gobbles star-eggs, proclaiming the Guarani winter. The southern cross holds tight to the emu's head, hesitant to hand over the skies to the approaching dawn.

While we wait, Cida prepares a chimarrão and we share its bitter warmth between us to dispel the chill on this early morning hilltop. We sit on a raised wooden platform with a 360° view. To the north, naked beaches lie curled in sleep. To the west, the Lake of Conception has begun to wake up, dispelling the mists that engulf its mountainpass. To the south, green lush hills nestle around sandy shores and to the east, the endless ocean, dark blue now with flashes of white waves breaking on hidden rocks. On the wooden dias, the direction and distance of great astronomical monuments throughout the world are recorded. Stonehenge is 10,000 km from where we sit, the Mexican Sun Pyramid is 7,500 km away and further on in our Caminho de Peabiru, Machu Pichu is just under 3,000 km to the west.

Below us to the south, I can see the Gravatá Point, a coastal outcrop of rocks. Somewhere on the rocks, there is an ancient engraving on the rocks, slowly eroding. The point curves like a sleeping dragon nestled into the island. Not far from the sea, there is a large, round stone, called the eye of the dragon. Within this stone, there is a ledge, where a grown person can lie, sheltered from the wind. On this solstice morning, the sun bathes the person in its crevice as it rises.

Suddenly, a red-hot ball of flames begins to ascend to the east, breaking through a low grey cloud. We fall into a reverent silence and watch as the rising sun edges its way higher and higher into the sky between the stones. One of these must be the Pedra do Frade, the Sumé Stone. All of a sudden, light spreads like a blanket thrown across the sky and the show is over. I take out my tin whistle to honour the magic morning.

Cida and I sit together, immersed in the unbroken beauty of ocean and sky. As the sun settles into daytime, we shake ourselves into activity and begin our descent down the trail. The rustles in the trees hold no threat anymore and I laugh at my earlier fears. How a flood of light changes my perspective! We arrive at the

end of the trail. The houses now have awoken, the dogs stretch and watch us with one open eye as we pass.

We walk buoyantly down towards my parked car and as we near it, another car arrives through the gate. I recognise Maninho, in the driver's seat, who owns and maintains the prayer trail we have just walked. He invites us into his little office for a cup of native marcela tea before we return home. As he prepares the tea, he tells us about his work. More than twenty years earlier, he inherited this piece of glorious land and through a series of research and prophetic dreams, discovered that the land included an indigenous astrological observatory with alignments to the solstices and equinoxes. He set up an association called IMMA to raise awareness about the archaeological treasures that his land and the island holds. He started to map indigenous lithic monuments and copy and analyse the rock art on Florianópolis island and neighbouring islands.

Cida and I walk around his office space and admire the stones with bullauncavities and the collection of axe-heads. He shows us some central gnomon stones from indigenous sun clocks and rocks pierced with holes among his treasures. 'I keep these things here for safe-keeping,' he tells us. 'We have lost so much to people who make fires in the cavities ground into the rocks, or who uproot large stones of lithic monuments to build stone walls or houses. I tried to give these artifacts to the local government so that they would be put on display in some public museum, but I went from department to department and nobody knew what to do with them. Rather than have them disappear into the bottom drawer of some grey government filing cabinet, I keep them here until there is somewhere official to display them.'

I admire his cloth reproductions of the rock art along the coast, which hang around his wooden office. I am drawn to the myriad concentric circles that adorn the cloth reproductions. 'I have made copies of all of the rock art along this 140km stretch of coast from Praia do Rosa to Porto Belo,' he tells me. He shows me a huge cloth two metres long with innumerable symbols on it. 'This one is from Tree-filled island, which is a natural reserve now, so you can't land on it. I had to go by canoe by night to make this copy. That is 19 km by canoe and all the time, I had these big roles of cloth and all of the paints that I couldn't get wet,' Maninho does not look a particularly strong man to be canoeing that distance on a dark, night sea, but his passion and determination must have willed him on. 'In fact, '

he laughs, 'I had to go twice because the first time, the cloth wasn't large enough.'

'The rock art is much older than the Guaraní presence here on the coast, right?' I ask.

'Yes. The rock art is much, much older. They were made thousands of years before the Guaraní came,' Maninho confirms.

'Do you think the rock art means anything?' I ask him, 'do you think it is a map or a message of some kind or do you think it was just a hobby, a pastime?'

He offers us a cup of tea and points to two chairs for us to sit down. 'What do you think?' he asks.

We sit down and I reflect for a moment.

'I don't know, but perhaps it is the indigenous people expressing what they saw around them, maybe they had a different kind of consciousness, more dreamlike and the beauty around them inspired a desire to create art. I read once that the symbols that they used, triangles, wavy lines, circles are all symbols that we can see hazily just as we are closing our eyes. Maybe they were at a point of evolution that they were just waking up to a more conscious state and this is what the world looked like for them.'

Maninho breathes deeply and fixes me with a stare. 'I have been studying them for over twenty years and I will tell you what I think. You will have to make up your own mind though.'

I take a gulp of tea and settle into a chair to listen.

'I think the rock art, and the Caminho de Peabiru also, was opened by a much older civilisation and then used by the Guaraní and other indigenous groups like the Jê and the Incas. In my opinion, these carvings were made by people from Atlantis around 12,000 years ago, when the earth was coming to the end of a golden age. These people had a different kind of consciousness and could read the night sky, with its constellations and planets and understood the influence of the celestial movements on life on earth, through electro-magnetic energies. We all accept that the moon has an effect on the tides, that it is replicated in women's monthly menstrual cycle and many believe that it effects our moods, so much so that we have the story of the werewolf at the full moon, right?'

Cida and I nod in silent unison.

‘All of the planets affect us, but we don’t understand how. I believe the Atlanteans who lived here thousands of years ago, like the Mayans, the druids at Stonehenge, those who built the Egyptian pyramids, among others, knew about the energy lines of the earth and the planets and how to harness them for the good of those on earth. They were a global people, aligning this strip of sacred coast here with sites on the west of South America such as Tiwanaku in Bolivia, Machu Picchu in Peru or Easter island off Chile. You know that Machu Picchu is aligned at an angle of 296° from Florianópolis and lies 2960 kilometres away? On the Summer solstice on 21st December, if you watch the sunrise over Machu Picchu, you will be looking directly in the direction of this point here in Florianópolis.’

I widen my eyes in surprise. ‘That’s where I plan to be to see the sun rise on the 21st of December this year,’ I tell him.

He nods his head. ‘It seems like this ancient civilisation had these different observational points all over the world and seemed to be reading, harnessing, balancing some electromagnetic or other type of energy.’

There is silence in the room, as Maninho sips his tea.

Still digesting what he said, Cida remarks to him, ‘I have heard about Reich and his use of orgone energy. I know people are starting to use technologies that harness positive electromagnetic energy to cure illnesses. To be honest though, I don’t really understand much of it.’

‘Me neither,’ I admit.

‘These technologies were known and better understood thousands of years ago. In Europe you have chambers designed to harness these energies on certain days of the year. Reich and others have been rediscovering ancient knowledge. Most people think that the history of wisdom has been linear, with people getting more and more intelligent over time. I however disagree.’

‘We celebrated the birth of my youngest son Eoin at Newgrange in Ireland,’ I tell him ‘an ancient temple and passage tomb that is 5000 years old and is decorated with abstract art including circles and spirals, losanges, somewhat like the rock art here on the coast. At dawn on the winter solstice in December, the



passage and chamber are alit with sunlight that enters through a roof-box over the entrance.'

'That is similar to what happens here in the dragon's eye on Gravatá point that you could spot from the top of the prayer trail above, though it is considerably less elaborate here than in Ireland,' Maninho says, nodding his head, 'I hope that your son has the same fortune in life that people of the ancient civilisation of Atlantis had. They were a civilisation where people lived for up to 1000 years. When people talk about the fountain of eternal youth or about paradise as a land of eternal youth or no evil, they are talking about this ancient civilisation, this golden age. This is the ancestral memory that we all share.'

I smile at him as I tell him — 'we talk about Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth in Ireland and the Guaraní talk of their Yvy Mara Ey, the land of the no evil. Both the Guaraní and the Irish situated it somewhere in the Atlantic, where Plato said Atlantis was. Neither seem to have found this paradise though. The Europeans came in their caravels and found Brazil, beautiful, yes, but also challenging and soul-destroying at times, and the Guaraní were taken off as slaves back to Europe.'

Maninho sips his tea and nods.

'So, what do you think happened to Atlantis? Did it sink to the bottom of the ocean in the flood that survives in the myths of so many different cultures today?' I ask.

'Well, for me, this island of Florianópolis is a piece of Atlantis, so some of the land itself survives, even if the advanced Atlantean race died out,' he begins, causing my eyes to widen.

'My hypothesis is that the rock art includes a message about the mutations in the DNA of ancient Atlanteans, either naturally or through cross-breeding with other types of humanoids or some movement away from their connection with the divine. I believe that these mutations led to problems in fertility and the fall of the Atlantean civilization.'

'There are approximately 26 sites of rock art along the coast from Praia do Rosa to Porto Belo. I believe this rock art provides information on the genesis of man, similar to ancient knowledge encoded in the bible. These repeated concentric circles could represent the big bang, the expansion of the universe or cells going

through a process of development or mutation. Look at these symbols from Ilha do Coral, Coral island,' Maninho points to the wall at the entrance to his office, which is painted with a reproduction of the rock art, 'this is a summary of the situation of man. See here, this stick man has the eternal knowledge within him, represented by these vertical lines stemming from his chest, but he is limited by time, represented by this circle, and space, represented by this graph-like symbol. He faces the challenge of being an eternal presence in a mortal, physical body.'

I breathe in deeply, as his words echo within me.

'That's why the rock art was hidden in inaccessible spots all along the coast: to preserve it. It is facing east because the east means knowledge. If you want to know what a day will be like, you have to see the sun rise. That will tell you everything you need to know about what is to come that day.'

'So you think the concentric circles are a symbol of the big bang?' I repeat.

'They could be. Or they could represent a cell as I said. Another possibility is that they are the symbol of Atlantis. You know that when Plato wrote of Atlantis, he said that the city was built in concentric circles? These people had knowledge that we no longer have,' Maninho says thoughtfully, 'They knew about the world's natural rhythms. The world moves in eras, but we have forgotten all about them and live out of synch with them. We can't read the signs for what is to come.'

'And what is to come then?' I ask, intrigued.

'We are entering again into a new golden era, 2000 years of light. But this paradise is only accessible to those who have eyes to appreciate it. What we should be asking ourselves is if we are ready to welcome this new era. Are we ready to embrace it and live it? We have an incredible opportunity right now. That's why you are feeling the call to explore your spirituality, to go on your Caminho de Peabiru. Most people though are concerned with surviving, educating their kids or buying their second car. So little energy is focused on our spiritual readiness to live in paradise. In a way, we are already living in paradise, but we don't open our eyes to see it.'

#### CELTIC CELEBRATION WITH THE LITTLE SAINT

In the northeastern coast of the island of Florianópolis, there is a majestic

beach rounded on each end by two rocky outcrops, called Santinho, or Little Saint. On its northern rocks, there is a sanctuary, a thin place where spirit is more palpible. The sanctuary is a prayer of dark imposing rock standing resolute against the crazed crashing of the Atlantic ocean.

The beach got its name from an ancient rock carving of a man with a halo, 80 cm in height at the heart of the sanctuary. Perhaps it was a representation of Sumé himself who arrived walking on the water from beyond the horizon of this ocean. The sanctuary was a place of worship for the indigenous people and after them, the azorian fishermen who colonized the coast paid homage to the little Saint, leaving flowers, candles and other offerings for him. In the 1970s, a Jesuit priest cut off the slab of ancient art and sent it to be 'examined' by the Catholic Church. Despite the outrage of the local community, it has never been recovered. Maybe if the Jesuits had equated it with St. Thomas, it would not have suffered such an unabashed act of vandalism.

On both sides of the Little Saint beach, there is awe-inspiring rock art. The rock art on the south side of the beach is easy to see, as the huge five-star hotel that dominates the beach has erected a shelter to protect them and several information boards about the rock art in the area. This is in sharp contrast to the local government's lack of interest or investment in protecting and providing safe access to this incredible heritage. This hotel was the first place I ever stayed on the island of Florianópolis over ten years ago, when I came on a weekend visit to Florianópolis. At the time, I lived in Rio de Janeiro with my late husband, who was my boyfriend at the time. I was accompanying him on a work trip to the island, where he was giving a talk to a group of businessmen at the hotel. While he was working, I scrambled along the rocks and found the protected inscriptions on the south side.

After admiring the rock art, I walked the length of the beach to the outcrop on the other side. This is where the image of the little Saint had been and where more, unsignposted rock art can be found. Ten years ago, I knew nothing of this art, but it was just here on these rocks that I sat in a burst of inspiration and wrote my diary. I wrote two impassioned entries on two sides of one sheet of paper, as I sat there. The first was one I would look at time and time again after my husband's death. He was my boyfriend at the time and I wrote about how much I loved him, how sure I was that I wanted to marry him and how excited I was about our life

together. On the other side of the page, I articulated clearly what I wanted to do with my life. Although I was working at the time in an NGO in the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, work I valued and had dreamed for years of doing, I wrote in my diary that my ideal life was to spend it having adventures and writing about them.

I remember this second entry into my diary as I make my way over the dunes to the northern corner of Santinho beach, one Sunday morning. Earlier this year, I published my first book *Loves Last Gift* and am deeply immersed in the Caminho de Peabiru, the adventure described in this, my second book. Perhaps I have been walking along paths opened by Sumé for longer than I imagine.

I have been invited to take part in a ceremony here on the northern corner of Santinho beach with a group of Celtic Druids. I can hardly believe that I have stumbled across Celtic Druids here on the eastern coast of Brazil, but life is teaching me more and more to be open to any possibility. A group of ten of us meet in the dunes at the bottom of the rocky outcrop to celebrate the Celtic feast of Bealtaine together at the Santinho sanctuary.

The main Druid is a septegenarian who is inconspicuously dressed and has a distinct twinkle in his eye. Two other, younger Druids are dressed in light metal armour, already roasting in the early morning sun. One of them carries a large ceremonial sword, wrapped in a thick blanket. I am introduced to the small group and I thank them for including me. 'We are delighted to have a native Irish representative,' the main Druid I. tells me, welcoming me with a smile. Everyone else in the group is Brazilian. As we walk along the rocky outcrop towards the sanctuary, I. points out a large slab of yellow arenite rock. 'There are unusual types of rock here, this yellow arenite and the dark black diabase strips are unusual,' he says, 'possibly there is some kind of fault line or energy line here. I imagine that thousands of years ago, the people had a consciousness that allowed them to sense this kind of thing.' As we near the sanctuary, he turns to us and in a gentle voice says, 'now let's leave things of the world behind us and enter into this sanctuary of spirit.'

As I. speaks, he is standing by a diabase slab of stone that faces eastward out to the sea. Engraved into the stone, I can make out two faint, eroding triangular shapes one above the other, that meet at their thin tips. Something in my heart jumps. I am struck simultaneously by its beauty and its frailty. The shape reminds

me of an hourglass and time, I realise, is running out.

‘This is the portal, the entrance point into the sanctuary,’ I. tells us. ‘On the morning of the summer solstice in December, when the rising sun hits this mark, you can make out a similar, smaller figure here to the right of that symbol.’ We all touch the rock in reverence, a sense of mystery emanating from it. ‘May I play my tin whistle?’ I ask quietly. He nods at me and smiles. As I play, the music flows over the rocks and the sacred engravings and moves out to mingle with the wind and the sea. We walk on to a little stream and one of the druids in armour takes a cowhorn from his belt and scoops up some water in it. He hands it to I., who pours it into a large seashell. He holds the shell up to the sun rising in the east, before drinking it. He invites all of us to do the same. I take a drink of water from the shell in hushed silence. A younger druid hands out tiny crystals to throw into the stream in gratitude for allowing us to enter the sanctuary. When we have all thrown our crystals into the river in a respectful silence, he adds. ‘Now, pick a flower to offer to the sanctuary in the blessing. This sanctuary is feminine and women love to receive beautiful gifts.’ I pick a yellow wildflower, twirling its stem between my fingers as we walk. We clamber up the rocks and I see some faint square inscriptions, that look printed on the rock. As we come to a large opening on the rocks, I. points out the defaced slab where the image of the little Saint used to be. Next to it, there are several other faint inscriptions of losanges and circles and emanating lines. ‘I never noticed those before,’ I say to him, bewildered, ‘even though I have been here a few times.’ He laughs, reminding me, ‘the mystery reveals itself bit by bit, when you are ready for it. Further along the headland, there are even more inscriptions, but it is very dangerous to get to them.’ There are some cascades of simple diamond shapes that remind me of strings of DNA and more joined triangles. I also count eleven concentric circles, eroding quickly. Are these a symbol of Atlantis? Or the symbol of the life-giving force, the sun? Why, I wonder, are there eleven? If the little saint chipped off the adjacent rock was St. Thomas, could these eleven circles depict the other eleven disciples of Christ? I quieten the questions within me, breathing deeply.

I. asks us all to take off our shoes in respect of the sacred ground of this outdoor sanctuary. He then lays a cloth on the ground, with each corner aligned with one of the cardinal points. In the east, he lays down a small dagger, in the north corner, a straw ceremonial knife, in the west a piece of crystal and in the

south corner, he lays down a stone. In the centre, he invites us to put the flowers that we have picked and anything else we would like blessed during the ceremony. The group bends over the cloth and when we stand back, the centre is filled with two tin whistles, a set of Celtic runes, my cross amulet, a necklace and several small crystals.

I. has his eyes closed now and seems to be meditating. We all stand in a circle around the cloth in reverent silence. I. takes the large sword from the blanket and points it out to the sea to the east. 'In the east, may there be peace.' Then he points it to the north 'In the north, may there be peace.' He blesses each of the four corners, before calling for peace in the whole world. He points his sword upwards, 'We ask for energy from the world above,' As he lowers his sword, he says 'and from the middle world and the world below.' 'We ask for energy from all four directions.' We breathe in the energy of these seven sacred spaces and exhale a sense of peace for our own lives and for the world around us. I. picks us some cress growing between the rocks and offers each of us a piece to eat, as we stand in the circle.

We all swallow the cress and close our eyes in silence. I. breaks the silence after a couple of minutes, by passing the facilitation of the group to one of the young druids in armour, who, on cue, lights two fires in little clay pots filled with pure alcohol and sets them apart at a metre's distance. 'Bealtaine is the time for blessing new projects,' the young druids tells us, 'we ask these fires to burn away bad fortune and the bad within us and we move through the fires for the blessing of vitality. As you go through the fires, leave the bad things behind and bring some projects with you that you want to bring to fruition in the next year. As you go through the fire, the bard will play for us.' One of the group, a red-haired uncannily Irish looking young Brazilian, takes up his tin whistle from the cloth and begins to play.

I am first to walk between the two fires. 'Please burn away my ignorance of the Guaraní, of nature, of the history that surrounds me and my resistance to all of it that leaves me uncomfortable,' I ask. I breathe deeply. 'And may Sumé guide me on this Caminho de Peabiru.'

Everyone passes through the fires in turn. As the final person walks through, the young druid invites us to thank the earth and the sea for their blessing. We



throw the small crystals from the cloth onto the rocks behind us and we throw our yellow flowers out to sea.

The young druid signals for us to sit down around the cloth. 'Now I will read the ogham runes to see what the gods think of our offerings today.' Ogham, also called the Celtic Tree Alphabet, is an early-medieval alphabet which was used to write the Irish language more than 1500 years ago. As I sit waiting for him to interpret the runes, the sun plays on my face. I sit there in the sun's blaze and marvel. What a bagatelle life is to bring me to this sacred spot on the east coast of Brazil, with a group of Brazilian Celtic Druids, reading Irish ogham runes. What an unpredictable adventure. I savour the taste of serendipity and laugh to myself.

The young druid puts a collection of small engraved strips of wood into a leather bag and shakes it. 'This first rune will tell us how our offerings are received today,' he begins. He pulls out a strip of wood. 'The apple-tree,' he says, after examining it carefully, 'this is a symbol of beauty and divinity, meaning that they have approved our offerings.' 'The second and third runes are to see what gift they offer us in return and how we should use it.' He reaches into the bag again and pulls out two runes, the black hawthorn and the vine. He sits in silence for a moment, closing his eyes. 'The vine represents the ability to see the truth. The black hawthorn is a symbol of great change. In return for our offerings, we are being given the gift of seeing the truth of the world, so that we can help in the great change, symbolised by this year's summer solstice.' We all sit in silence around him. He looks up at us, with sincere joy. 'We are at a time of great change in the world, where we are moving from the Era of Pisces, the symbol of Christianity, the era of *believing*, towards the Era of Aquarius or the big cauldron, the symbol of druidism, the era of *knowing* through personal, direct experience.'

He ends the ceremony with a wish for us all, 'may we all allow ourselves to see the truth that the divine is showing us, so that we can complete the mission that we have been given at this time of change.'

## GUARANI GUIDE

There is a fire on the eastern Brazilian coast, to the north of the island of Florianópolis, that never goes out. It is the sacred fire in the mud and wattle *opy*

or prayer house of the Guarani tekoá in the municipality of M'Biguaçu, on the Brazilian mainland, just north of the Island of Florianópolis. This tekoá is made up of fifty families, and it has looked eastward out to sea on this spot since the 1980s. It was created by the highly respected *pajé* or shaman Whera Tupã and his family, who are descendants of the original carijós indians that lived on the island of Florianópolis in 1500. Wherá Tupã came on pilgrimage along the Caminho de Peabiru from the more southerly state of Rio Grande do Sul, when he was 12 years of age. He returned to Rio Grande do Sul, but as adult, he again the Caminho de Peabiru, setting here on this patch of ancestral land as part of his lifelong search for the land without evil, Yvy Marã Ey.

From 1910 onwards, the objective of the Brazilian government has been to integrate the indigenous as poor members of Brazilian society, moving them into government reserves and taking them away from their ancestral lands. Despite signing the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2007, which confirms the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination and rights to lands, territories and resources, the Brazilian government continues to fail the Guarani miserably in the demarcation of their land and protection from the armed henchmen of private business that bully them. The Caminho de Peabiru plays a strong role in the Guarani search for more just and more respectful land designation, while also spiritually empowering the *pajés* who lead their people along it. The proximity of the tekoá to the sea is of great importance as a *pajé's* power is greater near the coast and beyond it, Yvy Marã Ey.

The name of this municipality *Biguaçu*, one of the four municipalities that makes up Greater Florianópolis, means *Big Fence* in Guarani. The first settlers erected big fences to close off pieces of land as individual property, a practice that astounded and confused the Guarani of the 16th Century. It was but the beginning of the process of fencing-in and fencing out of the Guarani from their sacred ancestral land and the curtailing of their sacred act of walking, an intrinsic part of their way of life, their *ñande reko*. The Guarani tekoá is visible from the BR101 motorway, but not falling on top of it, like the Itaty tekoá that I passed to the south. It is called *Yynn Moroti W'bera*, shining white water, in homage to the São Miguel river that flows through their land. The Guarani use the river to drink, wash, to catch fish and to gather the wet sparkling clay that lies on the river edge that they use to make their *petangya*, the sacred tobacco pipe. The river though is

more than a resource for the Guaraní, it is an ancestor.

My sons, Tahmid and I park at the eastern entrance of the village and walk up to the circular red-brick building, used by the Guaraní as a shop to sell their handicraft. The tekoá up the hill is hidden from view behind a green border of tall trees. The boys run into the shop and pick up bows and arrows and blow-pipes, before Tahmid and I have even entered. On simple wooden shelves, the shop displays these wares, along with marracas and necklaces of protection beads made from white, brown and red seeds. All shades of clay smoking pipes are for sale and native animals carved from butiá wood such as armadillos and anteaters. All of the names of these animals, tatus, tamanduás and of the butiá wood used to make them are Guaraní words that are now part of the Brazilian lexicon.

Two young women are sitting casually at a wooden table, smoking a pipe and laughing quietly at the children's efforts with the bow and arrows. They speak Guaraní to each other in low voices. Despite over 500 years of colonisation and untold massacres and discrimination, I find it incredible that they have managed to keep the Guaraní language truly alive. In Ireland, I was educated in the Irish language, though English was the language most used both at home and on the street. Most of my family and a lot of my friends speak fairly fluent Irish, but even so we now mostly speak English to each other. I have heard that even in some of the traditionally Irish-speaking areas, some parents are no longer speaking Irish as a first language to their children. It appears that we Irish have kept our language less alive than the Guaraní, despite the fact that we are an independent Republic, with Irish as our first official language and as a mandatory subject in all schools now.

I buy a bow and arrow for each of the boys and we talk to the girls as we pay. Their Portuguese is fluent and delivered in short responses in low voices. 'Do you always smoke?' Tahmid asks them with a smile. They giggle together. 'All Guaraní smoke from the age of this boy,' they say, pointing to six-year old Liam, 'it is part of our culture.' Liam makes a disgusted face and everyone laughs. 'But we do not inhale so much,' the other girl offers quietly. 'Do you work here in the shop?' I ask, 'are you paid for it?' They giggle again. 'No, we only look after it for the community.' The indigenous tekoá is a communal endeavour, not a hotch-potch collection of individuals like many of our villages or towns. The boys are running around the shop now, shooting the miniature arrows at each other and whooping. 'Boys,' I say to one of the girls, raising my eyes to heaven, 'three boys!' 'I too

have three boys,' she says gently and smiles. 'Really?' I say to her, surprised as much by her having three children at her young age as by the fact that she offered some personal information to me. I receive her confidence with a big smile and a feeling of welcome.

'Is Wherá Tupã, the pajé, here?' I ask tentatively, 'I think he's called Seu Alcindo in Portuguese.' They point up to the centre of the tekoá and nod their heads. 'Can we go up and talk with him?' I ask, holding my breath. They nod casually in agreement and smile.

Taking the boys by the hand, we walk up the steep, mucky path to the village, next to the river. To our right, we pass the traditional circular opy, made of mud and wattle, with a straw roof. It has no windows. We try to open the wooden door to look inside but it is shut tight. We keep on walking upwards and pass by an incongruous concrete block of toilets to our left. The road breaks into two and to our left, I see large piles of rubbish and some simple wooden houses, one of which has a 4x4 car parked outside. Walking into the indigenous tekoá reminds me of the shabby material aspect of the many favelas I have entered in Brazil as part of my development work, but I feel none of the shoulder-tensing apprehension.

To our right, we see a small, low house with an elderly couple sitting on the curb. 'Wherá Tupã?' I ask, offering out my hand. The old man nods in a friendly way and holds out his hand. Wherá Tupã has seen five cycles of bamboo in his lifetime, which would put his age closer to 150 rather than the official 104. His wife, Poty-Dja is also of a very advanced age. I shake hands with the couple as well and we sit down on the curb beside them. We sit in front of a huge pile of old wood and rubbish, next to which a fire is smoking. A younger woman comes out of the house and sits by the fire, using the embers to paint spots on the wooden puma that she is carving. We wave hello to her. There are animals everywhere. A cat lies lazily on its back, while two kittens and a larger cat suck her milk. There are some scraggly dogs sniffing around the wood and a goose flaps its wings at them. The sound of the television seeps out from inside the house — a football match. The older boys start playing with the animals and two year old Eoin toddles towards the fire. Tahmid stands up from the curb to bring Eoin away from the fire and I edge closer to the pajé on the curb. 'Thank you for receiving us,' I say to him, unsure now of what to say, 'I have come to ask you about the Caminho de Peabiru, which I have started to follow.'

Wherá Tupã speaks to me in low, good-natured voice, but all I can understand is ‘Biru, Biru’ and then a shake of his head. I can’t make out what he is saying and call Tahmid over to translate for me, frustrated. Tahmid breaks the ice by referring to the football match blaring from the television inside and remarking on a recent Irish defeat. Tahmid points at me, ‘she is Irish,’ he laughs. The two of them laugh together and Wherá Tupã seems warmed up now to talk. I can suddenly understand him. ‘I have eight children,’ he says and points to the woman by the fire. ‘That is daughter,’ he speaks in competent but broken Portuguese, ‘two sons teachers. All speak Guarani and Portuguese.’ He speaks with a strong pride and hits his fist on his chest. ‘This land,’ he says pointing around him, ‘only Guarani land that is owned by Guarani in this state — legal with your government. My son study your law, become lawyer and now land legal.’ We nod with him and smile. His smile back is almost toothless and very endearing. As he smiles, I see my father in him. My father is also a man proud of his eight children. He too has five daughters and three sons, one of whom is a lawyer, and he enrolled us in Irish language schools to ensure we were bilingual, ensuring our connection with our heritage without sacrificing our link with the modern, global language of English. Like my father, Wherá Tupã’s energy belies his age, his eye twinkles with adventure and he is accompanied by his lifelong wife, Poty-Dja. ‘School, Guarani school,’ he says, nodding his head and pointing to the path to our left. He looks straight at me and says with emphasis, ‘you come here to Guarani school and then you learn. No talk of Biru first time. Must come three time, then you learn.’

I let his words sink in. Here I am already following the Caminho de Peabiru and he is telling me to wait, to return for an answer. I had hoped he would give me some unequalled insight into the Caminho de Peabiru, bring me straight to the heart of it. I stifle a sigh of frustration.

‘In school, they learn our medicines too — plants and flowers that heal us. People walk on them everyday, no knowing it is cure.’ ‘What would you like us to bring when we come next time?’ I ask, ‘next time, we come, what should we bring?’ ‘Food good,’ Wherá Tupã nods humbly, ‘and tobacco for Petyngua, our sacred pipe.’

Sensing that our time is up, we shake hands again and thank Wherá Tupã, his wife Poty-Dja and daughter. ‘Say goodbye,’ I call to the boys, who are scattered around. Tom and Liam hold out their hands to Wherá Tupã. He laughs and ignores

their hands, drawing them close to hug them and pat them on the back. The boys hug him back, half-embarrassed, half-amazed at such a warm welcome from the first Guarani that they have ever met.

#### GUARANI WELCOME

It is a wild, wet day when Tahmid and I return for our second visit to the village. We drop the children at school early and drive straight over the bridge to the mainland, heading north to the tekoá. After parking the car near the Guarani craftshop, we walk up to Wherá Tupã's house and offer his wife Poty-Dja a bag full of food as a present. She receives it with a nod of her head, mumbling her thanks. Wherá Tupã is sitting on an old sofa inside the house and he invites us to sit in beside him. We shoo away some mangy cats and sit down. The room is a sparsely-furnished open space, with a bedroom off it. In the far corner, there is a small oven and several people huddle around it to dispel the sting of the cold morning. 'Today, no work on the crops,' says Wherá Tupã, who is named after the God of rain, 'so much rain mean this day of rest.'

'We have come back,' I say hesitantly to Wherá Tupã, who does not seem to recognise us, 'you told us to return and go to the Guarani school before you would tell us about the Caminho de Peabiru.' He smiles and nods his head. 'Go school, up that path and go school,' he says slowly. 'Before we go,' Tahmid says, 'I was wondering if I could buy a clay pipe from you, a petangyua.' Wherá Tupã nods his head and calls to Poty-Dja. She soon comes over with a white clay pipe head and a long bamboo straw to attach to it. Wherá Tupã rubs the sides of the pipe head, smoothening out its final edges. 'See, shiny in clay?' he asks as he holds out the clay head to us. There does seem to be a slight shine from the clay and I nod and smile. 'You Juruá go to the river and search gold. For Guarani, this is gold. The clay to make this petangyua is our gold.' 'Can we see how it is smoked?' Tahmid asks, cheekily. Wherá Tupã calls to his wife again who comes over with a pinch of tobacco and a lighter. He fills the pipe, pushing the tobacco down into the pipe-head with his thumb. He attaches the bamboo straw and puts it to his mouth, as he lights the tobacco. The house is completely quiet as he wafts smoke over his face from the pipe and takes his first drag. 'Ahhh,' he says contented, 'the clay is mother earth, the fire a ray of father sun. Tobacco is our first medicine.'

He hands the pipe to Tahmid, who sucks on it for a moment, making the



tobacco flare red for a second. 'The petangyua, the pipe is our bible. Your bible is book that you do not write anymore, you only read. Our bible is written all the time with the pipe. It is alive.'

Tahmid hands me the pipe. I take a drag on it and feel the dusky smoke in my throat, before it burns out. We pay Wherá Tupã for the pipe and thank him, shaking his hand.

'We will come and say goodbye after we have been to the school,' I tell him.

'Yes, come back again,' Wherá Tupã invites, smiling.

We take the path to the left and walk up to the school. The outside of the school is painted with murals of Guarani in native dress. There is a painting of a Guarani woman from the back, with a feather in her hair looking out at the sun rising over the ocean. There is a huge, majestic bird too and paintings of the village and its mix of traditional and modern buildings. At the entrance to the school, there is a small building of mud and wattle with a straw roof, like a mini opy or prayer house. We walk up to the first adult we meet in the school, who is a white man with a tanned, lined face.

'Wherá Tupã invited us to come and see the school,' I say, holding out my hand. He takes my hand and shakes it with a friendly smile. 'I am the headmaster of the school here,' he says, 'we have morning school for the older children, but we start the day smoking the pipe in the opy. Would you like to join us?' We smile broadly and follow him into the opy. The fire is burning and a group of teenage boys sit around on stumps of trees, smoking the pipe and joking in whispers to each other. The headmaster stokes the fire and it roars back to life. 'You've got to keep the fire lit,' he admonishes the boys, before sitting down. 'The fire in the opy in the village is kept lit all the time, 24 hours a day. This one we light in the mornings and at the end of school too,' he explains to us. 'Offer them the petangyua,' he says gruffly to the boys and one of them reaches the pipe over to Tahmid, who takes it with a smile. 'What's your name?' I ask the headmaster. 'My name is Karaí, that's my Guarani name. My birth name is M.,' he tells me.

'Do you live here in the village?' I ask, surprised. 'Yes,' he says, laughing at my surprise, 'I have lived here for the last five years. I was born into a Jewish family in the south of the country. Some of my family won't talk to me anymore because

I have become Guarani.’ ‘What made you become a Guarani?’ I ask, intrigued.

He clears his throat before answering. ‘I worked in the Brazilian army and I had an accident and couldn’t walk. I got to know a local Guarani tribe and they cured me, so here I am. I have a Guarani godfather in this village and he sponsored me to become Guarani.’

‘Do you speak Guarani?’ I ask. ‘A little bit,’ he says, ‘I’m learning.’ ‘And you,’ he asks, sitting back from the fire and looking at me inquisitively. ‘Why are you here in a Guarani tekoá? Are you religious or something?’ ‘It depends what you mean by religious,’ Tahmid says with a laugh. ‘We were talking to Wherá Tupã about the Caminho de Peabiru,’ I tell him, ‘and he suggested we come to the school to learn.’

‘I’ve heard a bit about that,’ Karaí says slowly, ‘sounds really interesting, but I don’t know much.’

‘Why did you want to know if we were religious?’ Tahmid asks.

‘We get religious people here from time to time, still trying to convert the Guarani,’ he responds, shaking his head.

‘Even now?’ I ask incredulously.

‘Last week, we had a couple of Jehovah witnesses. They said that they wanted to exchange ideas on spirituality. We said ‘fine, come into the opy here and smoke the pipe with us and we can exchange ideas’. Hah, they looked at us as if the devil himself had invited them into hell and they went running from the place.’ Tahmid and I chuckle as we imagine the scene.

‘A couple of months ago, a busload of Mormons stopped at the craft shop and asked if they could make a donation,’ he says, buoyed on by our laughter, ‘we said ‘fine, what kind of donation?’ They wanted to donate 100 bibles to the village.’

‘Wherá Tupã said that his pipe is his bible,’ I say, taking a puff from the pipe. ‘Yes,’ K. says, calmer now, ‘Wherá Tupã is the pajé, the healer or shaman of this village, he uses the pipe for visions, for spiritual clarity and when he is leading the rituals.’ ‘He said too that you learn about medicinal plants here,’ Tahmid mentions. ‘Yes,’ the boys murmur, ‘there is a trail of medicinal herbs and plants

just behind us here, with each one signposted, saying too its purpose.' 'Can we follow the trail?' I ask. 'Another day,' K. says apologetically, 'now it is time to start school.' The boys start to move towards the door of the opy. 'Tahmid and I stand up. 'Thanks so much for talking to us,' I say nodding to the boys as well, 'we will call in on Wherá Tupã again before we go to pick up our kids from school.'

When we arrive at Wherá Tupã's house, a young woman tells us that he is in the opy. 'Can we join him?' we ask. She nods gently. We go down into the mud-and-wattle, windowless opy, carefully pulling aside the stiff wooden door. Inside, the fire is blazing and Wherá Tupã and Poty-Dja are squatting on wooden stumps before it. They smile up at us as we enter, but say nothing. Tahmid and I close the door behind us and pull up two wooden stumps to sit next to them before the fire. The blaze of the fire warms me and welcomes me. The Guarani say that the sacred fire has kept all of the ancient stories and songs through the ages. It is the antidote to losing their cultural and spiritual heritage. The rain falls heavily on the straw roof. I close my eyes, savouring the thick heat of the fire and the soothing sound of the rain.

We sit around the fire, next to Wherá Tupã and Poty-Dja and an hour passes by in a peaceful haze. Concentrating on my breath, I fall into my Walking Flute meditation, sensing the breath clean out each of my seven chakras. As I exhale, for a fleeting moment, I am the blue heart of the flame, I am the cackle of the fire, I am the rain as it beats down on the roof. I sit in the golden red glow of the fire, sensing an ancient welcome to the Caminho de Peabiru.

#### GUARANI TIME

The third time we go to the village, the morning is bright and warm. We arrive at Wherá Tupã and Poty-Dja's house with a bagload of food and tobacco and a heart full of expectations. This is the day that Wherá Tupã will talk to me about the Caminho de Peabiru. This is the day that he will give me his blessing and wish me an *Oguatá Porã*, a good journey. Two young women and a barefoot child are on the porch when we arrive. 'We are here to see Wherá Tupã,' Tahmid says to one of the women, as I peer into the house to see where he is. 'He is working on the crops,' she says in a low voice. 'Can we go and see him?' we ask. She nods gently, 'the crops are on the other side of the motorway, there is a walkway under the motorway just down there.' She points down along the river.

We hurry down on the path that follows the course of the river and come to the walkway. 'Do you think he really will tell me some secrets about the Caminho do Peabiru?' I ask Tahmid excitedly. 'Let's find him first and see what he has to say,' Tahmid says cautiously, as we come to the other side of the motorway and follow a path beaten into the grass. The path brings us through a light forest to an open stretch of land looking eastward out to sea. There are endless banana trees and thriving rows of beans, corn and potato growing along the steep hill. Wherá Tupã however is nowhere to be seen. We look all about the hill but there is no trace of him. We see a house beyond the plantation and we venture down. Two ruddy-cheeked and barefoot Guarani children look at us warily as we approach. 'Hello,' I smile at them, 'we are looking for Wherá Tupã. Is he here?' The oldest child, a girl, stiffly shakes her head and looks at the ground. There is no noise or movement from the house, so we thank them and take our leave, frustrated. We take another look around the small plantation and follow another forest trail for a while, but we find nobody. There is no sign, no sound of anyone at all. It seems like he has vanished into thin air. 'Maybe he's gone back to the house and we missed him somehow,' I say, still hopeful. We walk back through the forest to the walkway, cross under the roaring motorway and climb up by the river to the village once again. When we arrive at Wherá Tupã's house, the same two women are still on the porch. 'We went to the plantation, but we couldn't see anyone there,' Tahmid tells the woman, 'did he come back here?' She shakes her head. 'No, he did not come back. He is there, he is tending the crops as he does everyday,' she repeats to us. Tahmid and I look at each other in frustration. 'He must have disappeared then,' I say, 'because we couldn't see him anywhere near the crops.' The woman shrugs her shoulders and moves inside the house.

We walk back to the car and sit inside, deflated but still waiting.

After ten minutes, I start up the car and sigh deeply. 'Maybe I was expecting too much, too soon,' I say, 'Rosana Bond said that the Guarani only started to talk to her about the Caminho de Peabiru after seven years of regular visits to the Itaty village on Horse's Mountain. Even Aleixo Garcia had to spend seven years in the village of Massiambu, before they guided him on the Caminho de Peabiru in 1524.' I drive slowly out of the village.

It looks like there are no short-cuts on this pilgrimage. Guarani time has its own distinct rhythm. Wherá Tupã won't reveal the heart of the pilgrimage to me. I will have to discover it for myself.

## AYAHUASCA — IN SEARCH OF SPIRIT

Ayahuasca is a sacred brew made from a vine and a shrub that are native to the Amazon jungle, which together create a natural hallucinogenic used to experience different states of consciousness. It is a widespread aid to help people on their spiritual path. The name Ayahuasca comes from two Quechua words that mean the chord of the spirit, as the brew allows the spirit to transcend the body without dying. The first of the Ayahuasca plants, the vine, represents the masculine and the shrub, represents the feminine. When it is time to harvest the plants, the women collect and prepare the shrub and the men the vine. Outside of the many indigenous tribes who use ayahuasca, including the Guaraní who call it kaapi, there are two main organised religions in Brazil that are centred around ayahuasca — Union of the Vegetable and San Daimé.

Just north of the Guaraní Sparkling White Water village where we had visited Whera Tupá and his community, Tāhmid and I experience ayahuasca for the first time at a Union of the Vegetable centre. The centre is in a place called Tijucas, close to the home of the Brazilian Catholic Saint, St. Paulinha, who was canonized in 2002 and is renowned for her works of charity with orphaned children and ex-slaves. It does not surprise me that the first Brazilian saint would have been brought up near this sacred stretch of Brazilian coast.

I hope that Ayahuasca will help me transcend my everyday consciousness and allow me to glimpse Yvy Marā Ey. Since Alastair died, I have been stalked by a visceral fear of death but also a nebulous hope of transcendence. In moments of deep, raw suffering, I had fleeting glimpses of a deeper reality. In the hospital corridor after he died, I found myself leaving my body and experiencing the pain of others around me. I physically felt my heart reach out and inhabit others' bodies. One day when I was driving along a road lined with pine-trees to pick my eldest Tom up from school, drowning once more in grief at his father's absence, I suddenly found myself expanding beyond the body, beyond the car and found myself hovering above the tips of the pine-trees. This expansive state of grace was accompanied by such joy, such lightness, such glorious peace. These unforgettable experiences, though momentary, awoke me to the palpable reality that I can access a state beyond my body. This fear and hope both live within me, battling for my soul. Maybe Ayahuasca will be a shortcut to strengthen the lived knowledge that I

am bigger than the body, that my children are bigger than their bodies.

Inland from the coast in Tijuca, Tahmid and I drive along dirt paths late on a Saturday afternoon and arrive at the Farm of Light ranch just as the sun is beginning to set. Farm of Light is a centre for the 50 year old religion Union of the Vegetable and its main ritual involves the cultivation, collection and drinking of ayahuasca. Friends of ours from Florianopolis are part of the leadership of the centre and have invited us to participate.

Union of the Vegetable was founded by José Gabriel, a man from Bahia in the northeast of Brazil, who experienced ayahuasca when he went to work in the rubber plantations in the Brazilian Amazon. He had a vision while using ayahuasca which urged him to take the sacred plants out of the Amazon and create a religion to share it with people in other parts of the country and the world in a safe and structured environment. In 1962, he created the Union, a christian organization with the fortnightly ritual drinking of ayahuasca at its core. The Union is now present in all states of Brazil and some other countries such as Switzerland, England, Australia and the United States. In 2011, the Union made an important advance in the US Supreme Court, where ayahuasca was officially recognised as a spiritual aid that could be legally imported from Brazil for religious purposes, under the guidance of the Union.

The Union is not a secret religion, but it is discrete. I thought I knew nobody who used ayahuasca, but a little bit of below-the-radar questioning uncovered a small web of my existing contacts that are regular members of the union. Before I was invited to participate, I met my friend for coffee to discuss the Union. My friend sat opposite me in the café, her eyes set on mine with a serious intensity. 'I want you to be clear this has nothing to do with spiritual tourism. The vegetable is a sacred mixture of plants. It is not a spiritual adventure, but a spiritual aid that together with the guidance of the ceremony and continued involvement in the religion, can help us in our long-term spiritual growth,' she told me sternly.

I nodded my head at her. 'Listen, I am on this pilgrimage along the Caminho de Peabiru,' I answered her earnestly, 'I would like to experience ayahuasca as part of that. Trust me, my intention is spiritual and not recreational.' She smiled at me, more relaxed now. 'Tell me though, is it dangerous?' I asked her. 'Not at all,' she responded quickly, 'I have been taking the vegetable since I was 15 and I took it



during pregnancy and labour. You know I am a trained bio-chemist, right? I have researched it thoroughly and can assure you that it is not dangerous at all.' 'But doesn't it make people sick?' I asked, pulling a face. 'Yes,' she laughed, taking a sip of her coffee, 'that has happened to me many times, but always in times that I was in need of some kind of cleansing, when I needed to let out some emotion or tension that was stuck within me.' 'But is it addictive?' 'No,' she assured me, shaking her head, 'it isn't physically addictive. I went without it for a year when I travelled abroad and had absolutely no feelings of withdrawal. I missed the Union, the social element and close friends I have there, but I experienced no physical withdrawal symptoms from the vegetable itself.'

I finished my coffee, assured and excited.

Now, Tahmid and I enter the simple, circular temple in the Farm of Light. Reclining chairs strung with bouncy, green plastic wire are organized in three rows around a long table. Behind the table, there is a large framed photo of master Gabriel, a short man with a smiling, wrinkled face with skin leathered and darkened by the sun. Beneath a ceremonial arch, there are rows of small drinking glasses. After a quick communal snack of bread and coffee, Tahmid and I take our seats in the front row and cover ourselves in the blankets we have brought with us as we wait. The doors of the temple are open and the evening has a distinct chill. I say a prayer while I wait, opening myself to whatever the experience will bring. I do my Walking Flute meditation, breathing deeply through each chakra and enter that increasingly familiar empty space within. I watch as my mind gradually calms down and I sink relaxed into the reclining chair.

I am brought back to sharp awareness of the room by the master of ceremony who stands to welcome the group of almost forty participants at eight pm. 'Welcome especially to the several new people here today who have come to experience the sacred vegetable for the first time. As it is your first time, I ask you all to respect the order of the ritual and be silent when anybody else is speaking. I will serve you the vegetable under the arch and when you are called, you can make a line on my left side and move always in an anti-clockwise direction around the table. Given that Master Gabriel was from Bahia, we call the vegetable the Bahaian firework. May all of us rise with it,' he concludes with a good-humoured lilt in his voice. He calls the Union members to take the vegetable first and half of the people arise and queue in reverent silence to receive the vegetable. I watch

as he fills the small glasses and each member drinks it back in one or two short shots, some making a slight grimace as they swallow. Then he calls the first-timers and I stand slowly and walk to the end of the line. I feel like I am in the line for communion at mass and I am not sure what to do with my hands. I clasp them together at my stomach in what feels like a respectful position. Tahmid is in front of me in the line. The MC fills a full glass for Tahmid, before filling a half glass for me. As I drink down the bitter brew, I am glad it was just a half glass. When everyone is served, we all sit down and wait for the 'borracheira' or trip to begin. My friend stands up and prepares us for what is to come. 'You might start to feel light-headed soon. Allow yourself to go with the experience. You may not understand what things mean now, but over the next few weeks, you will begin to have an understanding of what you see and experience. If you are feeling nauseous, open your eyes and try and concentrate on any music or talking that is happening as part of the ritual. There is a bathroom outside and there is sawdust in buckets by the doors, which you can use if you don't make it to the bathroom.' There is a collective giggle from the group that breaks the tension. My friend sits down and a young man sitting at the table begins to read out the memorandum and articles of the organization in legalistic Portuguese in a monotone voice. I struggle to understand what he is saying and that which I do understand is mind-blowingly dull. Very quickly, I begin to feel a light-headedness and when I close my eyes, I sense a fluidity, as if my head is at sea and I rise and fall with the waves. The borracheira, the trip, starts slowly, gently and then colours start to appear. I am surrounded by shocking pink pressed against blood red, the colours swirl into each other and go twirling through the air like a whirlwind twister. I have dropped into a silent carnival. All the time, the voice in legalistic Portuguese drones on in the background and I try to return my attention to it. Faces appear and droop long like Munch's scream, drooping further and further, falling to the floor and then, there's no floor and the drooping faces turn into twisters, twirling like whirligigs downwards.

The MC brings me abruptly back into the room, as he shouts loudly, 'the borracheira is coming, the borracheira is coming.' *Focus on the soul, not the mindgames,* I say to myself, dragging myself from the silent carnival and returning to my breath. I try and connect with the empty meditative space within me. The colours and fluid images keep drawing me back again and again and I sense a struggle within

me. I feel nauseous and open my eyes to steady myself. I have to concentrate on keeping my eyelids open and I breathe loudly and heavily. I look at the people around me, who have their eyes shut and are making funny grimaces as they trip. How can everyone remain seated, almost immobile, with such crazy psychedelia exploding in their heads? I want to laugh out loud but now I am worried I will vomit if I open my mouth. Nausea rises from the pit of my stomach to my throat and I push it back down again and breathe through my nose. A retching sound and then a stench to my left makes my stomach lurch. Someone is vomiting beside me. I open my eyes and see several people vomiting on the floor in front of their seats. From nowhere, country music fills the temple and muffles to some degree the sound of retching. How strange that these well-dressed people, sitting politely in orderly rows are vomiting violently on the floor before them. Somebody comes and covers the vomit close to me with sawdust. The MC shouts above the music 'catch the bahian firework, let it bring you high and explode in the heavens.' The music is in an endless crescendo, but I can't follow it. I am all-consumed by the herculean effort to stop myself from vomiting. Another bout of retching to my left is the last straw. I stand up and stumble to the bathroom outside. The cold air hits me and I shiver as I run to the cubicle. I fall to my knees, grab onto the toilet bowl and vomit violently. I kneel there and vomit several more times until there is nothing left but bile. I sink back on my ankles, feeling harrowed and grey. I breathe deeply. After an age, I flush the toilet and slowly stand up and walk to the sink, where I wash my hands and rinse out my mouth. My friend has come to check on me and hands me a glass of water in a plastic cup. I smile at her wanly, drink the water and slowly walk back to the temple. The desire to vomit has passed and so has the psychedelic trip. I arrive back at my chair and sink into it, covering my shivering body with my blanket. With my eyes closed, I hear a call for a next round and people standing up to have a second dose of the ayahuasca. I have no inclination to join them. It feels like only a few minutes have gone by, but when I open my eyes, it is already eleven o'clock on the white plastic wall-clock. I relax further into the chair, empty now and disappointed. I had been harboring quiet hopes of communing in ecstasy with God: this could have been my short-cut to instant enlightenment. *Seek and you shall find.* I read once that if you take one step in God's direction, he will take two steps in yours. Why then had he sent me on a nauseating merry-go-round? I feel a slight pang of rejection.

As I stew in my wounds, the second wave of *borracheira* passes for the rest of the group and the evening begins to wind down. One by one, people start to speak of their experiences. ‘The *borracheira* was goooooood,’ one young man smiles widely, his eyes still closed. ‘The firework took off,’ another says with a grin. ‘There was so much colour and faces of people I know,’ a middle aged woman adds. Tahmid starts to laugh. ‘Sorry, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I opened my eyes and saw all of your faces and it was so funny.’ ‘You,’ he says pointing to the MC, ‘you make very funny grimaces.’ The MC laughs with him, and soon everyone is laughing heartily. I even begin to feel better myself. As the ceremony draws to a close, I put my hand up to speak without knowing what I am going to say.

‘Look, I vomited alot and I am feeling a bit disappointed,’ I begin, my voice slightly hoarse, ‘I had hoped for a moment of transcendent ecstasy with God or some extrasensorial vision of reality that would change my experience of life. I had not imagined that I would end up face to face with a toilet bowl for the evening.’ A ripple of laughter moves through the group. I sigh and continue, as a pearl of clarity, in the guise of a short zen story to mind. I share the story with the group. ‘There’s a tale about a seeker who went to visit a Zen master. The Zen master received him sincerely and asked the man to tell him why he had come, as he poured him a cup of tea into a small cup. The seeker told him he had come to understand how to achieve enlightenment. The Zen master kept pouring tea into the cup, until it was overflowing. The seeker called the attention of the Zen master to the overflowing cup. ‘You are like this cup,’ the Zen master told the man gently, ‘you are full to the brim. You must empty yourself before you can receive any wisdom from me.’’

I finish my little monologue with a sigh, ‘I recognize that ayahuasca was emptying me out of my many internal issues, all of my European conditioning — so many obstacles that distance me from the true Caminho de Peabiru.’

#### A LESSON IN WONDER

North of Tijuca and the Union’s Farm of Light, in the town of Porto Belo, we stumble across a B&B called Pousada Peabiru. This is the first time I have found such a sign of commercial awareness of the Caminho de Peabiru, so I excitedly ring to book a room. Nobody answers and I wait for the call to ring out

before hanging up. Where the coastline south of Florianópolis had been such an encouraging symphony of discovery, mystery and spectacular sunrises, north of Florianópolis is proving more of a challenge. The BR101 motorway hugs much of the coast, compelling us to drive rather than walk it and the beaches are much more built up and uninspiring than in the south. It turns out that even the Pousada Peabiru is closed, as we are out of tourist season.

Tahmid and I go for one day's walk along the coast, north of Florianópolis. We start our day in Porto Belo, the beautiful port. We catch a boat from the renovated pier for Porto Belo island, where the most northerly rock art along this stretch of sacred coast is found. As the motor boat moves away from the mainland, I look back at Porto Belo beach, with its lush green trees behind the sand. A handful of fishermen stand on the sand looking out to sea. The fish are later than usual this year and there is a strain to their postures. The bay is dotted with small, colourful boats, poised for action. I turn to look out on the calm sea, where a slit of pink and yellow streaks the sky between the horizon and the clouds above: the remnants of sunrise.

The island is almost deserted when we arrive. We walk down a wooden walkway, looking through the slats in the hope of seeing the famous blue crab. We push open a large gate and begin a trail through protected Atlantic Forest. This island is privately-owned and fortunately it seems carefully preserved. The air is a hum of insects and mosquitos. Being the first people to walk the trail today, we startle butterflies from their slumbers and walk straight into spider's webs weaved during the night. A humming bird crosses my path, flutters energetically close to me and dives back into the undergrowth. A wooden sign asks for silence so as not to scare the animals, such as otters and armadillos and I gladly stop talking and focus all of my attention on the walk through the lush forest. Near the end of the trail, we come to a large stone, the Stone of the Cross, about three metres in height and half-hidden by trees around it. This large stone is the canvas for the most northerly site of rock art. Like the other rock art that I have seen, it faces east, towards Yvy Marã Ey, Guarani paradise in the Atlantic. Unlike the other rock art I have seen, the stone is some fifteen metres inland from the sea-edge.

The rock art is well preserved by the natural canopy of trees overhead and there are a glut of symbols, many resembling the art I have seen before. There are several square shapes divided in four with a dot in each of the quadrants.

Here there is another where the central shape of the cross is more prominent. It is the cross of the directions, my pilgrimage cross. Just as I did with the ancient cross in Ireland outside Gallarus oratory, I place my pilgrim cross into the grooves and it fits perfectly. Another symbol is like the infinity sign or maybe a string of DNA. Here are repeated wave-lines, imitating the sea perhaps and what looks like a v-shaped boomerang. There so many shapes and symbols that I cannot decipher. It is a blackboard scribbled with mystery. Frustrated, I stop trying to make out what they mean for a moment and do my Walking Flute meditation, feeling my breathe clean out my chakras, one by one.

Then I sit looking at the rock art, simply enjoying it.

What pleasure, what peace! What beautiful drawings, what mysterious, unknowable art abounds on this sacred coastline. I sink into this delicious feeling — sitting in the mystery without the mind reaching unendingly for rational explanations.

After a few minutes, an image arises in my mind's eye of a person thousands of years ago hunched over with a sharpened rock in hand, engraving the rock. Down through the ages, I can almost reach out and touch him on the shoulder. I wonder too if he felt my presence somehow. I wonder if the sensation he felt engraving the rock was somehow created by all those of us who are linked to him, through his art, so far into the future? (As I write this, I can almost feel your eyes, dear reader, looking over my shoulder.)

A blasted corner of the stone of the cross brings me out of my reveries. I pass my hand along its uneven, sharp edge. The rock was partly blown up by dynamite by treasure hunters who believed that the Jesuits hid an angel made of pure gold under the rock, destroying some of the rock art in the process. Some believed that the rock art was a type of treasure map too. It seems like a treasure map to me; a map to a different, more connected consciousness.

Leaving the island and arriving back at the pier, we begin to walk the stretch of sand from Porto Belo to Pereque beach. On the beach in Porto Belo, we happen across a lone rock with a bowl-like cavity carved into it. I run my fingers along it and feel once again marble smooth contours that I felt in the bullaun in Ireland. Pereque beach is lined with large nut trees and from time to time, a sizeable nut falls from the tree right next to me, making me jump back slightly.



We pass groups of teenagers playing football barefoot on the sand to the sound of loud music. We pass the lines of fishermen, standing, staring out to sea. I sit to prepare the chimarrão and Tahmid stands next to a fisherman. 'Have the fish appeared yet?', he asks looking out in the same direction towards the sea. 'Not yet,' the fisherman responds curtly, without taking his eyes off the sea. 'How do you spot a shoal of fish?' Tahmid asks, straining his eyes. The fisherman clicks his tongue disapprovingly. 'You can't just come here and ask how to see the shoals of fish. It takes time. Your eyes have to become accustomed to all of the colours of the sea and then you will sense when the fish have arrived. Sometimes the sea turns red if they swim on their sides as they pass.' Tahmid strains his eyes for a few more minutes, before sitting down beside me on the beach to drink chimarrão. There is no short cut on this Caminho de Peabiru for him either.

We cross over a bridge to walk along the curving bay of Itapema, where the beach is built up with apartment blocks and large houses towering over the beach. This is just the beginning of the overdeveloped beaches on the northern coast of Santa Catarina, that continue through Balneário Camboriú to Piçarras and São Francisco do Sul, where they meet the neighbouring state of Paraná.

As we move onto Itapema beach, the air seems to turn grey. The sand is hard and pebbly and dotted with tiny jelly fish. Seagulls stand on the shoreline looking out to sea with the same strained look as the fishermen. We pass a dead penguin, his stomach ripped opened, and two vultures hopping around at a short distance. The poor creature got caught in the wrong current down south and ended up here, too far north. The walk now is unpleasant, the looming apartment blocks and concrete paths contrast too strongly with the idyllic serenity of the Porto Belo island and beach earlier in the morning.

We need to walk on the edge of the BR101 highway to get to a large outcrop of rocks at the very end of Itapema beach. 'This is the last walk I will do on the coast north of Florianópolis,' I tell Tahmid adamantly. He nods his head in relief.

We have arranged to meet Is. a local historian, who has agreed to show us one of the great Peabiru treasures of these rocks. When we meet him, he invites us to scramble on the rocks with him, getting closer and closer to the sea and its violent spray.

Is. jumps up to higher ground. 'Now this is part of what you have come

here to see,' he says with aplomb. He points to an oddly shaped rock, sticking out from behind huge rocks. Tahmid and I, tired after our walk, look sceptical. 'This is Sumé's boat,' he tells us as he touches the polished sides of the rock. As I look closer, it really does look like the narrow tip of a boat, hollowed out in the centre. 'You have heard how Sumé was well-received by the indigenous people when he gave them their sacred crops of maté, corn and mandioca?' We both nod in agreement. 'After he gained their trust, he started his moral phase, speaking to them against practices such as human sacrifice and polygamy,' Is. Continues, 'so the tribes turned against him and tried to kill him. In some places they tried to kill him with arrows, others tried to burn him and here, they tied him and his boat up at night so that he couldn't get away, so that they could kill him the next morning. In the middle of the night, he caused a great storm to erupt and left the tribe by walking on the rocks and then walking away on the sea to escape them. This is the boat that they tied up, turned now to stone to remind everyone that Sumé passed by here. 'I touch the smooth edges of the stone tip of a boat. 'And his footprints?' Tahmid asks, 'are there any left on the rocks?' 'Over here,' he says, leading us down to another rock. 'This is Sumé's footprint, that people used to come and worship years ago. 'I look down on the rock to see a hole the size, depth and width of a man's foot, but with only very slight indication of toes. 'But there are no toes,' I note, disappointed. 'There were toes, but people came and scraped off the part of the rock that separated the toes, to dissolve into boiling water to make healing teas.'

I remember our Guaraní grandfather south of Florianópolis saying the same thing on the Morro do Indio Sambaqui on our first day of walking. Just like negligence, *too much* veneration can be a bad thing.

'Come, take off your shoe and sock and put your foot in,' Is. invites me. I lean on his arm and take off my right shoe and sock. My foot fits well in the hole and I breathe deeply to connect with where I am and what I am doing. Could it be that I am now truly standing in Sumé's footprint?

His footprints were reported as early as 1515. A shipwrecked English-man called Knivet and high-ranking Jesuit priests were among those who wrote that the indigenous people showed them the sacred footprints on the rocks as proof that Sumé, a white man like them, had passed through their lands. The footsteps were reported in many places in Brazil. There are also some in Paraguay. The indigenous

people said that the footprints appeared the day after Sumé was expelled from the tribe, to remind them of his presence and his message. 'Apparently, the Incas used footprints as a type of way-marking arrow on their paths,' Is. tells us, 'maybe the way-marking arrows on the Peabiru are in the shape of feet and they could even suggest that the Incas walked all the way from the Pacific to the Atlantic, using the Caminho de Peabiru. Some andean artefacts were found here on the east coast such as a copper ax found in Cananea.' I smile at the thought. I have been so caught up in the idea of the Guaraní using the path, that I had not given much thought to the Incas using it to come eastward.

On another rock, I see a child's footprint, complete with toes and everything. 'Look at that,' I point to Is. 'That footprint is perfect, but it is so small.' 'Some say,' said Is, 'that a child's footprints are often found close to the footprints of Sumé. They are attributed to his guardian angel, who was with him in the moments of difficulty that he encountered with the tribes.' 'There is a huge footprint here too,' Is. says, walking further north to a large hole full of seaweed in the rock, with the general shape of a giant footprint. 'In other places in Brazil too, there are giant footprints, suggesting that there were some kind of giants in this area thousands of years ago,' Is. tells us. I remember our fisherman on Ouidor beach and the legends of the giants crossing beaches with three strides.

When I was a child, we had a phantom 'Big Foot' at the back of the garden of our house in Dublin, that would eat your dinner if you weren't quick enough. He was a make-believe member of the patagonian tribe, researched by Charles Darwin, because of the myth of their huge size. I chuckle to myself at the possibility of this tribe of giants being here also and leaving these huge footprints. 'Who do you think Sumé was?' I ask, as we stand on the rocks.

Is looks me straight in the eye as he speaks. 'Sumé was St. Thomas,' he answers confidently, 'I have analyzed all twenty of the Jesuit letters that were based on the first conversations with the indigenous about the mysterious Sumé and everything points towards St. Thomas. It was hushed up by the church so as not to overshadow the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in Europe. I am publishing a book on it later this year.' He looks out to sea now and exhales deeply, 'there is something very mystical about this coast. I have had some highly unusual experiences, especially at solstices and equinoxes: images appearing in front of me on the sand, strange coincidences, that kind of thing. There is some very special

energy here.’

I feel a tingle throughout my body, a flush of warmth rising up through my spine that makes me shiver with excitement. There are several theories about who opened the Caminho de Peabiru and so little conclusive proof. This coast is calling me to go beyond the mind, the rational, to a deeper, more subtle level of understanding and consciousness. I have no idea if Sumé was St. Thomas or St. Brendan, but I strive to keep my mind open and not reduce everything to a thought small enough for my limited, rational mind to hold. This walk along the coast is proving to be a two hundred kilometre wake-up call to wonder.

#### LEAVING THE ATLANTIC COAST

A couple of months later, the boys, Tahmid and I make the final coastal leg of the the Caminho de Peabiru along the Brazilian coast by car. We drive from Itapema to Barra Velha, the old estuary where the Itapocu River meets the sea. The Itapocu winds down from the west and the Caminho de Peabiru leaves the coast and moves inland along it. Here we meet the ghost of another European pioneer along the Caminho de Peabiru, who walked in Aleixo Garcia’s footsteps. Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish explorer, sailed from Florianópolis into the Itapocu river in 1541. From here, he and his entourage walked inland towards Assunção in Paraguay, where Cabeza de Vaca was to take up his position as governor.

Itapocu is an important word on the Peabiru pilgrimage. According to the researcher Rosana Bond, there are six places called Itapocu on the Peabiru pilgrimage. Itapocu is originally I ‘Tape Poco, which means ‘the water by the long path’. The placename was used as a way-marker along the Caminho de Peabiru. Rosana has not disclosed where the other Itapocus are, as she is currently writing an article on it. Like a mysterious treasure map, I would love to stumble across some of them on my journey.

At the turn off the motorway into Barra Velha, there is a replica of the Statue of Liberty, 57 metres high outside a large department store. This is the largest statue in Brazil and it dwarfs the statue of Christ that rises on the hill over the town before us: the new Brazilian religion of western consumerism dwarfs the colonists’ Christianity.

Near to the seafront, we stumble across a bronze statue of Mani, an indian

woman kneeling proudly on a small roundabout amidst the traffic, her naked pendulent breasts outrageous in this modern town. It has always struck me as strange that on this coast, Brazilians will wear the tiniest, dental-floss bikinis, but you will never see anybody going topless on the beaches. Displaying full naked breasts has a boldness about it here that delights me. This statue is the first statue of an indigenous person that I have seen in the 200 km of the Caminho de Peabiru along the Sumé coastal songline. I stop before the statue and bow my head in reverence. Some Guaraní mythology say it is Mani, half-God, half-human who sacrificed herself to create the mandioc root which is a staple to this day in Brazil. Other stories say it was Sumé or São Tomé who gave the Guaraní the mandioc root and taught them how to cultivate it. Mani is the female face of our Peabiru's Sumé.

Across the road from the statue, we stop to look at an *Ossada* at the side of the road. Threaded through a thick iron bar, are fifteen whale backbones, that look like huge stone knots. A tourist sign, rare along this coast, refers to the nearby Armação de Itapocorói, an old whaling station. This Ossada by the side of the road is a small, exposed graveyard of the Right Whales, flaunting man's barbarous history against them. The Right Whales's move from the south pole between July and November each year to reproduce in these waters. Each year, we spot the huge grey curves moving out to sea. The boys point them out excitedly as they flip their large tails out of the water, seeming to wave at us before diving again under the water. We have seen mother whales with their newborn calves, who hover on the surface of the water, never far from the protective mass of their mother's enormous body. The sight of them is always exhilarating.

This is a good year for whale watching. There are more whales than ever in recorded history. Almost 200 different whales were spotted. The Right Whale species is endangered due to extensive hunting since whaling first began in this area in the seventeenth century. Whaling only ended in 1973 and there is now a community-based effort to protect the whales and to help them claw their way back from the brink of extinction. The first whaling station or armação was opened near the M'Biguaçu indigenous village that I passed earlier on the Caminho de Peabiru. The third one was built here, close to Barra Velha in 1778. The largest whaling operation and the last one to close down was in Imbituba, close to where we began our pilgrimage on this songline of a coast.

It dawns on me that our pilgrimage has followed the strip of coast used by the right whales to nurse their young. Whalers were successful by attacking the whales' weakest point, their newborn babies. They would harpoon the calf and when the distressed mother would come to its rescue, they would mount her and kill her with harpoons and long spears. Then they would drag the mother whale ashore to be sliced and diced and turned into oil for streetlamps.

I hold my young boys close to me as I explain to them what the bones are and I feel a mother's relief that the whaling has stopped here. Slowly, the Right Whales and their babies are increasing in number and enjoying once again this sacred coast, that also drew the indigenous people thousands of years ago to create intricate rock art and place huge Sumé Stones and astrological observatories along it.

We arrive at the mouth of the Itapocu river and get out of the car to walk on a strip of sand between the pounding Atlantic ocean and the wide, winding river. It is late afternoon and the sun is already on its descent, beaming a path of glittering gold along the river that is flanked at each side by dark green mangrove. The sunrays fall on a small, red fishing boat as the fisherman throws his tarrafa net into the river. The net hangs momentarily in the air, spotlit, before it drops audibly on the water. The three boys run along the edge of the sea, daring the incoming tide to catch them and laughing as the waves get closer and closer. Logs of driftwood are scattered on the sand and a glut of perfect shells steal the boys' attention now; smooth white, cream and grey shells are interspersed with long pink shells that hint of perfect sunsets.

I sigh with contentment. The first leg of the trip, the 200km stretch of sacred coast from Ibraquera to Barra Velha, the Sumé coastal songline, is at an end. This coastal walk has opened my eyes to the story of the place in which I live. In total, I have been living on the Brazilian coast for seven years, the first three in Rio de Janeiro and four now in Florianópolis. I have been busy, mostly working on a charity project and having children — too busy running from the past and chasing goals for the future to see the present all around me. It has taken me seven years, a mystical number in both Celtic and Guarani traditions, to open myself up to some of the incredible wonders that the Brazilian coast offers. A stanza from a childhood poem floods me:



What is this life if full of care,

We have no time to stand and stare.

How wonderful that life has afforded me this opportunity to stand and stare. How wonderful that I have taken it. As I begin to awaken to all about me, it feels like I have been somehow sleepwalking. I have been busying myself in the bubble of everyday life, raising children, working, washing endless dishes and filling spare moments with the distractions of modern life. Now, I am becoming more conscious now of the ground on which I am stepping, more aware of the beauty and history of this coast that is my home now. I feel one pulse closer to the abundant nature around and to the Guaraní that are slowly, and with difficulty, reclaiming their sacred home. Perhaps too it has taken the coast seven years to open itself and to flaunt its indigenous treasures to me, from the Sambaquis on awe-inspiring hidden beaches, the last vestiges of the lush Atlantic Forest, the mysterious rock art and ancient astronomical observatories and the recuperating Right Whales frolicking along its coast. This dive into the Caminho de Peabiru has brought me more awareness of the Azorian Portuguese culture too that is still visible here and has adopted so many aspects of the Guaraní outward lifestyle. Layers of cultures have been peeling back from this coast before me.

Many Brazilians live on this coastline unaware of many of its treasures, as I did for seven years. The Guaraní are essentially invisible to almost all the juruá. When people refer to the natives here, they are referring to the Azorian Portuguese. Most people don't know the meaning of the villages where they were born, that bear Guaraní names — Itapema, Ibiraquera, Biguaçu. Nor do they realise consciously that the Guaraní taught their ancestors how to fish here, how to weave baskets with native plants, how to prepare the different types of mandioc root for their traditional farofa or how to drink maté tea in a chimarrão gourd and use native plants for healing. Most people are unconcerned about the Guaraní's past and their ancestors' role in it, ignorant to the challenges they still face and dismissive of their way of life and the spiritual treasure that still pulsates, albeit with difficulty, in their roadside communities. How much is being missed!

I move away from the perpetual movement of the children at the seafront and look out now over the near-stillness of the Itapocu river, into the west. The Caminho de Peabiru now leads me westward, away from the paradise Atlantic

coast over the Serra do Mar mountain range and into the Brazilian state of Paraná, which I have never visited, before beckoning me on to Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru. Sumé is said to have walked westward through Brazil and Paraguay, doubling as Tunupa and Viracocha in the south of Bolivia and leaving Peru by walking on the water of the Pacific, just as Sumé arrived on the Atlantic.

The early European colonisers mostly trekked along the Caminho de Peabiru westward from the Atlantic in search of El Dorado, the city of gold and silver. Aleixo Garcia went westward with 2000 Guaraní in 1524. I imagine now Cabeza de Vaca and his entourage following this same epic path in 1541, as he went to take up his position as governor in Paraguay's capital Asunción. Different to how I imagine Aleixo Garcia, I see Cabeza de Vaca before me sweating under incongruous European colonial garb — frilly shirts and impractical trousers. Cabeza de Vaca sailed from Florianópolis to this point at Barra Velha and disembarked with twenty six horses, 250 Europeans, a couple of Franciscans and a few Guaraní guides before starting the long trek westward along the river. He was taking an alternative route to that of the great majority of Europeans who accessed Asunción by taking a boat up the Paraguay river from Mar del Plata in Argentina to the south.

No doubt the Serra do Mar, the Mountains of the Sea, covered then in verdant Atlantic Forest held more dread and danger for these intrepid men than they do for me. Both the indigenous tribes and the landscape have since been tamed, beaten for the most part into a harmless submission or death. I too am European and I too move westward. The treasure I seek however is spiritual, not material.

I am leaving this sacred coast, the comfort and safety of my home here and the ability to dip in and out of the journey. I feel a slight apprehension as my trips will have to be longer now and I am entering a part of Brazil that I know very little. I sense a palpable excitement also however, a sensation that has been largely absent since Alastair's death five years ago. The Caminho de Peabiru is re-igniting my innate sense of adventure in life.



Trail to Ouidor beach, South Brazil, May 2012.



Indian Hill, Ferrugem beach, South Brazil, May 2012.





Guarda do Embaú beach, South Brazil, May 2012.



Enseada do Brito, South Brazil, May 2012.



Santinho beach, Florianópolis, South Brazil, June 2012.



Footprint of St Thomas,  
Itapema, South Brazil,  
June 2012.



Whale bones, Itapocu,  
South Brazil, July 2012.



Statue of Mani, Itapocu,  
South Brazil, July 2012.



## PEABIRU GUARDIAN

An old stone-paved path, over a metre wide, winds up the Monte Crista mountain of the Serra do Mar, passing through the Atlantic Forest towards an enormous stone guardian on the mountain top. The paving, which goes on for several kilometres, is completely out of beat with the overgrown forest setting. Some researchers suggest that it is a vestige of the Caminho de Peabiru, others that it is an Inca trail, proving an Inca presence on the eastern coast of Brazil. Others refute this hypothesis and contend that it was built in the 19th Century, providing as proof a receipt on official record for work done on a stone road in this area.

My two older sons, now nine-year-old Tom and seven-year-old Liam, and I walk along these dark stones that are compactly set into the earth, some of which are worn smooth from generations of footsteps. The path bewilders me with its incongruity. It looks as if it was dropped here in the middle of the forest by mistake, a forgotten vestige of a more ancient time.

Monte Crista is one of the peaks of the Serra do Mar, which stretch for 1,500 kilometres from the south of Santa Catarina to the state of Espírito Santo to the north. The Caminho de Peabiru along the coast has been following it in parallel but now we must cross over it to go westward into the heart of the South American continent. In Guarani the mountain range is called Paray Jocoá, the mountain that held back the sea, and the Guarani revere it as a sacred place. It was here, they say, that their ancestors thousands of years before were saved from a great flood by climbing to its summit.

We start off on a dirt trail, completely shaded by the huge native trees that tower above us, which let through only a dusky light from the day's sunlight. Tall garapuvu trees and palms of all types rise around us. From time to time, we pass a fire-red tree trunk that breaks the swathe of green — the fire cinnamon. The air is humid and buzzing with life. The path rises up and down before us and we steady our feet on the bulging roots of the trees.

We pass by muddy patches, slopping through the reddish mud which is a thick, clutching clay at our feet. When we come to a bend in the river, we come across our first group of hikers of the day as they fill their water bottles. Each

one is carrying a big backpack, preparing to sleep over night on the mountain top and they marvel at Tom and Liam leaping up the trail path. Tom and Liam ignore their marvelling and have spotted a thin vine-snake in the water, shouting with excitement as they watch it swim and slither away from the crowd.

We are walking with J, a guide in his early fifties, who has lived in this area for twenty years. When we get to the stone path, I ask him as we walk, if he believes the path is part of the ancient Caminho de Peabiru or is it a more modern creation.

He continues walking and calls to me over his shoulder. 'Walk on it, observe it for a while and then I will tell you what I know about it.' I fall into silence behind him and allow myself to be guided by the stones. There is a sense of mystery to the path, a hint of man's will in this overwhelming domain of wild nature. J stops to point out the width of the trail. I have to admit that it does remind me of the Inca trail to Machu Pichu that I walked in my early 20s. 'See here,' he says, pointing with his walking stick, 'the stones go all the way to here, about one and a half metres wide, though more than half of it is covered by vegetation now. Remember that the Jesuits who first described the Caminho de Peabiru said it was 1,4 metres wide.' The width of the trail seems to change as we move, depending on the space available. At times I can make out that it was as wide as the Jesuit's description of the Caminho de Peabiru, but at other times, it is narrow. At one corner, where the path narrows visibly to follow the contour of the mountain, J again stopped. 'See how narrow it is here, due to the natural impediments,' he points out, 'you would never be able to get a carriage up this path, there are too many places where it simply wouldn't pass. That's why I think it is unlikely that this was built in the 19th Century. Why would they pave it if it wasn't going to be used by carriages?'

Further along, he points out a large, lighter coloured stone in the middle of the path, which has a funnel carved into it. 'See here,' he points out, 'this funnel is for dynamite. This stone and some others you will see as we walk, are from a time when dynamite was used and they are in the most-used places. That receipt from the 19th Century probably points to a repair of the old path, not its construction. They replaced the stones that had eroded, but the path was here long, long before then.'

'So you think that this was built by the Guarani or by the Incas?' I ask. 'No,' he says firmly, 'I think this path predates both of those tribes. I have a sense that

it is around 12,000 years old, that it was built by a more ancient civilization that we know little about.'

'If they were advanced enough to build paths like this, why didn't they leave any written record?' I ask. 'I don't know,' Romano replies, 'maybe they didn't write or maybe they wrote or drew on wood and that has all decomposed by now.'

'Do you think it is connected to the rock art along the coast?' I ask.

'Ah, that I don't know,' he laughs, 'I just know that there is something very special about this place. One time I thought of leaving here to explore other places, and try to live elsewhere, but I had a vivid dream that told me that everything I need to learn, I can learn here. So I have stayed here and I am learning here.'

'I read that the Guarani believe that this Serra do Mar, this mountain range of the sea is a good place to prepare yourself for the ascent to paradise, Yvy Mara ey,' I tell him.

J laughs again, 'there you have it.'

As we walk, he continues to talk. 'You know when I was in my late teens, I was evangelical and I went around telling people about the bible and Jesus and I thought that I was going to change the world. Instead of changing the world, the world changed me. I'm 51 now and life has shown me that preaching about the bible is not my path. It has shown me that God is within me, not in some bible or teaching. Life seems to be telling me more and more to just stop, simplify and stop. It's hard for me. I have such a drive to be busy, be productive, but years here by this mountain have changed me.' I listen to him, my eyes navigating the stones underfoot as I identify with his words. The boys have run ahead, leaping and whooping along the path, shouting back with delight when they see a humming bird or a wood-pecker in the thicket.

'In what way do you feel this place is special?' I ask him.

'Once in the forest, I came across a slab of stone and I had the sensation that it was an old sacrificial table,' J tells me, 'I lay on it and I surrendered myself to it. After a while, I started to see images and it struck me that the last person to be sacrificed on this stone was somehow still present. At the last minute, just before his death, the holy men realised that he was not the chosen one to be sacrificed,

that there had been a mistake, but they killed him anyway. I left the stone and a few days later I brought a healer back with me to liberate the energy that was stuck there. The next time I came back, a part of the mountain had eroded and fallen down on top of the table, unbalancing it and making it fall lower down. I took that to mean that the energy had been liberated. I planted flowers that day and as I did, I heard three distinct cries. I feel they were cries of liberation.'

I am perfectly quiet as he gives this monologue. His sincerity is palpable. There is an innocence to the way he talks, void of any desire to convince or impress. My mind wanders to the indigenous and their conviction that Sumé would return. According to some early colonial witnesses, some were so anxious about his return that they sacrificed human messengers in ritual, as J had described, in order to intuit the timing and circumstance of his return.

J and I walk along in silence and he breathes deeply. 'What I mean to say is simply that this place is special. The energy on this mountain is special. There is more to this than some 19th Century governor building a random path in the middle of the Atlantic Forest.'

We come to a clearing in the woods, where the boys are sitting on a log resting. 'You took *forever*,' Tom says to me, 'we have already been here for *ages*.' I laugh and sit down beside them. About us, there are several other hikers and the place is littered with rubbish. J stands in the middle of the clearing and in a loud voice calls people's attention, 'Listen, not pointing the finger at anyone, but let's all remember that we have to bring our rubbish down the mountain with us. There is not always someone ready to take our rubbish away, there are no maids here and no mothers to pick up after us.' There is an uncomfortable silence in the clearing. Some young men stand to the side, smoking and eyeing J silently. J picks up the rubbish and gathers it in a pile. Tom, Liam and I scurry to help him. 'We can take this back on our way down,' J says, as he leaves it piled by a tree stump.

The boys take a drink of water from the bottle in my backpack and then skip off again up the trail. The slope of the trail steepens from here on, but the boys take to it like leaping hares. 'A lot of the people that come up here have parents or maids waiting on them hand and foot at home,' J states clearly, with no hint of bitterness, 'they don't really understand that when they throw something 'away', there is no such place as 'away'.' 'Does it annoy you?' I ask him as we walk past a

few recently discarded cigarette butts that he picks up and stuffs into the outside pocket of his backpack. 'It used to,' he says, 'it used to really bother me, but now, more and more, I just focus on doing what I can; reminding people to be more aware and picking up as much as I can. I have stopped leaking energy by judging others and feeling anger towards them.' He breathes deeply and strides ahead after the boys.

After two hours of steep ascent, we emerge from the canopy of trees and stand beneath a foggy sky. There is a group of panting hikers sprawled out on some rocks and they laugh at their own exhaustion, as they remark on Tom and Liam's energy and stamina. The boys are fuelled by the adrenalin of the walk and they quickly run up the last few hundred metres to the top of Monte Crista. As they play on the rocks, surrounded by a heavy white mist, J and I sit down on the grass and prepare a sandwich lunch. Tom comes over to where we are seated, takes my tin whistle from the pocket of my backpack and plays the music 'Gabriel's oboe'. Thus, heralding our arrival on the mountaintop. I smile with pleasure at Tom playing this special song for us and the continued good humour of the boys on this challenging walk. I am not the only walking flute in the family, it seems.

After a quick lunch of cheese sandwiches and apples, the cold air of the mountain top starts to chill us. We gather our things together and walk to the edge of the mountain. 'When there is no mist, you get great views from up here,' J laughs, pointing in front of us, 'over there to the east is the sea and there to the south, you can see the city of Joinville.' All we can see is the white mist before us. The pajés of the Guarani often lived alone on mountain tops, especially where they could see the sea. This provided the pajé with better vision spiritually as well as physically. Here we are now at the top of the mountain and our vision is totally limited. We are in a bubble of visibility surrounded by mist and all we can see are the rocks dotted with purple ambrosia flowers among the vegetation. We stand on a rock, which J tells me is on the edge of a sheer drop down the mountain that is invisible to us now. I can't see the abysses that surround us nor how tiny we really are in this landscape. Perhaps it is not yet my place to have the vision of the pajé. Maybe it is enough to focus on the ground on which my feet are walking right now. 'Mum, I think we are *in* the clouds,' Liam says excitedly. I call both boys quickly to me and we move to safer ground together. I hug them close, warming us up.

'Over here to the west, you can see the rest of the Serra do Mar, the

mountains of the sea leading into the state of Paraná,’ J points, ‘the Caminho de Peabiru continues in that direction over the Quiriri fields.’ J leads us to the other side of the mountain top. A huge stone stands out against the mist. ‘The Guardian,’ I say quietly, as I move closer towards it. It is 10 metres high and its profile looks like a man sitting down. It has a head and a body and his legs are in a sitting position. I can’t tell if this it is a natural formation or somehow created or placed by man. ‘I think the body used to be one block of stone,’ J says, standing next to me, ‘but it has cracked at certain places that gives the impression that it is sitting. Maybe the head was placed there or maybe it fell there by chance.’ The boys and I walk down to the huge stone and walk three times around it and I say a silent prayer when we finish. There is a small space between the stones and I crouch inside, nestled into the middle of ‘The Guardian. I play my couple of tin whistle tunes for him.

When I come back outside, the boys have started a sword fight with their bamboo walking sticks and I see tears ahead. This is my cue for starting our descent. I lean on the base of ‘The Guardian and look in the same direction as he is looking. All I see is mist before us. ‘Hey,’ I say to J, ‘he is looking westward, right?’ J nods in agreement. ‘The Sumé Stones and the rock art on the coast look eastward towards paradise, towards Yvy Mara Ey,’ I remark with pleasure, ‘now, this Sumé Stone is looking westward, in the direction that the Caminho de Peabiru is taking us.’ I laugh with delight as I hug against the huge stone. ‘Looks like he will be looking over you, guarding you on your path,’ J smiles at me, giving voice to my sensation, before he turns to walk down the mountain.

I call the boys to me, each of us shaking visibly now from the cold of the mountain top. The three of us move on together. I can’t see anything through the mist, but I feel quietly guided and guarded as I go.





Serra do Mar, Sul do Brasil, julho de 2012.

## A PLAGUE ON NATURE

The Caminho de Peabiru leads me inland through the Brazilian state of Paraná in the direction of Paraguay. The state is named after the river that runs endless like the sea through it. Five hundred years ago, as Cabeza de Vaca and his two hundred and fifty men made their way along the Caminho de Peabiru, this area was a tangle of thick Atlantic Forest. They were guided by Guaraní from the island of Florianópolis but they were entering now into the territory of other tribes. Their pace was slow and cautious, taking nineteen days to cover two hundred kilometres from the mouth of the Itapocu river, before arriving at the region where the colonial town of Lapa is now situated. Earlier in his life, in young adulthood, Cabeza de Vaca had been taken prisoner by a native American tribe near modern day Florida and was kept captive for eight years before he managed to gain the trust of the indigenous people and secure his own freedom. The experience had been transformative for him, turning the young, gold-greedy conqueror into a more humane, more respectful man. His pace, and his survival, along the Caminho de Peabiru in 1541 attests to that.

The tangle of Atlantic Forest has since been decimated since he was here. As I travel by bus over the 100km from the foot of the Serra do Mar to the colonial town of Lapa, the only remnant of the area's former verdant glory are the few native araucaria trees dotting the conquered landscape of orderly plantations and industrial towns. The last araucaria trees, or monkey puzzle trees, stand tall and resilient on long, thin trunks, their branches sprouting ten metres above our heads, outstretched like layers and layers of bare arms pointing their leafy palms upwards towards the heavens. They seem to be in an ecstasy of grace — a willing surrender. Like this posture in today's material world, the araucaria is in danger of extinction.

The towns in this state are so very, very new. Some boast only seventy or eighty years of existence. Others, like the town of Lapa that I visit, were created in the eighteenth century as resting points for the cattle-herders or tropeiros that rounded up the abundant wild cattle abandoned by the Jesuit missions in the far south of the country and drove them northwards towards the ever-expanding metropolis of São Paulo. The tropeiros trail may well have been built in some places along the Caminho de Peabiru.

While the coast of the Caminho de Peabiru was mostly colonised by the

Portuguese, inland Paraná was colonized later in the 18th and 19th Century by other nationalities, mostly waves of German, Italians, Dutch, Polish, and Japanese.

The historic centre of Lapa huddles around a well-groomed square with bronze busts of important colonial leaders. I have lunch in the courtyard of an old colonial building and visit the small ornate wooden theatre, before visiting the municipal museum. It is here that the silence of the indigenous people builds to a crescendo for me. This land was inhabited by indigenous groups for an estimated 12,000 years before the arrival of the Europeans, while the town was created less than 300 years ago. Nevertheless, the museum is teeming with information and artefacts from the colonial history of the town but the indians are relegated to the forgotten drawer of minimal archaeological interest, with one listless glass case displaying a paltry selection of stone spear heads and mortars and pestles.

There is a demographic void in Paraná's precolonial history. The state's official history is a blip of blind colonial pride preceded by a deafening silence.

I travel further westward by bus, plunging deeper and deeper into the patchwork landscape of Paraná towards Campo Mourão and its neighbouring sixty year old municipality called Peabiru, in honour of this ancient path. The land rises and falls over hundreds of kilometres of rolling hills. The bus winds through a never-ending stretch of cultivated fields with clumps of green forest huddled around river sources. Most clumps appear to be secondary forests, rather than the original Atlantic Forest of tall araucarias and ancient round fig, cedar and brazilwood trees. Lines of eucalyptus plantations, imported from Australia, stand in military uniformity for kilometres and kilometres. These are the dead forests, where no birds build their nests, no undergrowth survives the greedy thirst of these green colonisers. I alight from the bus at Campo Mourão, one of the many new towns hobbled together, mostly unaware of the ancient landscape it invades. I have arranged to walk for two days with a guide that promotes the Caminho de Peabiru. My guide is a young man of mixed African and European descent and he captivates me quickly with both an intelligence and wisdom that belie his youth.

It seems that as soon as I turned off the Peabiru sacred coast, the weather turned too. My guide and I drive in a pick-up truck in the rain to a small forest reserve where a statue of the virgin Mary is placed in the hollow of a large garlic-wood tree, next to a large stone painted in 2004 to mark the beginning of the

Caminho de Peabiru in this area. As the rain pours down, we share a chimarrão in the truck. When the rain lightens, we walk through the small reserve, which is a mixture of original and secondary forest. The air reeks of garlic from the abundant garlic-wood trees. The smell transports me back to the Saint's Road in Ireland, where the dainty white flowers of wild garlic purified our path. There is a hushed silence in the reserve. I can hear no birds or insects. 'This reserve is privately owned, ' my guide tells me, as we walk in the drizzling rain. 'By law, the landowners have to maintain some of the land as a reserve.'

'How does it work?' I ask, 'is it a certain percentage of their land?'

'Yes, but the government are just about to redraft a law defining the balance between forest and plantations,' he explains to me. 'The current law has been in force since the early 1960s. The law stipulates the distance from rivers that you can plant crops and puts restrictions on cutting trees.'

'So do you think more land will be liberated for plantation or preserved with the new law?' I ask.

'I don't know,' he says candidly, 'seems like there are lots of voices in the negotiations, from farmers and land-owners to hard-core environmentalists. There does seem to be some genuine interest in providing incentives to maintain the original forest that still exists and to link up forest reserves into green corridors so that the endangered wildlife has some chance of survival.'

'Well, it is good that it is being discussed, that there is some hope of preservation,' I say, my feet squelching over the wet, muddy soil.

'Nature's last hope here,' my guide says in a low voice, 'this whole area of Paraná used to harvest wood and sell and export it, but now the original Atlantic Forest has almost all been cut down. There is only about 10% of it left. The landowners do plant trees now but mostly foreign species like pine or eucaliptus, which grow quickly and can be harvested in eight to ten years.'

'Is wood still the major crop?' I ask.

'No. Once the original forest was mostly destroyed, the plantation frenzy began in the 1970s. Landowners mostly plant coffee, soy-bean, sugar-cane, wheat, corn, mate, mono-cultural crops like that.'

‘Are there government nature reserves?’

‘Yes, but very few. Only 2% of the existing Atlantic Forest is protected. One example is the reserve at the Iguazu Falls to the west, but the farmers plant right up to the very edge of the reserves.’ He half-laughs in distaste, ‘they even plant in the space between the fence of the Iguazu reserve and the road. To get maximum plantation coverage.’

The private forest reserve comes to an abrupt end and we walk now along the dirt paths that criss-cross along the side of endless plantations. This landscape has been carved up for tractors and pick-up trucks, not walking pilgrims and we sink into the ochre red mud and swallow the dust of passing 4x4 vehicles as we move.

A small stretch reminds me of Ireland with its rolling, patchworked hills and out of nowhere I am filled me with a stomach-churning nostalgia. Even the cold is reminiscent of Ireland, though it is late September and the temperatures should be higher, even at the altitude of this Paraná altiplano.

Most of the gold and green plantations of wheat, corn and soy in the fields have been harvested and many of the tall green sugar-cane plantations have been reduced to charred devastations. Smoke is visible on the horizon as more sugar-cane plantations are burned. Only the low coffee plants, heavy with yellow beans, seem to be left growing. The whole landscape has been mowed down, each field imprinted with the colour of its crop. The earth lies raped about me — its soul beaten to within an inch of its life.

‘Why do they burn the sugar-cane?’ I ask my guide as we walk.

‘It makes it easier for the labourers to cut it,’ he tells me, ‘the fire burns all the superfluous leaves around the sugar-cane and then the labourers are brought by bus from the city to cut the remaining sugar cane.’

‘I guess it’s good that they have some work?’ I suggest.

‘I’m not so sure. It’s tough work. It’s even rumoured that some labourers take crack cocaine to persevere through it. Cutting sugar cane manually will be illegal in the next couple of years and sugar cane will have to be harvested mechanically. Once harvested, it is made into alcohol to fuel cars here or exported

to Europe and Asia to mix with the tarmac that makes roads. Exporting of sugar cane has been happening for hundreds of years of course. It was one of the main crops cultivated in Brazil at the beginning of the colonisation and over four million Africans were brought over as slaves to work on the plantations.'

'There is no denying that there are some benefits to technology,' I conclude, 'better for a machine to cut sugar cane than exploiting human beings or leading them to take cocaine.' My guide nods his head in agreement, 'there are huge benefits to technology when it is applied in a way that improves the wellbeing of all people involved, not just the hands of the few that control it. My life, and yours I imagine, are much easier and freer these days in large part because of technological advance.'

We pass a tractor in a field, which is full of weeds and yellow wild flowers. The driver of the tractor is wearing a mask over his mouth and waves at us in a friendly way as we pass.

'Why is he wearing a mask?' I ask, surprised.

'He is about to spray the ground with insecticide to prepare it to replant soy. Soy gets sprayed up to seven or nine times before it is harvested,' my guide responds.

'Isn't it dangerous that he sprays while we are walking?' I ask, taken aback.

My guide shrugs his shoulders. 'You have to be in direct contact with the insecticide to kill you quickly. It kills everything that walks over it, weeds, insects, wild pigs, rats and bigger rodents like capivari and gambás. It shouldn't harm us if we don't walk through the field.'

'It doesn't bode well that the driver is wearing a mask over his mouth,' I say and hold my breath as we pass the tractor.

'I never drink or eat anything with soy,' my guide confides to me, 'given that I know how much poison is sprayed on it. I always study the ingredients' label of any drinks I buy for example until I am sure they don't contain soy.'

I nod at him as he talks, still holding my breath.

We walk in the direction of an indigenous burial site, which is on privately owned land. Along the way, the local Peabiru interest group have put two



pilgrimage stations to mark the path. On a hill overlooking the rolling valley of harvested fields, there is a weathered ceramic statue of Saint Thomas blesses us as we pass. The small shrine is an odd catholic-pagan mixture, with a concrete pyramid at the saint's feet and a clump of the St. George's Sword plant nearby to ward off evil spirits. We walk up the hill steadily and look down on the vast expanse of plantations beneath us.

The second pilgrimage station is the skeletal head of a cow with one horn which is attached to a wooden stake to remember the passing of the intrepid Cabeza de Vaca, or Cow's Head in English, through this region. Two famous white men associated with the Caminho de Peabiru are remembered, while all that is left to remember the thousands of Guarani that have followed the sacred path is the lacklustre burial ground. At the burial ground, all I can see are unidentifiable scraps of clay urns at the base of a mango tree and a commemorative stone, whose inscription has been completely worn. 'It's difficult to get funding to maintain the route,' my guide tells me with a sigh, 'and our annual walks are petering out.'

'Why?' I ask, surprised.

'A new Guarani village set up just outside the town a year ago, and they said that they didn't want the Caminho de Peabiru to be commercialized, that it is sacred to them. Some of the group of organizers think we shouldn't organise paid Peabiru walks anymore. The steam has gone out of the efforts to promote it around here. There have also been some cases of vandalism on the organised walks. On an organised Peabiru walk in August in Pitanga nearby, someone wrote his name on top of Jesuit symbols engraved on the rocks.'

'You're kidding me,' I exclaim.

He shakes his head despairingly.

I realise that the thought hadn't entered my mind that the Guarani might object to the jurua following the Caminho de Peabiru. The practice of organised walks along the Caminho de Peabiru is strongest here in Campo Mourão. But on this walk, there are monuments created to honour São Tomé and Cabeza de Vaca — the Caminho's non-indian personalities that are part of the jurua culture. My guide F on the coast, who led me with the group from the Caminho de Santiago association, is also trying to promote guided walks there. He brought us to the

Massiambu tekoá and our interest was mostly on Aleixo Garcia having lived there before heading off westward on the Caminho de Peabiru. Once again, focusing on the Europeans' experience of the Caminho de Peabiru. I have seen some newspaper articles and municipal proposals talking of the opportunity for local business offered by the Caminho de Peabiru or the Caminho de São Tomé as it often called. It dawns on me that we juruá are in danger of doing it again — appropriating a Guaraní treasure for our own blind interests.

With a start, I realise that I myself didn't ask permission or an explicit blessing from the Guaraní to follow the Camino do Peabiru. I had identified with the pilgrimage as a Latin American cousin of the Camino de Santiago, which had been such a transformative experience for me in my twenties and the link to such a popular pilgrimage had promised a possible English-language audience for this, my book on the Caminho de Peabiru. I think back on my interactions with the three tekoás on the coast. In the first, the çaique M showed concerted disinterest in what we were doing and a reluctance to speak with us. In the second, E, the female çaique did speak with us and the community received our offer of lunch so that we could eat with them. E did not speak about the Caminho de Peabiru directly however. In the third tekoá, I remember how I had bluntly informed Wherá Tupá that I was already doing the Caminho de Peabiru and how he shook his head and said 'Biru, biru' at me. Internally, I cringe. I hadn't asked any Guaraní representative how they felt about me doing the pilgrimage, but rather had just informed them I was doing it. Even still, I was graciously received to sit by the sacred fire in the Opy prayer house in Wherá Tupá's tekoá. No doubt I appeared both arrogant and insensitive to them yet they gently welcomed and included me. They didn't talk to me about the Caminho de Peabiru, but they let me sit with them in silence at their sacred fire and smoke their sacred pipe. I feel deeply humbled.

A stronger and more authentic desire arises in me to use this book to contribute to the current plight of the Guaraní and to bridge in some small way the distance between the Guaraní and my readers in Brazil. I am undertaking the Caminho de Peabiru as a historical pilgrimage, following the footsteps of mythical or historical figures as the beginning of a true encounter with the Guaraní but also as part of my own inner psychological and spiritual path in our shared, universal search for greater lightness of being and transcendence.

‘Look over here,’ my guide says, pulling me out of my thoughts. He points out an indentation in a field of high grass to our left. ‘That is probably the remains of an old road, probably Peabiru,’ he says, ‘the problem with the Caminho de Peabiru here is that most of the land and the archaeological sites have been destroyed by intensive farming and the government has done little in terms of preservation. The trails have all been made into roads and it is difficult to know exactly where the Caminho de Peabiru passed. Like the forest and the fauna here, indigenous history is on the brink of extinction.’

We walk onwards, on our symbolic Caminho de Peabiru. When we are nearly back to the truck, we meet a wild-eyed local farmer in a blue felt hat and an unbuttoned yellow shirt and torn blue shorts. He is carrying a bale of hay and two small dogs snap at his ankles as he moves.

‘When we arrived here, 30 years ago, this was all forest,’ he says nostalgically, pointing all around him. ‘We used to hunt all kinds of animals here, deer, wild boars, even jaguars. Now there are none left around here. Even if we were allowed, there’s nothing left to hunt.’

‘The Atlantic Forest houses 60% of the endangered species in Brazil,’ my guide tells me as we take our leave from the farmer, ‘there are many primates and birds that simply don’t exist anywhere else and are on the brink of extinction.’

‘How are the farmers faring here?’ I ask, slightly shocked at the farmer’s dishevelled appearance.

‘Most of the farmers are part of the cooperative COAMA, which is the largest farming cooperative in Latin America. That way the farmer gets a fair price for his harvest. Farm labourers are becoming more scarce and the whole process is becoming mechanised.’

‘The same changes happened in Europe,’ I tell him, drawing from my limited knowledge from my Irish urban upbringing, ‘but here it seems so fast and so recent. It sounds like a mere thirty years ago, everything was so different.’ He nods his head slowly in somewhat melancholy agreement.

We drive to a farm for lunch, that has opened an eco-hotel on its land. The farm was set up by a Swedish man in the 1960s and almost half of the land has been protected as primary or secondary forest. Though the Swedish man

died eight years ago, his octegenarian wife and their son and family continue to manage the farm and the hotel. We sit eating a lunch of rice and beans with the owner. I congratulate her on her concern for the environment and she laughs light-heartedly. 'When we first came here in the 60s, my husband put up a sign saying 'Here, we protect flora and fauna, no hunting or fishing allowed.' Nobody understood what he was talking about. The local farmers thought him a crazy foreigner.'

After lunch, we walk through the forest with the owner's son, now in his forties. An abundance of butterflies buzz around us as the sunrays of early afternoon dapple the forest with a magical light. 'What do you plant on the rest of the land?' I ask him as we walk past a hazy blue stream. 'We used to plant coffee and soy,' he says, 'but now we focus on sugar-cane and eucaliptus trees.' I close my eyes momentarily, as a stray sunray warms my face. 'Isn't eucaliptus bad for the soil?' I ask innocently, my eyes still closed. The owner's son stops abruptly and his voice hardens. 'Well,' he begins defensively, 'soy does much more damage than eucaliptus. When we planted soy up until 1994, we used to spray it four or five times with insecticide, now they spray it seven or even up to nine times. That damages the soil much more than planting eucalyptus. It's true that eucalyptus trees don't let other vegetation grow or encourage wildlife, but once they are cut, the land quickly regenerates.'

His defensive tone snaps me out of my relaxed post-lunch mood. 'What about organic farming,' I ask reactively 'is that an option for a farm like this?' 'I don't know of any examples of organic farms around here,' he says curtly. With that, he starts to walk ahead of me at a faster pace, and I scurry after him, the spell of the forest broken now. It seems I have touched a nerve.

As we come to the end of the forest trail, he shakes my hand to say goodbye, adding in a sad tone. 'The truth is that man is a plague on nature, whatever way you look at it, man is a plague.'

My guide and I leave the farm and start our walk along our symbolic Caminho de Peabiru again. The farmer's words ring through my mind. 'Man is a plague on nature. Man is a plague on nature.' Are we a plague though? My experience in Paraná would lead me to agree with this defensive farmer, trying to maintain his business and family in the cut-throat, competitive environment of

today's agricultural world, while also honouring his father's pioneering efforts to preserve nature.

The colonisation of Brazil does seem to have been a plague on nature. What though about the Guarani? When they lived in their traditional ways, with their much smaller population, were they a plague? In the Guarani story of origin, mother earth tells man, Tupã-mirim that he has the power to create. Man is a co-creator of the earth, and what he thinks and says becomes matter. *'Man came down from the mountain with the talents of the earth and the talents of the sky. He tried out his power saying: 'arara' and the first parrot was created. Then, he said 'urkurea' and the first owl appeared..(..). And that is how it happened with all of the fish, plants and animals.'*

For the Guarani, man was not given a divine right to use nature, but a divine responsibility and opportunity to create. We colonisers and their mixed-race descendants in Brazil have treated nature with arrogant superiority as a useful and exploitable possession, as has happened in the rest of the industrialised world. The Guarani way of looking at the world on the other hand seems to suggest loving co-creation. What we create is part of us and we are part of it.

The Guarani were a semi-sedentary tribe that lived in small communities of extended family. They used to move from place to place every six or seven years after they had used up local resources. They would plant seeds of trees and plants before they left and then move on to different land, allowing nature to recuperate. When they returned to the earlier land, there would be plentiful trees and wildlife to feed the members of the tekoá. Some writers believe that the Guarani's constant search for Yvy Marã Ey is a reference to their constant wanderings and migrations towards new, untouched, fertile lands.

I wonder if there is any way our world of seven billion could come back into some kind of a rhythm with nature again? I have heard about the Kayapó Indians in the Amazon forest who to this day, make small clearings in the forest and plant medicinal herbs, plant brazil nut seeds all year, build soil and use companion planting. I have also heard of the promising work of Ernst Goetsch in the Northeast of Brazil with his synthropic agriculture, where he co-creates with nature, creating healthy soil as well as harvesting crops and providing a sustainable alternative to farming. There is the biodynamic farming movement as well that promises more balance, more integration and sustainability for man and nature.

Indigenous, synthropoc and biodynamic agriculture however seem so distant from the destructive agricultural practices on this Paraná altiplano.

As I walk, I wonder if there is any way *I* could get back into some kind of rhythm with nature again? I am your quintessential 21st Century blind plague on nature. In thirty six years, I have flown about one hundred times on planes, many of which have been trans-Atlantic flights. For the first half of my life, my parents drove me to school, to activities, on holidays and for the last nine years, I have been driving my own three children around in an even more frenzied way. How many tonnes of waste have I produced? As I walk onwards, I wonder sullenly if the huge pile of my children's nonbiodegradable plastic nappies will be the longest lasting legacy that I leave on this earth.

I walk for four kilometres with my guide along a dirt road, waking up like never before to my own arrogant, unconscious treatment of nature, as the sky threatens rain again. A couple of cars pass us along the way and stop to offer us a lift. They balk at us incredulously when we tell them that we would rather walk. Here in Paraná, where there are no paths and only mud roads and insecticides, people simply do not walk for pleasure anymore.

Along the reddened track, we come to a clump of forest surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. My guide holds apart the barbed wire for me and I squeeze through to the forested area. We weave our way laboriously through thick, wild forest. Branches catch at my hair and over-ground roots grasp at my ankles. When we battle our way into the middle of the dense forest, my guide crouches down and points to a large stone that is partially protruding from the ground.

I crouch down beside him among the twigs and leaves, next to the dark grey stone. As I look closely, I see that three concentric circles have been engraved into the stone, one inside the other. I gasp as I see them, taken aback. The stone looks so ancient and so lost in this thicket of forest: a forgotten message from a forgotten past. I pass my hand over its moist surface and feel a giddyness. Nobody has studied this. Nobody has signposted its existence. I am filled with a sense of intimacy, this is just between my guide, the one who carved it and me, crouched here in the undergrowth, touching it, tracing its concentric circles with my fingers.

This is an echo of the spiral found on a stone by St. Brendan's Saint's Road last year and the concentric circles I saw on the rocky outcrops on the eastern coast



of Brazil. I am awash with a sense of privilege and I beam a smile of gratitude at my guide.

The universe is playing hide and seek with me. Here I am in the far west of Paraná, squirming at man's self-destructive greed and blindness, and my own, and out of nowhere, life has presented me with a mysterious stone with the sacred symbol of the concentric circles. 'You know,' my guide says, breaking the silence, 'for the Guarani these concentric circles are the emanations from the central beginning, the Great Mystery. There are three circles here and the Guarani God Tupã is known as the third emanation. He is the God of thunder, god of the West. He breathed a blessing into man's left ear and it became intelligence and he breathed a blessing into man's right ear and it became wisdom. Tupã made his painting in man's head which is called thought, which both creates and destroys. This is the most difficult cycle for mother earth, because humanity almost extinguishes her, with its incorrect use of the power to create. Due to the bad seeds that have accumulated in his blood — fear, illusion, slavery, forgetfulness of our true nature — humans create an era of possessiveness, dispute, attachments and a feeling of omnipotence that endangers the very earth they walk on.'

#### THE SPIRITUAL CONQUEST OF THE GUARANI

There is a parasitic fig tree in Brazil that slowly kills its host tree. It grows on top of the host tree, using it as a base to extend its huge, hungry roots and suck all of the water and minerals from the earth nearby. The host tree slowly dies away, leaving the core of the fig tree hollow.

I step inside the hollowed centre of a sprawling fig tree in the ruins of an old Spanish colonial town on the outskirts of a town called Phoenix in Paraná and a chill runs up my spine.

The town is named after the phoenix because it is a city that arose from the ashes of a much earlier village, called Villarrica del Espirito Santo, created at the end of the 16th Century to secure these lands called Guairá for the Spanish crown. The fact that this area is now Paraná, part of the portuguese-speaking Brazil, highlights the failure of this effort. The Portuguese pushed back the boundaries with Spain and the colonial town was eventually settled six hundred kilometres away in its current location in Paraguay.

To get to the town of Fenix from Campo Mourão, my guide and I drive 60 km past endless cultivated fields with palm tree borders and random clusters of trees around the water sources. I wonder if any wildlife survives in these clumps of nature. Surely they need larger spaces to hunt and thrive. We drive through nameless warehouse towns, many with large statues of Jesus or grottos of Our Lady at their entrance. This is still staunch Catholic country, with evangelical churches only beginning to creep stealthily into the towns. We drive to a small nature reserve that houses the four hundred and fifty year old ruins of the Spanish town of Villarrica del Espiritu Santo, which was strategically located where the river Ivaí meets the river Corumbataí. As we drive through the gate and nod at the sleepy guards, the forest is lush about us. The reserve is a refreshing oasis of wilderness after the endless uniformity of machine-sown plantations. I breathe more freely and enjoy the shade. When Villarrica was created, the area was inhabited by the Guarani and Jê tribes and must all have looked much like this lush oasis of preserved forest.

We stop the car and look through the one-roomed museum. A model of the town shows the square, with a church and cross at its centre, surrounded by rows of mud houses with clay-slate roofs. Religion and politics hand in hand. Over the centuries, the mud houses have crumbled in on themselves to form little mounds, reclaimed now by Atlantic Forest.

We walk on a trail graciously carpeted with brown and green leaves, through the forest down to the river. The branches of the stout trees around us clasp each other above our heads, shading us as we walk. Rays of sunlight break through the canopy to spotlight birds and fallen logs. The forest is heaving with life and I congratulate myself on recognizing the red-backed guaxo bird and the yellow-bellied bem-te-vi. A lizard, half-a-metre long, scuttles loudly out of the foliage and swaggers unperturbed across our path. This trail used to be the main road in the village, which survived mostly from maté plantations.

‘Was this a Jesuit mission?’ I ask my guide as we walk.

‘No,’ my guide responds thoughtfully, ‘this town dates to just before the Jesuit missions.’

‘Really? Didn’t Cabeza de Vaca meet a catequized indian in the region on the Caminho de Peabiru in 1541 and employ him as a guide,’ I said.

‘Other religious orders were active, Franciscans and Dominicans for example but the Jesuits came nearer the end of the century. The first Jesuits arrived as the town of Villarrica was being relocated to this site in 1589. You’re Irish, right? Did you know that one of the first Jesuits in this region was an Irishman called Thomas Fields? He was from a place called Limerick.’

I stop walking and laugh out loud. How bizarre life is! Here I am, a random Irish woman, following the Caminho de Peabiru, a possible Way of St. Thomas and I discover that one of the first catequising Jesuit to use these same paths over four hundred years ago is an Irish man called Thomas! He even comes from the same part of Ireland as my own father. As the surprise settles in, I realise that it also shows how my Irish ancestors too have had some part in colonising and catequising. Millions of Irish emigrated to North America, enabling those of us who remained on our native soil to survive and thrive, while they made a new life for themselves on Native American land. Only a small number of Irish came to South America, but perhaps since St. Brendan set out to find paradise in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, we have been involved in missionary work here in Brazil as demonstrated by Fr. Thomas Fields. I myself came to South America on a secular but charity-driven mission, unconsciously inculcated in me as a young Catholic in a strongly missionary Ireland.

My guide continues, unperturbed by my surprise, ‘at first, the Jesuits were wandering evangelists, moving among the indian villages with their crosses and their books of biblical images but by 1610, the indians were being *reduced*, their freedom limited as they were gathered in ‘missions’. The leading Jesuit priest here, Montoya, justified the missions as a way of facilitating their work of ‘spiritual conquest’, which was impeded by the fact that the indians lived dispersed in the jungle, the mountains and the valleys. In settled missions, the Jesuits could ensure that the indians lived in a civilized way, ensuring that they were wearing cotton to cover their traditional nakedness for example.’

‘Montoya was one of the first people to write about the Caminho de Peabiru, wasn’t he?’ I ask.

‘Yes,’ my guide nods his head, ‘he spoke about a wide, extensive trail, which must have been used nonstop for the Jesuit’s catequising efforts. He also wrote about St. Thomas as being the true identity of the Guarani’s Sumé. He wrote even

that he had in his possession a piece of wood from St Thomas' cross.'

He stops for a moment before continuing, 'although Villarrica wasn't a mission, fifteen missions were later built in this region, allowing the Jesuits to win the souls of thousands of indians to make up for the great loss of followers in Europe due to the Protestant Reformation.'

I nod in understanding. 'This same religious battles continues in Brazil today with the protestant evangelicals making huge strides in winning over traditionally Catholic communities.'

'But why did the Indians join the missions?' I ask uncomprehendingly, 'it must have been hell for such wandering souls to be stuck in one place and held to an exact schedule.'

'The Guaraní joined the Jesuit missions as a means of survival. Their traditional means of living off the land, by fishing, hunting and semi-nomadic subsistence farming, were no longer feasible since the rude arrival of the Europeans. The Guaranis' options were to be treated like slaves in the Spanish encomienda system or hunted by the Portuguese bandeirantes who raided the forests to capture them as slaves for the unmanned plantations in São Paulo. Countless hundreds of thousands if not millions of indians were killed, tortured and enslaved by these bandeirantes.'

'But,' I protest, 'the bandeirantes are considered heroes here in Brazil. I saw bronze statues of several of them at the entrance of towns that I passed on my busride through Paraná.'

'They are heroes in a way for Brazil,' the guide continues, 'they are credited with increasing Brazil's territory three-fold as they pushed the Spanish further and further westward and southward, and they discovered a lot of the great mineral wealth of Brazil as they went. They also cleared land of the indigenous and gathered them to sell as slaves.'

'But how could they possibly justify what they were doing? These were Christians, right? Part of their whole justification for colonisation was to bring christianity to the indians,' I beseech of my guide.

'This was wild-west territory,' he reminds me, 'religion was often just a

superficial façade, unconsciously and sometimes consciously providing a sense of righteousness to the most heinous acts. One priest in the 16th Century, Frei Ortiz, said that the God that the colonisers were preaching to the indians was 'Give me gold, Give me gold.' These bandeirantes even went so far as to justify their treatment of the indians as their divine duty, citing the old testament's call to combat pagan nations. There were always a couple of priests with them on their expeditions, to anoint the dead and ease their conscience.'

'So the bandeirantes were the white Portuguese paid by the government?' I ask, trying to get clarity.

'No, no. The bandeirantes were private hoards of adventurous, desperate men from around São Paulo, but their activities were supported or at least not curtailed by the Portuguese government. The bandeirantes were led by a small number of white Portuguese, the ones whose statues still dot the country, but they were made up mostly of indigenous men and caboclos or those with mixed Portuguese and indigenous blood. Many of these caboclos were the sons of bandeirante fathers who had hoards of children with different indigenous women. They even spoke a mix of Portuguese and Tupi-Guarani called Nhangatu. Nhangatu, or the general language as it was also called, was created by the Jesuits and it was the main language used in Brazil at the time until it was outlawed in the mid 18th Century. These bandeirantes had a devastating effect on the country's indigenous people. There were an estimated four million indigenous in Brazil in 1500 and two hundred years later, there were only 300,000. They died in droves from illnesses brought by the colonisers, and thousands of indigenous people were enslaved or killed by the bandeirantes.'

I fall into silence as we walk, trying to digest this painful information.

'Are there any mission ruins nearby that we can visit?' I ask finally. 'No,' he shakes his head. 'The missions were built mostly out of clay here and have literally disintegrated back into the landscape. They were attacked in the mid 17th Century by the Portuguese bandeirantes, led by Raposo Tavares, taking sixty thousand indians as slaves. The indians probably used the Caminho de Peabiru to try and

escape the bandeirantes, who pounded after them down the same trail. The Jesuits fled this region with the surviving twelve thousand indians. They headed south to set up missions further from São Paulo, along the Uruguay river. There are stone ruins there spread throughout southwest Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. I think there are some in Bolivia too.'

My mood is sombre as we walk back to the car and leave the reserve. My initial sense of peace and joy at walking through such exuberant nature is washed aside by sickening dismay at learning again of the physical brutality towards the indigenous people, with God, the God I was baptised and brought up to believe in, used as justification. It was such a long time ago, but it hangs on here in the air somehow, unresolved.

We drive to the nearby town of Phoenix, where we have lunch. As we walk past the catholic church, a large painting above the main entrance grabs my attention. The painting depicts the river Ivaí passing through lush green forest. When I look closer, I see a sandy inlet on the right hand side of the painting. There on the sand, several semi-naked indigenous figures are gathered, waiting as a brown-robed priest baptizes an indigenous man in the river.

I stand looking at this painting and minutes tick by. It is very large, monopolising the front of the church and dated 1974. Is the Catholic Church still so proud of the catequisation of the indigenous, the bulk of whom died soon after, due to their contact with Europeans? I wonder to what extent the Catholic Church questions its role in justifying the brutal colonisation and massacre of the indigenous people of Brazil. In five hundred years, is it possible that the Catholic Church has failed to appreciate the natural spirituality of the Guarani? When the Pope and the bishops go to sleep at night, I wonder how they evaluate their success or failure in bringing the conquistadors or the indigenous closer to God. If the European conquistadors had come to South America without the partnership of the Roman Catholic Church would they have had an even weaker moral compass or would they have come with a more open mind and heart? Would they have been more humble? Less assured of their superiority in all ways physical and spiritual? Would they possibly have come ready to thank the Guaraní for the bounty they often willingly shared and entered into an equal conversation about ways of working harmoniously with the land and each other and growing spiritually?



In Ireland, Christianity arrived much earlier than to the Guaraní's Pindorama. It arrived in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century with Palladius and then St. Patrick. It is said that in Ireland there were no martyrs of the church as the early Christians came with a respect for the animist spirituality of the native Irish and the Irish druids were awaiting them. During the period that followed, a Celtic Christianity flourished in Ireland, a blend of the Irish naturally spiritual ways and Christ consciousness, not a dogmatic one-sided conversion. That came later in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century when the Roman Catholic Church gave papal permission to the British to intervene in Ireland for the first time and bring the Celtic Christianity into the order and discipline of organised religion. That was the end of the uplifting, inclusive Christianity in Ireland and the beginning of colonisation by the British. It strikes me that the two possible Christian Sumés, in whose steps I am following, St. Thomas and St. Brendan, were from a purer, more loving, more open Christianity than the Roman Church that came to prominence later in its history. If it was one of those early Christian saints, they did indeed come from technologically more advanced people, who had entered into a relationship of active transformation with the land. The stories of Sumé would bear witness to how they shared this knowledge with the hunter-gatherer Guaraní, teaching them how to engage in agriculture. If Sumé was St. Thomas or St. Brendan, they also shared a more pure, loving Christianity with the Guaraní in contrast to the Christianity that was superficially professed and used as justification for the violent and arrogant behaviour of the conquistadors. The endless wave of colonial Sumés, who could have shared their agricultural and technological know-how in exchange for the local and spiritual knowledge that the Guaraní had in abundance, have been such a devastating, disappointing curse for the tribe and for their sacred land.

This painting's image of the riverside baptism stays with me as we walk along the dusty trails towards our bed for the night. As we walk southwards, the landscape is a technicolor of ochre red against dark green, pressed against the blue-black of the late afternoon sky. To my left, a pale white moon, almost full, is already visible in the sky. To my right, the sun is setting over the chequered hills in a symphony of yellow and pink, with swirls of black smoke rising still from the burning sugar cane. We walk along the red, dusty road, flanked by moon and sun, in subdued silence until the sun disappears and Venus appears on the western horizon and a star-clad cloak of darkness envelops us.

## THE LAKE OF TEARS

I am aching with homesickness. I take a bus homeward early the next morning. I started on this Caminho de Peabiru to encounter a sense of peace, move towards some Guaraní *Yvy Marã Ey*, and all I am finding here in Paraná is a putrid glut of unconscious destruction and cruelty. I am in a world that hurts itself unawares, by hurting those around it. The tragic history of the indigenous people in Brazil, the despicable behaviour of many colonists and their bandeirantes, the collusion of the Catholic Church fills me with a desire to bury my head in the sand, like the wild ostriches I spot from time to time from the bus window. I just want to be near my boys and cuddle up in a protective ball with them. I want to close my eyes and heart to the reality of this continent's history and return to my bubble of middleclass busyness and family fullness. This evil world of salivating greed and decay has nothing to offer me. Surely I need to retreat from it, not immerse myself in it, to achieve some modicum of inner calm. On the coast, this sense of awakening to my adopted home had brought mostly a sense of wonder and intimacy. Inland, the shadow side to this awakening to nature and the history of the land dismays me.

Why, oh why, is Brazil so bloody big that my journey home to Florianópolis on the coast will take fifteen hours? To avoid any further delay, I forgo stopping on the way in Pitanga, to see the Jesuit rock engravings that have been found near the Gamalão waterfalls. These are the same historical engravings that were vandalised by someone on a recent locally-organised Peabiru group walk; another fact that makes my stomach lurch.

I have to make a two-hour stop in Guarapuava however, before taking my final bus back to Florianópolis. Guarapuava means Angry Wolf, referring to the once-plentiful wild wolves that the first colonists found in this area. They are, of course, extinct here now. The air is bitterly cold as I get off the bus in Guarapuava and I close my light rain jacket protectively around my neck. Winter has decided to hang around for the spring it seems. Is it the weather that is crazy, as everyone one says, or we who are crazy for causing its erraticity?

Guarapuava is on the main highway between Paraguay and coastal Brazil, possibly along the Caminho de Peabiru. It is on a major drug-trafficking route and I am wary as I walk out of the bus station. I signal to a waiting taxi-driver and

clamber into the taxi. I know that there is a bronze statue of an indian warrior somewhere in the city and I am determined to see it. Perhaps we Europeans haven't completely blocked out the history of the indigenous people. Perhaps there is some respect left for the ancestral owners of this land.

The taxi drives me along the wide streets of Guarapuava. The city is bigger than I thought and I am soon disoriented. We pass a large, solid bronze statue of a military man on a horse in the middle of a round-about. 'Who is that?' I ask the taxi-driver.

'That is Diogo Portugal,' he says offhandedly. 'He was in charge of building the first fort here in the 18th or 19th Century to secure the lands for Portugal and to protect the first white inhabitants from the indians.'

'Were there Guarani indians here before the Europeans?' I ask.

'I don't think so,' he says, 'there were three other tribes, but I can't remember their names.'

'Do they have a reserve nearby?' I ask, hopeful.

'No,' he laughs good-humoredly, 'those tribes were massacred. They don't exist anymore. I think there is a reserve of Kaingang and Guarani indians not too far away though.'

We come to another statue on a roundabout and I ask the taxi-driver to stop the car, so I can jump out to take a picture. This statue, at two metres high, is much smaller than the earlier one of Diogo Portugal. The statue itself is dwarfed by its five metre base, which is filled with the names of members of the Rotary and Lions Clubs that financed and erected it in 1978. The statue is made of bronze and depicts a proud-looking indigenous man looking defiantly outwards and upwards, wearing a cloth around his waist, a beaded amulet and a feathered head-dress and holding a bow and arrow. By his side a wolf, one of those historically abundant in this region, howls at the sky. The statue pays homage to the great indigenous leader or *caçique*, Guairacá, which means 'The Wolf of the Fields and the Waters. On the base of the statue, there is an inscription with the words 'cô ivi oguerêkô yara'. This was Guairacá's battle-cry against the Spanish in the 16th Century: 'This land already has an owner'.

It is refreshing that the bravery of the indigenous is celebrated, a people that must have shown unimaginable courage and cunning when at war against the guns and canons of the Europeans. The cynic in me notes however that the indigenous leader celebrated here fought against Spanish rule, not Portuguese rule later on. In that way, he can be celebrated as if he was one of the first flag-bearers or bandeirantes, protecting what was to become Portuguese or Brazilian land from the Spanish.

I jump back into the taxi that drops me off at the municipal museum in a pretty, low-roofed colonial building overlooking the original central square of Guarapuava. The museum is full of objects from colonial time, an endless stream of old beds, tables, portraits. I can see only two references to the indigenous in the whole museum. One is a painting depicting or perhaps celebrating, the slaughter of Indians by the Portuguese from their fort in the 18th century. The other is the glass-cased golden book which lists all those who contributed financially to the construction of the Guairacá statue in 1978. Like the bandeirante attacks, the indian statue was privately, not publicly financed. I find no such book on the financing of the Diogo Portugal statue that I passed, which was constructed even more recently.

In the city of São Paulo, there is a huge monument built in honour of the bandeirantes – Monumento as Bandeiras. A group of over 4000 indigenous people and sympathisers splattered it in red paint as an act of protest. The newspapers were outraged what they considered vandalism. One of the indigenous leaders, Marcos Tupã, sent a letter to the press to better explain the protest. What follows is an extract of that letter:

*We marched in direction of this stone statue, called the Monument to the Bandeiras, which honours those who massacred us in the past. We tied a red cloth to the statue, that represented the blood of our forefathers that was spilled by the bandeirantes, of whom the white seem to be so proud. Some non-indigenous supporters understood the force of this symbolic act and painted the statue with red paint. For us indigenous people, paint is not an act of aggression against the body, but a form of transformation. Although some criticize this act, they helped us to transform the body of this work for at least one day. It stopped being stone and blood. It stopped being a monument in honour of the genocides that decimated our people and was transformed into a monument of our resistance. Occupied by our warriors, by our women and children, this new monument made our long-suffering history into something living and beautiful, shouting out to*

*all those who can bear – stop once and for all the shedding of indigenous blood in this country. How can a statue be considered Brazilian heritage, if it honours the genocide of those who are meant to be part of Brazilian society? What type of society pays tribute to genocides before the eyes of its survivors. Only those societies that continue to practice genocide in the present day. This monument for us represents death. For us, art is something different. It is something that transforms bodies and spirits. For us, art is the body transformed into life and freedom and this act of protest was art.*

*Thank you, agnyjevete, for all those who fight!*

I leave the museum, deep in thought, and cross the square to visit the Catholic cathedral which dominates the square. Before being called Guarapuava, the settlement was called Our Lady of Bethlehem, as is the Cathedral. The settlement was taken for Portugal and the Catholic church with the act of possession solemnified by the first mass that was held there in 1771. A priest, Padre Chagas, was decisive in determining the location of the settlement, as he argued that this land was the best location for the cathedral. After the cathedral was built, the town of Guarapuava grew around it.

I push open the heavy wooden doors of the white-painted cathedral and I am blinded by the overwhelmingly elaborate decoration of the interior. All of the walls and the ceiling are intricately painted in gold. Cherubs abound with messages in latin, the stations of the cross are depicted, endless statues line the side naves. The well-trained Catholic girl in me bows and bends her knee, before walking, head down, up the aisle to the front pew. My heart is beating with a fearful uncertainty, as if someone will sense my criticisms of the Catholic Church and throw me out of the cathedral as a blasphemer. I calm myself as I kneel down and focus on the face of Jesus on the cross. It is his message, his example, not the politics of the church, that is of interest.

The altar before me is exquisite and stone angels flank each side of the altar. Behind the altar, a huge painting bears down on me. I do not dare to take a photograph, but I note that on the side of the painting, there are two indians standing in traditional dress, looking upwards towards Jesus on the cross in heaven. To their right side, there are two tall vibrant palm trees that represent Christianity. To their left side, I see a dead tree with a serpent wrapped around it which represents their indigenous beliefs. Palm trees are so sacred to the Guarani.

They are the five cornerstones of their Pindorama world. Sumé himself is said to have survived a flood by holding on to a palm tree. But here they have been distorted and co-opted as part of the syncretic evangelization of the indigenous. I stand up to leave, perplexed.

Outside, I breathe in the fresh, cold air and sigh deeply. I am heavy with a feeling of sadness. Twinges of anger rise and fall but this deep sadness is the stronger emotion. I walk two blocks uphill to my final destination, the Lake of Tears, before I have to go and catch my bus home. The day is grey and overcast as I come to a deserted lack-lustre lake about half a kilometre in circumference, surrounded by concrete paths, roads and office buildings, with some token greenery dotted around it. There are two rusty swan peddalboats tied to the edge. I stand on the verge of grass and look despondent at the lake. Legend says that the lake was formed by the tears of Irassai, the wife of Guairacá. When Guairacá went off to lead the tribes against the Spanish, she had the premonition that he was going to die. Her tears were shed for her husband, for her tribe, for their way of life. The lake strikes me as far too small to represent so much loss.

I stand there and feel so disgusted, so powerless, so lonely. This must be but a shadow of what the indigenous people feel on learning their history, never mind living it. I don't have much time before my bus leaves, but I decide to walk briskly around the lake, to say sorry in a tiny way for the way we Europeans and Catholics have treated them. With my bag heavy on my back, I start to walk. With each step, I pound the concrete path and say the word *sorry* out loud. When I am halfway around the lake, passing the rusty swans, an image of a crying Irassai comes to me. She is bent over on the ground, weeping desolately. All of a sudden, I recognise her pain. We are now just one young widow watching another. I feel within me once again the overwhelming weight of realising that I will never be held by my husband again, that he will never smile at me again, that our children will grow up without their father, that all security and certainty has gone from the world. How would it be to feel on top of that pain, the unbearable despair of knowing that your children's future, your whole family, your whole culture and the sacred earth that has always been your home, was being destroyed?

The sensations I have been feeling throughout this trip in Paraná move from my head to my heart and I crumble in a loud, heaving sob. I have to kneel by the edge of the lake to release the welling pain.



What has happened to the indigenous people of Brazil is not a dusty page in some now irrelevant history book. It is true suffering, a real, palpible pain for the indigenous people and a bloody blot on the history of this country. The situation has not been acknowledged, never mind addressed. How can modern Brazil ever hope to include all people if it won't recognise openly the atrocities it has perpetuated and put a stop to them? The indigenous people continue to be treated like unwanted outcasts on their own soil.

I wipe my face on my sleeve before running around the rest of the lake and hailing a passing taxi. The good humour of the taxi driver shakes me out of myself. After my first couple of monosyllabic answers to his questions, he asks, 'so what is an Irish woman doing visiting Guarapuava?'

I speak quickly, composing myself. 'I came to see the statue of Guairacá, the museum and the cathedral and now, of course, the lake of tears. I am interested in indigenous history and legend.'

'Did you hear about the snake?' he asks me, looking at my tear-stained face through the rearview mirror. I shake my head.

'There is a legend that a child was thrown into the lake and it became a huge serpent, which slithered out of the lake and into the place where the cathedral is now. The cathedral is built on top of the snake and they say that it will be a fearful day if that snake breaks free.'

The taxi-driver's story settles within me, as he drives me back to the bus-station. There is a snake in the Guarani story of origin but it is very different to the symbol of the snake we know from the Christian story. The first man goes to a mountain in the East to learn how to live on earth and sees a cave with a light coming from it. When he enters the cave he sees that the light is coming from a silver snake. It was a snake that filled him with a sense of serenity, not fear. The man asks 'can you teach me how to live on earth?' and the snake says, 'of course, I am the spirit of the earth.'

As the bus lurches through the endless GMO soy and corn plantations on the twelve hour trip from Guarapuava to Florianópolis, a great sadness fills me as I think of how the spirit of the earth has been buried and trampled in this state of Paraná. Even the Caminho de Peabiru itself has been covered in tarmac or

neglected into disappearance. Perhaps though it was always more a spiritual than a physical path.

How different to the Saint's Road in Ireland and Spain's Camino de Santiago! On the Camino de Santiago, the trail has been largely maintained since the Christian pilgrimage began over 1000 years ago. You can follow the Camino by foot for over 800 km in Spain, or by bicycle or horse if you prefer. The state of Presence that I experienced on the Camino de Santiago came from weeks of walking along trails, mostly immersed in nature and following clear yellow arrows. There were pilgrims, generous locals and plenty of hostels, restaurants and waterfountains to support me along the route. There was little need to exercise my over-worked brain and I could slip naturally and easefully into a more intuitive and peaceful state. The combination of unfettered walking and embracing nature lulled me organically into a delicious state of meditation or Presence. On the Caminho de Peabiru however, the trail has dissolved back into the landscape or been covered with tarmac by five centuries of fevered activity. Many of the main South Brazilian highways are built along the Caminho de Peabiru. Even where the trail does still pass through natural surroundings, it has not been maintained or way-marked.

On this Caminho de Peabiru, my left brain is constantly busy, reconstructing the trail from different sources, learning the history of the path, searching out guides and places associated with Peabiru. On the Camino de Santiago I was held externally, so that I could go deeper internally. On the Caminho de Peabiru in contrast, I have to keep my wits about me to navigate my way. Along the coast, there were moments of sublime beauty and introspection, glimpses too of Presence at the Guarani fire and sitting by the ancient rockart. But here inland, I am immersed more in the violent past of this region and its destructive present. The sense of disgust and dismay that I am feeling at the violence and injustice towards the indigenous and towards the earth itself is only intensifying on this pilgrimage. I am becoming more aware of the country's past, of the ongoing injustices, but I long to escape it all. I long to melt back into wild nature about me, cast off all worries, sing a song of Presence. Isn't that what pilgrimage is all about?

The Guarani in general follow the Caminho de Peabiru as a pilgrimage from the West and move towards the sacred coast in the East in the direction of Yvy Marã Ey. Their earlier origins are in the West, the Amazon, central Paraguay and

they migrated to the East. From the 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Centuries, it seems they did follow the paths from East to West but their objectives on those trips seem to have been more bellicose or at least commercial rather than spiritual.

After a while of living relatively peacefully with the Azorian colonists in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, they also escaped along these paths westward, but in a bid for desperate survival in the face of violence and oppression. The early European conquistadors too, like Aleixo Garcia and Cabeza de Vaca, also went from east to west but they went in the direction of power and riches.

It dawns on me that as a pilgrim on the Caminho de Peabiru, I am going in the wrong direction.



Paraná, South Brazil, September 2012



Lapa, Paraná, South Brazil, July 2012.



Paraná, South Brazil, September 2012.









Guairacá



Fênix, Paraná, September 2012.



Lagoa de Lágrimas, Paraná, setembro de 2012.

## IN SEARCH OF REDEMPTION – THE JESUIT MISSIONS

The Jesuit missions are the only experience that offers any hint of redemption for colonist Europe's history towards Brazil's indigenous people. When the Jesuits and the 12,000 Guarani fled the Bandeirantes in modern-day Paraná in 1628, they most probably used some branch of the Caminho de Peabiru to escape. They came to the Paraná river at *The Seven Falls*, a gushing group of 19 waterfalls in seven groups. Like many tribes native to Paraná, these falls no longer exist. They were flooded thirty years ago to create the Itaipu hydroelectric dam. The fleeing Jesuits tried to circumvent the falls, but feeling the rancid breath of the slave-traders on their necks, they decided to speed up their walking pace by dropping their nine hundred canoes down the falls in the hope of catching up with them down river. Nine hundred carved wood canoes were thrown like offerings into the Seven Falls and broke into millions of pieces of driftwood. The desperate group continued on the trail, carrying with them the bones of dead Jesuits that they had dug up from the mission cemeteries and the barroque statues of the saints imported from Europe. Two Jesuit priests died on the perilous journey southwards. Of the 12,000 guarani, only 4,000 arrived by foot in the more southerly region of Tape, ravaged by illness, hunger, wild animals and slave-traders. Perhaps many Guarani ran off to take their chances in their native forest.

The region of Tape, which means 'the way' in Guarani, is today part of Brazil's most southern state, Rio Grande do Sul. There, a handful of Jesuits and thousands of Guarani built seven missions on the now-Brazilian side of the Uruguay river, far away from the bandeirante's São Paulo and the sugar-cane commercial interests to the north. In this isolated corner of the new world, they created a closed cluster of communities of up to 7000, where the Guarani toiled the land, reared cattle and learned trades such as iron extraction and violin making. All the time, the Guarani were being catequized, their pagan souls saved from the devil and the fires of hell.

I travel by car southwest to visit the ruins of the Jesuit Missions with my friend Cida, my sons Tom and Liam and Cida's two sons Francisco and Pedro. We brave an eleven and a half hour drive with all four boys in the back of the small car. On the journey, we see only one Guarani village, made up of a gypsy-like glut of tents dangerously close to the busy road, with lines and lines of washing

hanging everywhere. I notice an evangelical church, incongruous and conspicuous among the mud and wood houses. By the time we arrive at the area of the seven missions, the mood in the car is brooding with pent-up energy and and are-we-there-yet frustration. We drive the last 20 km heading straight into the setting sun. The now-monotonous scene of endless golden plantations is set alight in a deep crimson hue.

When we finally arrive at the town of St. Michael of the Missions, it is enveloped in darkness. We stop for pizza at a corner restaurant called Indigenous-Village Grill. With stomachs filled and tantrums averted, we wind down the car windows as we slowly pass the shadowed ruins of the mission in the distance, spotlit and rumbling with the nightly tourist sound and light show. We arrive exhausted at the local hostel. The hostel is themed around the Guarani, teeming with information about the Guarani way of life, their ñande reko, and their cosmology. Every room is named after one element of the Guarani culture and the reception area is filled with indigenous arts and craft. I sleep in exhausted relief at finally being in a place that celebrates the Guarani.

The next morning, we walk the three hundred metres to the ruins of St Michael Arcangel mission and pay our entrance fee to a group of uninterested, uniformed guards. The day threatens rain and dark grey clouds are low about us. The missions throughout South and Central America were all set out in a similar, orderly way. We walk through an open field, which was once filled with rows and rows of indian mudhuts with mud-slate roofs. The Guarani were organised into nuclear families, alien perhaps to their sense of extended family, and housed in a mud-floor cubicle. I stand in the field and try to imagine rows and rows of slated mud-huts with wide paths between them and a perfect symetry promising an incongruous uniformity and order. Each mud-hut had a small plot of land to grow their own subsistence crop. The main road through the huts led straight to the main square, which led to the entrance of the church, the beating heart of the mission.

Our boys run ahead through the field, past a two-metre high mission cross. The mission cross is different to the traditional Christian cross in that it has two horizontal lines rather than one: faith doubled. Purple and yellow wildflowers dot the large unkempt field which leads us to the huge red-brown ruin before us: the remains of the great St. Michael Archangel's church.

A melancholy invades me as I look up at this large, sulking remnant. It starts to rain and we try to take shelter in the ruin. There is no roof left but we burrow ourselves into cold-stone corners that protect us from the downpour. I play the tin whistle in the rain to mark our arrival. To the sound of Gabriel's Oboe, the theme song of the film 'The Mission', we look out from the sodden, crumbling walls, slowly being reclaimed by the fig trees, the tufts of grass, the wild flowers. Such great Jesuit aspirations, such endless Guarani graft and sacrifice: all turned to ruin.

I try to summon before me the image of indigenous children standing in angelic rows in a choir, or the men carving their violins with a surprising mastery in the workshops next to the church. But all I can see are the ruined walls and the sullen looks on my children's faces as the heavy rain pours on. I look out from the church ruin to where the square must have been and try and imagine the women, awkwardly draped in thick white cloth. All I can see is the uneven grass stretching out desolate before me. Does all human effort evaporate like a wisp of cloud at the merciless hand of time and greed and politics? Why do anything in this world if all we can do is so small and transient and inconsequential?

Cida and I stand under the arched entrance of the church and pour hot water into our cuia gourd to drink maté. The maté warms me up and lifts me out of my morose thoughts. This chimarrão tradition is from this region, a practice of the gaúcho cowboys of Rio Grande do Sul, who in turn learnt it from the Guarani indians. Maté, ca'á, is a sacred plant for the Guarani. At first the Jesuits forbade it in the early missions as 'the herb of the devil', but soon, they were encouraging its use as a means to reduce the alcoholism that had taken hold of the Guarani in the missions. The missions began to produce maté in large quantities in the their 'tupanambae' or community lands and it soon became one of the economic foundations of the missions. How must the Guarani have felt about the commercialisation of their sacred plant? The Guarani had always lived on a subsistence basis, and concepts of money, profit, storing and selling of food must have been startlingly strange to them.

We walk behind the church, where the Jesuits lived their private lives, separate from the Guarani. The area now is overgrown, a clump of fig trees growing huge and hollow. The Jesuits experimented here with new crops from Europe before introducing them to the Guarani. Though the Jesuits and the Guarani lived in the same missions, they did not live together in the same way. The small number of

Jesuits were the clear leaders of the missions, dictating every aspect of the everyday life of the Guarani. They did however concede some voice to the Guarani civic leaders, the caciques, and some of the traditional ways were respected. Given that the Jesuits were so few in number, compared to the estimated 300,000 Guarani that were 'reduced', it is very telling that the missions are to this day known mostly as the *Jesuit* missions, rather than the *Guarani* missions. This must have been a Catholic Communism where some were more equal than others.

The missions must though have been a better alternative to many Guarani than ending up in the encomienda pseudo-slavery of the Spanish or the hands of the slave-trading bandeirantes. The Guarani's old way of life in the forest was gone and their survival must have seemed to lie within the mission boundaries. The missions may have met the material needs of the indians for a time but how painful it must have been though for the Guarani's to give up their way of life, to commercialize their sacred ca'a and to be confined and denied their perpetual movement and pilgrimage for Yvy Mara Ey. Perhaps that pain is the price they paid to continue to exist. Though many other indigneous tribes in Brazil have disappeared, the Guarani still do exist to this day and make up almost 10% of the indigenous community of Brazil. They persist in the material poverty of their roadside villages, in the blood and facial characteristics of many South Americans and in the traditions and language of Paraguay and Brazil. In some tekoás, they seem to be maintaining the ancestral heritage and even sharing it with the Juruá around them. The Guarani believe that the earth was created for them to live in their traditional way as a path to paradise. They lived physical life, their ñande reko, for a spiritual objective. They harbour a belief that if all Guarani perish, so too will the earth, to the detriment of the estimated 225,000 Guarani in South America and the rest of us as well. They hang on not just for themselves, but for the earth and for the rest of us too.

Our children run off through the open field with their back to the ruins of the church. Cida and I walk slowly after them. We walk past a tree about my height, its trunk twisted with a mix of dark and light green oval leaves hiding its small, round purple-black fruit. 'What's this?' I ask Cida. 'This is a maté herb,' she tells me. 'But this isn't a herb, it's a tree,' I reply, nonplussed. 'You are such a gringa,' she laughs at me, 'the maté herb is only called a herb, but it's actually a tree.' I laugh with her. I have been drinking this maté for a couple of years now and I had



no idea. 'Apparently, maté or caá was another one of Sumé gifts to the Guarani,' I note, trying in vain to reassert myself as the trip's knowledgeable guide.

Soon, the boys are beckoning to us to join them and Cida and I walk slowly back to look through the mission's museum. The museum houses many statues of Jesus, Mary and the saints, intricately carved from wood. They are so delicate that they make me want to run my hand along their cheeks and touch the downward curve of their noses. A cough from one of the security guards makes me put my hand back by my side. In the middle of the room, I see some large imposing wooden statues, taller than me. The back of the statues has been hollowed out. If the security guards weren't around, I would have been able to step into the back of one. The treasure-hunter mentality says that they were left hollow so that the Jesuit gold and silver could be carried unnoticed within them. Others say that the Jesuits would stand inside the statues and speak to the Guarani from behind them, tricking the Guarani into believing that the Christian saints could speak through their statues.

On the veranda behind the museum, we come across a small group of Guarani, silently selling their wares; a selection of hand-crafted wooden knives and bows and arrows, small carved jaguars and owls. I buy each of the boys a present. Liam chooses a knife and Tom chooses a bow and arrow, impatiently stringing the bow and whooping loudly as the blue painted arrow flies through the air. Two indigenous children sit barefoot on the museum porch, half-hidden behind a pillar, silently peering at the noisy Juruá children. The Guarani stand with their back to the ruins, completely separate to the group of uniformed security guards who also stand out of the rain, bunched together on the veranda.

These Jesuit missions lasted for 150 years, though they moved several times to escape the barbarian appetites of the bandeirante slave traders. Among some considerable successes, the missions suffered from droughts and bad administration, epidemics of European diseases that almost wiped out whole missions and endless attacks by the bandeirantes. Perhaps it was convenient for the bandeirantes to have the now well-trained agriculturalist Guarani brought together in one place, rather than having to hunt them like animals in their native forests. In the 18th Century, when the Spanish handed the region of the seven missions over to the Portuguese, the Spanish joined forces with the Portuguese to evict the Guarani from this mission land. All but two of the Jesuits had fled by this stage,



saving their necks and their religious order's presence in South America, for a while, and perhaps even the surplus of wealth from the missions. The war that ensued is called the Guarani war.

The missions belonged to the Jesuits. The war to the Guarani. The church that had lured them out of the forests, abandoned them to their fate.

The Guarani hero, the mission-born Sepe Tiarajú, who led the Guarani for years in an effort to protect the missions, is famed locally for shouting at the army of colonizers, 'This land has an owner, it was given to us by God and by Saint Michael,' before he was stabbed by a Spanish soldier and shot by a Portuguese captain.

Like Guairacá before him, whose statue I saw in Guarapuava, Tiarajú symbolizes the indigenous resistance to the European powers. Both of them lost their lives to it. Tiarajú's education at the hands of the Jesuits did not dampen his indignation at the brutal colonisation and perhaps fuelled it further with the understanding of the righteousness of defense in the eyes of even the white man's God. Tiarajú's statue stands proud at the entrance to the municipality of Saint Michael of the Missions, opposite a statue of a Jesuit. Tiarajú's indigenous features and long hair remind me of the statue of Guairacá but unlike the loincloth worn by Guairacá, Tiarajú is wearing the restrictive clothing of a European soldier of the 18th century. The Guarani accepted the clothing of the colonist, in the naive hope that the clothing and the Christian conscience of the Juruá would save them.

Sepé Tiarajú is known as a popular saint in the south of the country for having defended the Catholic missions for years against the allied forces of Spain and Portugal, with a nearby municipality called Saint Sepé. The Catholic church however to this day has made no move to beatify or canonize him. In 2009, Sepé Tiarajú was named a national hero in Brazil. Could it be that even the Brazilian state is quicker at recognizing and attoning its failures and omissions than the Catholic Church?

Sumé, our Peabiru creator, was famed for teaching the Guarani to make clearings and plant their sacred mate, awati or corn and mandioca and to grind the wheat to make flour. In some versions of the legend, he taught them of one true God, carried a cross and prohibited polygamy and anthropomorphy. The Jesuits must have seen themselves as following in the footsteps of St. Thomas,

the christianized Sumé. There must have been some truly beautiful, innocent and well-intentioned men in their ranks. Ignited with missionary zeal and at least some competence, they 'reduced' an estimated 300,000 Guarani. They managed on a large, settled scale what Sumé or St. Thomas had merely urged as a walking prophet. Yet it is Sumé, and not a Jesuit priest, who is revered to this day by the Guarani.

#### GUARANI VOICES

Leaving the sombre shadows of the Mission of Saint Michael, we drive 30 km to the nearest Guarani tekoá. We get directions from the tourist office near the Mission. 'They will try and charge you more, but only pay R\$50 for the visit,' the tourist representative warns us before we go.

We seem to be nearing the village and we stop to ask a Guarani man on the road. He answers in Spanish that it is just up the road. Soon thereafter, we arrive at the village school, where several laughing children are spilling out of the classroom balancing plates of food and being admonished in Guarani by a white female teacher. A young man approaches us and offers, lacklustre, to be our guide. I hand him R\$50 and he accepts it without a word. We walk over to a mud and wattle building with a straw roof, which acts as a community centre. I put my head in the door, where four modernly-dressed Guarani teenagers are looking at a Mac computer with two young jurua men. 'Hello,' I call out. One of the white men beckons me through the door with a smile. 'Hi, we are helping these guys to make a documentary of their village life,' one of the white young men tells me enthusiastically, 'we have worked in several other Guarani villages around Brazil.' 'How is it going?' I ask one of the Guarani adolescents and he smiles and nods his head. Our guide has already moved on to the next building, the health centre, so I wave goodbye to the small group and follow after him. He is showing Cida and the children the community health centre and explaining that the nurse comes once a week. 'The people go to the pajé before going to see the nurse,' he explains to us in a defiant voice. 'Do you have an opy in the village, a house of prayer?' Cida asks. 'We used to have, but we don't anymore.' 'Do you have rituals to welcome the sun and celebrate the setting of the sun?' I ask. 'We used to,' he answers, 'when we had an opy. From 5.30 in the morning we would sing and dance together. Now, people do it in their own homes.' 'Are some of the people

Christians here?’ I ask, thinking about the Jesuits’ efforts at spiritual conquest. He snorts in contempt, ‘no there are no Christians here and we don’t let any Christian church set up in our tekoá.’

The houses in the village are all made of wood, but our guide brings us behind one wooden house where a low, traditional mud and wattle house has been built. There is man sitting at a fire smoking next to the house. When he sees us, he goes into the house without a word and comes back with a selection of small animals carved out of wood and a bunch of CDs of Guarani children singing their traditional songs. I buy a CD and thank him. He takes the money, says nothing and sits down again by the fire.

Many questions are exploding inside of me, but the guide is looking nonchalantly at the muddy ground, eager it seems to wind up our visit as soon as possible. I grapple around for something to bridge the gaping divide between us, ‘we spoke to a Guarani man at the entrance to the village and he spoke Spanish to us,’ I tell him, ‘do you have many people from Argentina or Paraguay here?’ ‘We don’t recognise your borders or your countries,’ he says caustically, ‘he is Guarani like us.’

Nothing to lose, I think to myself, as I launch the question I really want to ask on him. ‘We have just visited the ruin of St. Michael’s mission,’ I tell him, ‘what do you think about it, what do you think about the past of the Guarani?’

He shrugs his shoulders, his eyes not leaving the muddy ground. After a moment, he says in a quiet, monotone voice, ‘when I think about it, I feel anger. But for us now, this tekoá is good. The land is good and there is a lot of space. We have a natural water source and a small forest.’ ‘Many other Guarani live without their own lands, on the edge of the roads,’ I remark to him. ‘Yes, some villages are very poor,’ he agrees quietly. The situation of neglect and cruelty towards the Guarani is not news to him, it has been going on in different guises for five hundred years. Cida and the children, sensing the brooding atmosphere, thank him quickly and move towards the car. Our guide walks off in another direction, without waving goodbye.

In the car, I put the CD on to play and we leave the tekoá to the sound of children’s angelic, soothing voices singing the Guarani ancestral songs. These songs, the Pora Hei recount the oral history and myths of the Guarani people

and the intonation of the words are considered to have a healing power. As Cida drives, I relax into the unfamiliar words and regular beat of the song, opening myself to the voices of Guarani children to heal my futile anger and sadness on their behalf.

As I listen to the songs, I feel my perspective expand. It expands to include the 500 years that the Guarani lived in the southeast of Brazil before the Portuguese arrived. Idealised images assail me of Guarani walking from tekoá to tekoá towards Yvy Marã Ey, cultivating their lightness of being, their aguyje and their sacred crops, living in happy communion with each other and with nature. My perspective expands further back to the arrival of the Guarani on their slow migration south from the Amazon. In the Amazon they are known as Tupi but those who came south and took possession of the more distant lands are the Guarani, which means 'warriors'. For the first time, I imagine the Guarani taking possession of the land by force from the small communities that predated them on the coast. I see these warriors moving westward also, bellicose and widely feared by their adversaries. I recognise for the first time, this shadow side of the Guarani and see them more fully. I begin to recognise the human beauty and beast that we all share. Like me, they have been to some degree both colonised and coloniser. I sense a distinct loosening of my pity for them and of my idealised reverence of them.

As the songs sing on, a rush of closeness to the Guarani arises in me and I feel more authentically our common humanity. I marvel at a community that have kept alive their language and their oral culture during these 500 years of oppression. Perhaps the Guarani are not victims but cultural warriors, singing their way to wholeness around their sacred fires.

#### GUARANI SACRED CAÁ CEREMONY

The sky is weeping in a torrential downpour, when we arrive at a tiny Guarani museum in the town. Shouting loudly, we rush from the car to the museum, getting drenched as we do. At the entrance of the small, private museum, we hardly glance at the large statue of St. Michael subduing the dragon. Inside the tiny dimly-lit building, we are met by S., who greets us with enthusiasm.

'I set up this house of memory to share some of the Guarani things I have in my possession,' he tells us with a smile, 'my grandmother was Guarani and

although I was not brought up in the traditional Guarani way, the ñande reko, I see myself as Guarani too. Many people around here have Guarani blood. Some are ashamed of it, but I am not. I consider it a privilege.' S. shows us a collection of pottery vases and urns, decorated with the Guarani cross and red natural paint. 'This is the result of a project I did with the local Guarani village,' he tells us, 'a Guarani grandmother taught me and ten teenage Guarani to create their traditional style of pottery and we made almost fifty vases.' We admire the work, some of which is unfinished. 'Only two of the ten teenagers took part in the whole four months of the project,' he laments to us, 'many young Guarani are turning away from their heritage.'

'What is this?' Tom asks, pointing to a large stone bowl on a high pedestal, full of green leaves. 'That is sacred,' the man tells us, 'as well as a museum, this is also a small opy or house of prayer. I perform a Guarani ritual, called the ca'a ritual or maté ritual.'

'Could we participate?' I ask intrigued. He looks at me and smiles. 'Of course,' he agrees, nodding his head.

We all follow him over to the stone bowl and he picks up a string of round beads. He hands it to Cida. 'Please put this on my neck to start the ceremony,' he says in a low, respectful voice. Cida takes the beads from him and puts it around his neck. The boys are completely silent, watching him. He stands beside the stone bowl and closes his eyes. He breathes deeply for a moment, before opening his eyes. 'The ca'a, the maté, is very sacred for the Guarani, as is the awati or corn, which we will also use in this ceremony. I will do the ritual and then each of you can do it, one by one, after me. I will stay with you to help you remember the different stages.' Liam looks up at me, questioningly and I smile reassuringly at him.

S. picks up a long bamboo stick in his right hand and takes a handful of ca'a from the bowl in his left hand. He walks in a circle around the stone bowl in an anti-clockwise direction to a corner of the room, where there is a small bowl with burning embers on the ground. 'As I put the maté into the fire, I strike the bamboo stick on the ground three times and I think of all of the negative things that I want to let go of.' Smoke rises up from the bowl as he throws in the maté and bangs loudly on the ground three times. Slowly, calmly, he turns back to the

stone bowl and takes another handful of ca'a. He walks in a circle to another corner where he throws the maté into a second bowl of embers, again hitting the bamboo stick three times on the ground. 'This time, I think of all of the positive things I am asking from God, especially that I want to be closer to God.' He walks in a third circle around the stone bowl and between the two corners with bowls of burning embers, he takes a handful of corn from another bowl in his right hand. With the left hand, he flicks himself with water three times and says, 'In the name of the father, son and holy spirit,' before hitting the bamboo three times on the ground. The ritual space is full of smoke and the smell of burning maté. He turns to us and says, 'smoke is more powerful than meditation in bringing us close to God. That is why the Guarani always use the pipe, wafting the smoke over themselves. The smoke purifies them.' One by one, Cida, the boys and I undertake the maté ritual. I go first. Silently I make my prayer. *'Please help me to stop running away from the painful history of this continent, of the pain of the past.'* As I throw the second handful of ca'a, I add *'May I move forward on the Caminho de Peabiru without being swallowed whole by the pain of the past.'*

I stand back and watch the children as they respectfully, silently complete the ritual. They are fully present in what they are doing. How naturally aware they are of the sacredness of this simple ritual. I feel so much love for these boys, who are on their own path of growth and discovery. What a joy to be able to share this sense of the sacred with them.

Cida is the last one to do the ritual and as she finishes, we both hug S. in thanks. The rain has lessened and we go outside to see the few items he has outdoors, before taking our leave. We arrived twenty minutes earlier in a frenzied burst of internal and external noise, escaping the rain and we are leaving now quieter and internally more peaceful.

As we stand outside beside the statue of St. Michael and his dragon, I ask my question again, 'What do the Guarani think of the missions?' I ask S. He pauses to reflect before answering, 'I sense a note of sadness in the Guarani when they talk of the time of the Missions,' he answers me gently. Then he adds, 'but when I did a ritual with them on the grounds of the St. Michael's mission last year, during the ritual they cupped their hands in respect to the communal fire and then also to the mission's cross. It was as if they recognise that, like the communal fire, there



is also sacred spirit at the core of the Mission's cross.'

I feel deeply humbled by this gesture. Despite 500 years of oppression under this cross, the pajé can sense the sacred spirit at its core and honour it.



São Miguel das Missões, Guarani village, September 2012.



São Miguel das Missões, Rio Grande do Sul, setembro de 2012.



São Miguel das Missões, Rio Grande do Sul, September 2012.



São Miguel das Missões, Guarani village, September 2012.

THE WALKING FLUTE



ZENITH PARAGUAY



Iguaçu Falls, Paraná, September 2012.

## GLIMPSES AT THE IGUAÇU FALLS

I cross the Brazilian border with Paraguay alone at the sacred Iguazu Falls. Cabeza de Vaca was the first European to officially encounter the Iguazu Falls as he followed the Caminho de Peabiru through Paraná towards Assuncion in Paraguay. There is a bronze plaque in his honour on the Argentinian side of the falls.

I awake before sunrise and open the window of my hotel, which is inside the Iguazu Falls nature reserve. A flowering ipê tree curtsies to me beneath my window, cascading yellow sun-drops in the darkness. The stars are still out. I pull on my jacket and steal out of the silent hotel. I walk behind the hotel, past the sleeping staff quarters and along a deserted, overgrown path. I am utterly alone. I soon reach the banks of the Iguazu river. I sit down on a wooden step, just as the sun begins to rise over the river. It is a gentle, silent sunrise, just for me. The golden disc in a haze of pink winks at its reflection in the wide, free-flowing river before me. There are two suns now, one rising in the sky and the other stretching out across the water towards me. Cabeza de Vaca and his men came up this Iguazu river on canoes that they had bought from a tribe over 100 km away. Like me now, they could hear the rumble and roar of the falls getting closer and closer.

With a hint of red still in the sky, I leave the riverbank and make my way to the front of the hotel. It is still very early. The natural park opens to tourists between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. but residents in the hotel can visit the falls all day long. I skip down to the entrance of the falls, as they are awakening, their monotonous gushing music interspersed now with caws, chuckles and chirps. I laugh with delight and run down the wooden walkways, scattering butterflies and lizards as I go. The walkway is flanked by rock on the left side and thick, green foliage on the right side. From time to time, the view peeping through the foliage to my right makes me slow my pace and simply gape in awe. There are so many waterfalls, finding natural dips in the hard rock to allow their water to flow through and leap down to circular pools below. There are layers of waterfalls. One waterfall falls into a pool, which falls again in another waterfall into another pool, before falling a third time into the Paraná river below. What an unstoppable flow. How feminine they are, with their long, sleek cascades of cristal hair.



The first Guarani woman emerged from a waterfall. In their story of origin, the first man, Tupã-mirim went to a waterfall of pure, cristal water that fell into a pool of clear water that mirrored his image back to him for the first time. 'Mavutzinim', he called out, which means 'what a marvelous, beautiful thing', and the first woman emerged from the water and was called 'Mavutzinim'. They walked on the earth together and as she had come from the water, he wanted to teach her everything. 'With the talents I was given,' he said, 'I created everything.' She responded, 'there are only grey creatures and no coloured creatures'. Then she said 'panamby' which means butterfly, and the first butterfly appeared. In this way, she said the name of all the colourful and beautiful creations. She said the names of the tasty fruit and the perfumed flowers and thus took part in the creation of the world.

All these beautiful things, created by the first Guarani woman, abound around me now. Several green parrots, with their backs to me, watch the early morning falls. Yellow-bellied birds jump from branch to branch, chuckling at me. A humming-bird flits among the trees about me and then flies ahead of me, hovering for a moment above the path, urging me onwards. And now, a toucan with its oversized orange beak and its surreal colours looks at me inquisitively from a high branch.

And the rainbows. Rainbows appear and disappear against the prisms created by the waterfalls in an elaborate, incessant show of lights, oblivious to their audience. There is nobody else on the walkway, nobody else enjoying the falls or the rainbows. The whole of nature is displaying itself only for me. My heart is beating as I run and I feel it might burst with joy. Suddenly, a rodent-like animal the size of a hare, a cutia, walks nonchalantly in front of me and brings me back to earth with a thud. It eyes me distainfully and sniffs the ground with its long snout, before walking slowly off the path. I start to walk again downwards towards the falls, my pace slower now, my eyes more alert for the abundant wildlife.

The indigenous Kaingang are native to this area. Their legend recounts that the falls were created when Naipu, who was betrothed to marry the god M'Boy, ran away with her lover, the young warrior Tarobá. M'Boy chased them as they escaped down the river. He was so angry that he hit his fist against the ground, causing it to crack open to create the falls. He caught up with Tarobá and Naipu and changed Naipu into a stone at the bottom of the falls called the Devil's



Throat, to be struck by the water for eternity for her crime. Tarobá was turned into a palm tree that dangles over the edge of the falls, watching the suffering of his beloved Naipu, unable to help her. I wonder which of them suffered most.

The noise of the falls is like thunder now. A broad sheet of yellowed water hurls itself down to the rocks below. I feel a flash of empathy for Naipu as I watch the rocks below grit themselves against the endless force of the water. The vegetation on the rocks is pulled back by the wind created by the falls, and is caught standing like hair on end.

I follow the wooden walkway to the centre of the falls. The water sprays me from all angles but I face it triumphantly, laughing as my clothes stick to me and drops of water roll down my face. I am right in the heart of the falls with the Devil's Throat before me. A rainbow forms in the water beneath me, brilliant hues of pink and blue against the white foam of the water. Hundreds of delicate black swallows dive their curved wings into the water again, and again. The communal, dilerious chirp competes with the thunder of the water as it falls. These swallows are in a frenzy, in ecstasy. The rainbow beneath me bends into a full circle of colour on the water and I am inside the circle. Euphoria fills my heart. I expand. I am all of it.

I laugh out loud and blast into my tin whistle, part of the cacophony of sound. How blessed I am. Not only can I feel nature from the inside, I am aware of its awesome beauty and can communicate it too. I can express all that the water is feeling as it rushes and falls, I can express all that the light is feeling as it erupts into a rainbow. I am swept up in the deafening chirping of the swallows and the chuckling of yellow bellied birds. My joyful tears become part of the gush of water, falling gratefully from the Iguazu river to the Paraná river below.

#### OASIS OF NATURE

An old indigenous trail snakes through the Iguazu nature reserve. When Cabeza de Vaca heard the thunder of the falls, he wisely decided to carry the canoes through the forest and cross the river upstream from the falls. It must have been no mean feat to hike with 250 men, supplies and canoes through this Atlantic forest. It is said that Cabeza de Vaca was mesmerised by the falls when he came across them and called them the falls of Saint Mary. I wonder though if the weary Spaniards

did not also curse the falls for making their intrepid voyage more difficult. It could however have been a lot worse for them. Ten years earlier in 1531, all of the members of a Portuguese expedition led by Pero Lobo along the Caminho de Peabiru were massacred by an indigenous tribe close to these Iguazu Falls.

The trail through the reserve is a gem. The forest is semi-deciduous and subtropical and it pulsates audibly with life. As I wait for the tour group to form, I immerse myself in a cloud of colourful butterflies in a glint of sunlight that has made its way through the canopy of trees overhead. They look like fluttering dots of blues, reds and yellows. 'So many butterflies,' I remark to the guide as we start off. 'We have almost three hundred species here,' he explains.

We walk along the trail, flanked by tall trees that provide a canopy to shade us. Underneath the foliage of these tall trees, palm trees and countless other species flourish. The guide points to a red fungus on the bark of some of the trees. 'Is it a sickness?' a walker asks perturbed. 'No,' the guide says, 'this fungus only flourishes where the air is pure. The more you see, the purer you know the air is.' I breathe deeply, savouring this delicious, pure air. The guide points the trees out to us as we pass. 'This is the red anjiko tree. It is used to make excellent furniture. It takes 150 years to reach 30 metres. Most anjiko trees in Paraná have been cut down to plant corn and other crops.'

'This one here is a timbuava tree, used by the indigenous to make canoes. Its fruit is called ear of the monkey and is used by the indians to make soap.' Further along, he points to another tree. 'This is a uvaia tree, like a guava tree, that gives a round yellow fruit. There isn't much fruit in this forest though, mostly seeds, so there are lots of rodents here that live off the seeds.'

I point to a familiar tree and say smugly, 'this tree I know. If we get lost, at least we will have bananas to eat.' The guide smiles at me. 'You're almost right,' he tells me, 'that is a heleconia tree. It has the same leaves as the banana tree, but it doesn't give the banana fruit. The tree that gives banana is not native to Brazil. It was imported from East Asia.'

'What?' I ask gobsmacked, 'bananas are not native to Brazil? I've been living in Brazil for seven years and I never heard that!' The guide laughs goodhumoredly. Internally, I think of the São Tomé bananas and wonder for a second if it was Sumé who introduced the banana first to Brazil.

We continue on and another walker says cautiously, 'I hear there are jaguars here.' The guide nods his head. 'We are tracking sixteen jaguars at the moment. We also have over forty types of snakes, so keep a sharp eye out.' I shudder with a deep, culturally inbuilt, aversion to snakes, grateful that I didn't know of the dangers when I went on my solitary pre-sunrise walk to the river. There are no snakes in Ireland. Myth says that St. Patrick, the country's patron saint, banished them from the top of Croagh-Patrick, a mountain on the west coast. Science points to the cold climate. As a child I had sworn that I would never live in a country with snakes. Nevertheless, here I am.

The guide signals to us to be quiet. We hear the single-pop sound of a woodpecker pecking a tree. 'Listen,' he whispers, 'the woodpeckers are talking to each other.' Off in another direction, we hear a different woodpecker peck at another tree. We follow their conversation for a few moments before continuing on.

We pass by a sanga, a little river with water reddened from the soil. 'This soil is the fourth richest soil in the world,' the guide informs us, 'that is why it is so intensely farmed. Only the mountains and the scant government reserves have kept the Atlantic forest alive here.'

We come to a swampy area where we climb a wooden look-out tower to spy the papo-amarelo crocodiles below. They lie motionless in the glistening water, only their eyes visible above the water. A cloud of butterflies swarm around each crocodile, feasting on the minerals left on its back as the water evaporates. On a fallen log, a carcará eagle looks over the river, searching perhaps for crocodile eggs. A graceful, white aninga bird stands on one pink leg in the reeds. I watch, mesmerised.

That night, I stand like an aninga bird, one foot on a railing, watching the sun set over the falls from the look-out tower in the hotel. There in the west lies Paraguay and the continuation of the Caminho de Peabiru. I lean on the barrier, watching the scorched red light soften into the dark blue of night. The moon, almost full, takes charge of the sky as I descend the tower and then the walkway for my last visit to the edge of the waterfalls. The thunderous sound is more intense in the near-dark and demands an external and internal silence. The stars begin to appear in choreographed perfection above me, heralding the beginning

of the Guaraní summer, *ara pyau*, the new time. I walk slowly, bringing attention to each step, quietening and emptying myself, melting into a sense of hollowness and Presence. When my feet reach the edge of the falls, I feel myself expand once more into the landscape, crowned now by a lunar rainbow — effervescent and other-worldly.

#### GUARANI LEGACY

Paraguay is the Zenith of the *Caminho de Peabiru*. As I follow the path of the sun from the Atlantic coast on the east to the Pacific coast on the west, Paraguay, the Guaraní world, is at the Zenith. I make it to Paraguay on the second try and with a strong dose of apprehension.

I had planned to go earlier and had booked a flight and organised my itinerary. Three days before I was due to leave, the Paraguayan Senate impeached its president. Meanwhile, my babysitting arrangements began to unravel. By the time the Peabiru researcher Rosana Bond invited me with a tight voice to her house before I left, I was alert to the signs that it might not be the best moment to be travelling alone through Paraguay. As we sat in R's little wooden house, drinking *maté*, she told me that the night before her indigenous spiritual guides had warned her in a dream that I should postpone my trip to Paraguay. As we spoke, an exquisite humming bird fluttered down and beat its wings to hover next to us. 'Look, the presence of the humming bird confirms it,' she says decided. I surrendered to Guaraní time and postponed the trip.

When I tell my friends in Brazil that I am going to Paraguay, the typical reaction is one of concern. There are frequent reports of violence in the border areas, where hoards of Brazilian go laden with cash to buy low-cost, duty-free electronic goods. Nobody I know has travelled to Paraguay beyond the border and I sense a palpable disregard and disinterest in this small, flat, landlocked neighbour.

I finally make it to Paraguay at the beginning of the summer in November. The sun is truly at its zenith and I swelter under 35 degrees of heat. Crossing the border between Iguazu Falls and the Paraguayan town of Ciudad Del Este is a cacophony of cars, vans and trucks beeping and cutting into each other to cross the border bridge. The queues coming back over the border to Brazil are teeming with cheap plastic goods, imported from China at low tariffs. There is no

obligatory immigration control, but the bridge is dotted with officials ineffectively eyeing up passing cars. Lines of trucks exporting soy-beans beep loudly as they try to pull their heavy load into a lane on the bridge. This too is one of the major drug routes of South America — a chaotic free-for-all.

Alejo Garcia, as our Peabiru pioneer is called here in Paraguay is officially credited with ‘discovering’ the country, when he followed the Caminho de Peabiru towards Bolivia. I am quite sure thousands of years of indigenous people of Paraguay would disagree that he discovered anything. Cabeza de Vaca followed in Alejo’s footsteps and walked from the Iguazu falls to the Paraguayan capital of Assuncion in the summer of 1541. I plan on making a similar journey before heading northwards up the Paraguay river in the direction of Bolivia.

Over the border, I go in search of El Sabio, the wise Bertoni, an eccentric Swiss botanist who lived in Paraguay a hundred years ago. Bertoni spent decades studying the Guarani traditions and he discovered and classified many new species of plant, including classifying the sacred maté herb and writing of the type of short, tough grass that was planted along the original Caminho de Peabiru. The Guarani informed the bulk of the work that lent him both national and international fame. When Bertoni died, he left part of his estate to the Guarani who lived near him and I wonder if their descendants still live on the land.

A Paraguayan taxi-driver, with rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror, sweeps me safely out of the frenzied chaos that spills incessantly onto the streets of Ciudad Del Este, passing signs for the Alejo Garcia airport. We drive past the ubiquitous advertising signs and posters, clashing in a visual cacophony of personalised political campaigning and desperate commerce. I am relieved to be leaving the border town and breathe deeply to release the remnants of apprehension.

The taxi-driver and I start up a conversation as he brings me over the Monday river and drives along 10 km of tarmaced road. ‘The problem with Paraguayans,’ he tells me, launching into a monologue, ‘is that so many want to have a good life without doing much work. It is in our blood, it comes from the indigenous blood that is running through all of our veins here. Even the Spanish that came over to the new world were looking for an easier life.’ We turn onto a dirt-road at a tilted, half-hidden signpost: *Moises Bertoni Museum – 16km*. A cloud of crimson

dusty earth rises as we pass along the dry, parched roads. We have entered into a labyrinth of knee-high soy plantations, the bottle-green of the plants clashing with the ochre-red of the soil, softened only by the pale blue in the sky expanding cloudless before us. We lose ourselves quickly in this monoculture labyrinth. Where, oh where, has the famed biodiversity of the Guaraní lands disappeared to? Many of the medicines of the world originated from the plants of the Guaraní's Atlantic forests and fields. The Guaraní language is one of the most used in the world in botanical classifications.

We take another wrong turn and back up into a whirl of red dust, before taking another identical road into the heart of the labyrinth. I strain my eyes to see some sign for Bertoni's museum. 'There,' I say relieved, making out a faded sign, half-hidden by a bush, 'we turn right here.'

We pass a small plantation of corn, like an army of thin men clustered together in no clear order. Between the corn, we can see some wooden shacks, small mounds of rubbish and a glimpse of Guaraní sitting outside a wooden house, the children half-naked in the heat. 'See,' the taxi-driver mutters dismissively, 'little work.' We pass an old school building, abandoned and lifeless. Next to it, there is a shelter of four tree-trunks holding up a roof of straw. The chairs from the school have been placed in a circle underneath the shelter. The chairs are empty except for one, where a cockerel sits proudly.

Further along the dirtroad, flanked now with corn on each side, we come to the entrance of the Moises Bertoni museum and the taxi-driver stops the car. A large, official sign tells us that it is closed and under reform. I ask the taxi-driver to wait for me and I walk to the little reception booth to see if there is anyone around, but the booth is abandoned and surrounded by a swathe of rubbish. No reform seems to be underway, but rather a policy of concentrated neglect. I walk past the booth through a thicket of heaving trees bearing down on me on either side. The trees from each side meet in an arch over the path, giving me some welcomed shade. I turn a corner and a lone Guaraní boy further down the path looks at me, startled, before jumping into the undergrowth. What rich vegetation this must be, teeming with the Guaraní's native herbs and plants. I am completely illiterate in their language of botany, unable to identify their plants. I arrive at an information centre, with the door wide open. The windows are broken and the centre itself stripped totally bare. There is not a trace of furniture or equipment



in it. I continue along the downward path lined with incongruous but pretty, wrought-iron outdoor street lamps.

The bulbs though are all broken now and shards of glass scatter the ground. In a palpible silence, more abandoned than peaceful, we saunter down to a house on a hill, that looks down over the Paraná river. The house is closed now and the shutters on the window locked tight. I stand on the wooden varanda and look down on the unkempt garden before me that runs downhill into the river. A little path worn on the grass down to the river is almost invisible now. Nature is gradually reclaiming its land. In Paraguay, the Caminho de Peabiru is known as the Tape Avirú, the well-worn trail. Bertoni wrote about the ingenious way the Guarani maintained their trails through the forest. They would clear a path and quickly, plant two or three types of grass, that grew quickly and easily, to impede the forest from reclaiming the path. They chose particularly sticky plants so that the people who walked on the path would bring the grass along on their feet, planting seeds in this way all along the path for long distances.

I walk down to the river, where the smell of jasmins perfumes the air and the sounds of crickets and unknown insects herald ownership. The river drags lethargically along before me. I stand on the small strip of sand, where the local Guaranis come everyday to sing songs of gratitude to the setting sun.

I sit down on the sand and stare into the brown sludge of the river. I take out my tin whistle and play a melancholy song for Bertoni and for his decaying home. He is buried somewhere nearby, beneath the large trees still growing here.

A movement to my left makes me turn and I see a man pulling at some overgrown weeds. He keeps his eyes to the ground until I am next to him. 'Do you work here?' I ask. He nods, looking up at me timidly. 'How long has the museum being closed?' 'About a year,' he answers, without looking up from his half-hearted tugging at the weeds. A suspended walkway snakes along the little oasis of forest and I long to walk along it and marvel at the Guarani's botanic treasures, but when I find the ladder, it is unsafe and boarded up. As I turn away, disappointed, something starts to bite my leg. I wriggle, smacking my legs and then something bites me on the other leg, and now on my thigh. I run behind a big tree and take off my trousers, yelping. A whole colony of ants has decided to infest me. I jump about frantically, squashing the ants, until at last the biting stops. I turn

my trousers inside out and hit them against a tree before picking the remaining ants out of the trouser legs one by one. Bertoni's land seems to belong more to nature than to his visitors. Something tells me that he would prefer it that way. As I calm down and put back on my trousers, I giggle to myself. As I step out from behind a tree, I notice another caretaker, sitting on a varanda drinking chimarrão and silently watching me.

I shiver, slightly embarrassed and exposed, and hurry away from the house and from the river back down a different path. I pass a clearing in the forest, a silent graveyard with tiny iron crosses and simple cloth dolls attached to the cross. Perhaps it is a Guarani graveyard. The Guarani traditionally burn the dead inside their houses and build a new house for the remaining family nearby. At some point, there are so many graves, that the Guarani move the whole village a short distance away, so that the dead continue to be in their homes and close to the community. The line between life and death is thinner here. The Guarani believe that when we die, we become one with everything around us. The sacred water from our body becomes the water in our descendants and other life forms. I stand silent for a moment among the graves. Further along, I come to seven wooden pedestals that must one day have held some kind of statues. There are no statues left now but when I rub the brass nameplates, I can make out the names of some of the Guarani mythological monsters Kurupi, Ao Ao, Teju Jagua. Perhaps the Guarani don't need statues of their mythical monsters. Maybe they know what we have forgotten, that such monsters are inside us, not outside.

A stone's throw from the graveyard, I come across a clutch of mud and wattle houses, some covered with layers of corrugated iron. These must be the descendants of the Guarani from whom Bertoni learned about their ñandu reko, their way of life. Some adults walk close by, carrying white sacks over their shoulders, but they do not look up. I pass a house where three small children sit out on the mud floor playing in the earth. The little girl in a grubby dress smiles at me, one of her front teeth missing. She must be around the same age as my son Liam. The smallest boy, around Eoin's age, is naked and caked in dirt. He looks up at me as I pass by. An older brother, maybe twelve or thirteen, comes out of the house and stops in his tracks when he sees me. 'Do you have any arts and craft to sell?' I ask him quickly in Spanish. He smiles at me and goes back into

the house for a moment, before coming out with a large cloth. He lays the cloth on the ground, arranging a number of bead necklaces on the cloth. I squat down by the cloth, savouring the presence of the small children who look at me with wide, curious eyes. I don't know who is more intrigued with whom. I buy some necklaces with reed crosses and thank the older boy. He beams a radiant smile of strong, white teeth as I go. I smile back at him and his siblings, somehow soothed by their quiet beauty.

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

I lurch on a bus all that afternoon along the motorway that stretches through the country to the Paraguayan capital of Assuncion, which was built along the Caminho de Peabiru. The road rises out in front of me, straight and unending. Other buses hurtle precariously past, passing droves of teenagers on motorcycles without helmets. The bus is filthy and I kick some questionable rubbish under my seat to hide it from view. The air conditioning, necessary in this 35°C heat, buzzes along ineffectively in grating disharmony with the spluttering rattle of the bus. I read for a while, but I find it hard to concentrate, so I close my book. Everyone around me on this precarious bus seems to be on their mobile phone and a stream of nasal sounds surrounds me. I only recognise the odd Spanish word thrown into the conversations. They are all speaking Guarani or jopora, a mix of Guarani and Spanish. I lie back on the chair and try not to think of what is crawling from the seat onto my hair as I travel. Outside, shaggy, unkempt fields hold lone cows near lone houses and random clumps of palm trees. This is so different to the ordered monotony of the productive Paraná plantations. I seem to have entered into a world of scrub. All along the motorway, there are little Catholic shrines by the roadside. Paraguay is a highly Catholic country. In 2007, the Pope, in recognition of Paraguay's religious fervour, said the Christmas message in Guarani for the first time, in addition to 61 other languages. Even the recently ousted President Lugo was an ex-bishop.

The bus rattles through a town. A glut of make-shift stalls spill onto the ground, selling huge, green watermelons, yellow melons, peeled oranges, medicinal herbs and an unending array of knick-knacks. Everyone is trying to scrape a living. At the stalls, the people sit with their gourds and metal straws, drinking terere, the Paraguayan maté, which they drink cold. Fat flasks of cold water stand at their

side. Gaudy mobile phone advertisements abound. Paraguay has joined the pay-as-you-go mobile network with gusto. The town is called Caaguazú and I recognise the reference to the sacred mate herb *ca'á* in its name. I congratulate myself on recognising some basic words now in Guaraní. Guazú means big, so the town means Big Maté Plants. Maté was the main plantation in Paraguay during the colonisation, making it peripheral to the interests of the Spanish crown, hungry to exploit more lucrative crops and mines. Perhaps this lack of colonial interest is one of the reasons why the Guaraní language lives on here.

As the bus continues on, I look around in the dimming light for any sign of maté trees but I only see shrub and the odd plantation that looks like soybean. The name, like so many others, doesn't seem to fit anymore. Night is falling as the bus enters Villarrica in the modern state of Guairá. We pass a dimly lit square and I jump with excitement when I see that it is named after León Cadogan, the twentieth century ethnologist and defender of the Guaraní, who compiled many of their myths and spiritual teachings. This is the final location of the town of Villarrica Del Espiritu Santo, or Phoenix as it is known in Brazil, that I visited in Paraná in the interior of Brazil, earlier on the Caminho de Peabiru. The town is known as El anderilho, 'the wandering one', as it moved seven times after it was set up in the 16th Century before settling here 600 km away, deeper inside Spanish colonial strongholds. This truly is a pilgrim town.

I have arranged to meet my Brazilian friend Cida here at the Villarrica bustop to explore Paraguay together for a couple of days. As I step off the bus, I am bowled over by the stifling heat and heckled by taxi-drivers. I hear someone shout my name and gratefully spy Cida waving at me. She extracts me from amidst the taxi-drivers and hugs me. I am relieved to see her. 'Let's go,' she says, 'there's a hotel called San Miguel up here. I saw a little sign.' The side-streets are dark with only occasional streetlamps. We come to the San Miguel hotel along a dark and dirty alley. The hotel itself looks like more of a doss house, with the door of a bedroom wide open, showing the silhouettes of men lounging on beds in the darkness. A noisy ventilator whirrs. As we ring a bell on the gate, I see a large antennae-ed cockroach nibbling a piece of bread by the gate. The owner of the hotel arrives, short, unshaven and bare chested, with a round Paraguayan potbelly. Before he reaches us, Cida and I scurry past the cockroach, out of the gate.

We come to a main street and into the sharp relief of regular streetlamps. We

laugh together in relief. How wonderful to be with a friend, rather than grappling about on my own. Along the main street, we see a hotel called 'Ybytyruzu hotel', which reassures us with a bright and clean reception area. 'Just where we want to be,' I say, delighted with the name of the hotel, which is the name of the mountain range we will climb in the morning. We check in and fall onto our beds with a contented sigh, turning on the air conditioning for a blast of relief from the unrelenting heat.

After taking a shower, we walk down to the Plaza de Armas, a typical Spanish colonial square, though much of its architectural beauty is now hidden behind gaudy plastic shop signs. The evening heat is more bearable now and we sit at a table in the square. Soothing melodies from a Paraguayan harp, brought by the Jesuits and now the country's iconic musical instrument streams out onto the square, reminding me of Ireland. We order a pizza and a cold beer to mark our first night together on Paraguayan soil, the zenith of the Caminho de Peabiru. As the waiter serves our pizza, he strikes up a friendly conversation, asking us where we are from and our names. 'I'm from Brazil,' Cida says with a smile, 'my name is Cida.' The waiter gasps in a knee-jerk reaction, 'what an ugly name,' before mumbling an apology and walking away. Cida and I look at each other and laugh out loud. 'I told you your name would give you trouble here,' I say to her with a wink, 'Cida may be a widespread name in Brazil in honour of Maria Aparecida, your patron saint, but in Spanish and French speaking countries, Cida sounds like SIDA, the AIDS disease. Imagine if you asked someone her name and she told you it was AIDS, how would you respond?' Cida nods her head, 'ok, you were right,' she admits, 'I had no idea that the reaction would be so strong. I guess I will call myself Maria from now on here in Paraguay. What's in a name anyway?'

'Cheers *Maria*,' I say aloud, raising my glass of beer. We chink glasses and take a long, cool drink. We tuck hungrily into the pizza.

We fall into silence, as we eat. 'You know what,' Cida says, reflecting, 'maybe it isn't such a bad idea to change my name to Maria. Maria Aparecida is my original name, but everyone calls me Cida since I can remember. It strikes me that it may well be time to change.'

'Just because the Paraguayans don't appreciate it?' I ask, laughing.

'No,' she says, shaking her head, 'maybe it has to do with my age. I have

lived as Cida for 40 years and I have started to feel different. I do sense that it has to do with my son Miguel and how my whole life changed with his death. Not just my separation from his father, or moving out of my home, but internally a lot changed, my appreciation for life, for its transcendence, for the spiritual in me and around me. Something died in me, but something new was reborn too. I feel a change of name would be a way to mark and honour that internal process.'

I take another slice of pizza. Between mouthfuls, I tell her, 'you know that the Guarani think that a person's name is really important. The word name means 'soul word.' I was reading today on the bus a piece written by Leon Cadogan about the Mbya Guarani's naming ceremony for children, the *nimongarai*. The mother brings the child to the pajé in the ceremony in January and asks him what the child's name is. The pajé then communicates with the gods to see what the child's name or soul-word is. He lights his pipe and blows smoke over the child's head. Each name comes from one of the four cardinal directions, it is a sound that comes from the spiritual world and that moves through nature to make an individual musical note for each child. The name or ñe'é is like a divine substance that will keep the child on the right track for life. If he is called his divine name, he will follow his right path. If he gets sick or has psychological or spiritual problems, they will sing and chant to connect him again to his original soul-word or name.'

'That's beautiful,' Cida says, 'it's just what I am experiencing, the emergence of my soul-word. It just happens that my name is coming from the Peabiru Zenith of Paraguay and the pajé who urged me towards my soul-word was a Paraguayan waiter.' We laugh together in a delicious intimacy. 'So would you like me to call you Maria from now on?' I ask her as the laughter dies down. 'Yes,' she says, quieter now, 'yes I would.'

Reaching for another slice of pizza, Maria asks 'Who is this Leon person you were reading about today?'

'Leon Cadogan, an interesting man,' I tell her enthusiastically, 'he was a Paraguayan ethnologist of Irish-Australian descent who was brought up right here in Villarrica. I passed a square dedicated to him on the busride this evening. He worked with the Guarani of this area of Guairá for forty years before he died in the 1970s. He worked with them to compile this book called the *Avyu Rapyta*, full of the myths and spiritual tradition of the Guarani. He was even initiated as



a Guaraní himself. He was given his ñe'ẽ, his spiritual name and was known as something like 'one who flies like a whirlwind.'

'That's a bit of a mouthful,' Maria laughs. I laugh too. 'He kept his spiritual name a secret until his death. All of the Guarani I have met have two names, a typically Portuguese or Spanish name and a Guarani name. They use their Guarani name in the intimacy of their community and their European name when dealing with the Juruá.' 'It makes sense to use a name that helps you fit into a community,' Maria says thoughtfully, 'it enables intimacy.' 'That makes sense,' I nod, 'but for the Guaraní, I think they use Spanish or Portuguese names more like shields than as a form of integration. A word for the Guaraní can be like an arrow from a bow or a shield; it can destroy or defend. Maybe their European names are amulets, popyguás, to protect them in the world of the Juruá.'

'No wonder the Guaraní are known to speak so little,' Maria says, smiling in understanding, 'if words are so powerful, I guess they should be used sparingly and wisely.'

'Absolutely,' I agree, 'the Guaraní cultivate silence. Even the tembetá, the piece of metal with which a Guarani boy pierces the skin beneath his lips when he become men, is meant to hinder speech. The tembetá is a symbol of the importance of outer and inner silence in adolescence and adulthood.'

Just then, an elderly street woman, lost in her own lonely world, comes up to our table and starts to mumble an incoherent story of woe. Silenced, we offer her our last slice of pizza and leave for the refuge of our air-conditioned hotel room.

## SLEEPING DRAGON

The air is stifling when we meet our guide L. at the hotel the next morning and he quickly ushers us into a taxi that he has hired to drive us to the beginning of the day's hike. He speaks in Guarani to the driver to explain to him to bring us to the foothills of the Ybytyrusu mountain range, just outside the city. 'Does everyone speak Guarani in Paraguay?' I ask intrigued. 'Almost everyone, yes,' Luis tells me nodding. 'I'm from a family of Spanish descent and we don't speak Guarani at home, but many people have mixed Guarani blood and speak Guarani as their first language.' 'How did you learn Guarani then?' I ask him, 'in school?' 'No, no, I learnt it on the street, you just pick it up as you go along.' 'It seems

that most people on the bus spoke Guarani too, I couldn't understand a word of what they were saying on their mobile phones.' L. laughs, 'I guess Paraguay's tendency to shut its borders and isolate itself has preserved the language to a degree. Up until about ten years ago, people were embarrassed to speak Guarani in public in big cities, in certain professions, in certain circles, but now, Guarani is seen as a positive thing. Even our government markets the country as the Guarani World these days.' 'It's great not to be ashamed of your origins,' I smile at him, 'in Brazil, most people seem largely oblivious to the Guarani's influence on its language, even though many Guarani words are part of Brazilian Portuguese and the language is much more nasal, like Guarani, compared to Portuguese in Portugal.'

'Even here, the Guarani culture has mixed with European influences,' L. tells me, 'the Guarani language and traditions have seeped into everyone's way of life here. Most people are a mix of Spanish and Guarani and other European and indigenous groups. It's not so easy to find pure-blooded Guarani anymore though, people who really live the Guarani way of life.'

'But it is wonderful that the language is alive,' I smile at him. 'So much of the way of life, the outlook on life is imbued in the language.'

We drive through scrubby flatlands, the windows fully down, towards the Ybytyrusu mountain range which rises up dramatically before us from the flat landscape that stretches in all directions into a heated haze. The stretch of rock is a dark, solid blue piercing the light-blue of the sky.

'Paraguay is quite a flat country,' L. explains, 'the three highest mountains in the country are in this 40 km of mountain range and they are between 640 and 850 metres. We are going to climb the third highest mountain Acati, which means white-haired. Can you see the peaks there? That one is the highest, Trê's Kandu, and the one next to it is Amor, love, because it clings on to Tres Kandu and do you see the third one, which has a stone near the top streaked with white lines? That's Acati, that's the one we are going to climb.'

The heat is stifling as we get out of the car. The grey clouds overhead bounce the heat back on us, making the heat almost unbearable. We start to hike up Acati, following a trail up through rich, thick canopy of forest along the hill, adding more to the humidity and heat. The ground is parched and dusty, after

three months without rain. I notice some blue and white markings on the trees. 'What are these L.?' I ask. 'They are trail waymarkers that we painted,' L. said, 'the paint is organic, it is the paint that the Guarani use as facepaint.' I walk ahead, straight into a thick spider web weaved across the path and flail around to remove the web from my face and hair, hoping that the spider isn't crawling towards my scalp. 'See this web,' L. shows us, as he takes a piece off my hair, 'it's golden.' I look closely and yes, it looks like the finest thread of gold. Even the spiders spin treasure in the heart of Guarani land. Butterflies flit in and out of our path as we walk. A large blue-purple butterfly descends in front of me, leading the way. The spiky amambái plants abound and L. points out the tall, straight lampacho tree, that burst into pink flowers between August to September to herald the end to the cold weather. Its flowers are gone now and the cold weather a distant memory. The mountain slopes up relentlessly and we are all soon sweating profusely, stopping often for deep breaths.

'What heat!' Maria exhales, exasperated.

'We haven't had rain for months so it is especially hot, but in general, yes, Paraguay is incredibly hot in the summer,' L. agrees, 'last year, some friends and I actually fried an egg on the tarmac in Asunción. We took photos to prove it to people, but most people thought we had just fried an egg in the pan and then dropped it on the ground, but no we really had done it. It took longer to fry than in a frying pan, about thirty minutes, but it worked.'

'Hah, Paraguay really is the Zenith of the Peabiru, it certainly feels like the sun is right in the middle of the sky, at its hottest point here,' I marvel. We struggle on, red-faced, falling into silence.

'How the hell did Cabeza de Vaca do this?' I say in outbreaths after a while, breaking the silence. 'He walked along the Camino de Peabiru in the summertime in 1541 all the way through Paraguay to Assuncion to take up his role as governor, right?'

'You have to remember that Paraguay was covered with forest then,' L. said, 'now with most of our forest gone, there is hardly any shade. Only about 2% of the Atlantic Forest remains in Paraguay. Believe me, it would be much hotter to walk from here to Asunción now than then.'

‘I’m not feeling much shade from the trees around us,’ Maria pants, ‘they seem to be blocking the heat from escaping.’

‘We’re nearly there,’ L. assures us, as we come out of the forest and onto a wide track leading up the mountain. We follow the track which leads to a television antennae station on one side and a big gate on the other. ‘There is a great view from the top of Acatí, but it is private land, so we have to pay 10,000 Guaranis, the local currency, to enjoy it,’ L. informs us apologetically. He calls out and a watchman comes slowly to unlock the gate. We offer him the money and he lets us pass onto the land. A short trail amidst sparse trees brings us to an open plateau on the top of Acati.

Before us, frying in the heat, lies Paraguay, the heart of the Caminho de Peabiru. A patchwork of lazy fields stretches out ahead of us before becoming a haze on the horizon. The fields seem mostly unkempt grazing land with a few tiny orderly plantations dotted about. From this height, they look serene and sleepy. The crickets sound loudly, voicing my wonder. On the edge of the plateau, there is a tile with the image of the virgin Mary and baby Jesus. Behind stands one solitary sacred redwood cedar tree, used to make flying boats to bring the Guarani to Yvy Mara Ey, the land without evil. Beyond the tree and a sharp drop, the parched ochre-golden patchwork plains quiver in the midday heat. ‘Twenty years ago, this was all a dark green. It was forest. Now you can flatten a field of millenia forest in a day,’ L. says, melancholically.

I play my tin whistle and its melody stretches out over the plains, mourning the dark green forests of Paraguay and singing the beauty of this area of Yvytryusu. ‘What did you study in college?’ I ask L., as the three of us sit on the grass to eat our picnic lunch. ‘Agro-forestry,’ he answers, ‘I studied for six years in the University in São Paulo in Brazil before coming back here.’ ‘And why did you come back?’ I ask, biting into a sandwich. ‘I want to help preserve the bit of Atlantic forest that is left in this country. The country is being overrun by groups from Canada and Brazil and other countries, who come and bulldoze the forest flat and plant endless crops like soybean and sugarcane. I want to make my contribution for more sustainable, conscious development. That means sustainable tourism too, walking, hiking. That’s why I’m interested in the Caminho de Peabiru I guess.’ ‘And is it working?’ I ask. He passes his hand along the grass around him and responds with a sigh — ‘even tiny drops of water eventually erode a big rock, right?’

When we finish our lunch, L. jumps up and stands on the edge of the plateau. 'This mountain Acati was like a natural communication post. It signalled to afar that at its base, there is a sacred point, Itá Letra, a large rock with ancient engravings. That's where we go next.' Maria and I jump up to stand beside him. 'Ita Letra is aligned with that big rock there beneath the mountain, which is called the dragon's stone. In turn, that stone is aligned with the Yvycui mountains in Paraguari to the west, where there is a giant footprint in a rock, that some say is Sumé's footprint. Yvytry is aligned with Lambaré hill in Asunción. The mountains are a string of natural waymarkers on the Caminho de Peabiru.'

Refreshed by lunch and the gentle shade of the sparse trees, we grab our backpacks and head down Acati. At the foot of the mountain, we once again enter private land, paying 10,000 Guarani to two young children who sidle up to us silently when we come in through the gate. We walk past a huge, overlaid mango tree and turn into a clear space shaded by a huge rock, twenty metres high, that seems to have been dropped by mistake in the field. The face of the rock is riddled with symbols engraved on it: here there is a cross with a long vertical line a short horizontal line, and here an image like a child-drawn sun engraving with its emanating rays.

A walking staff becomes a sequence of lower-case n's in a row. 'We think that symbolizes a mountain range, maybe the Ybytyrusu mountain range or the string of low mountains and hills here in Paraguay that signal the Caminho de Peabiru. On an adjacent rock, there is a squigled joined line, which looks like the outline of a trail. 'Some people think that this is a kind of map, maybe of the Caminho de Peabiru or of the Guarani world along which it passes.' 'On this side of the rock, the images are more abstract, so probably later than the engravings on the other side. They are estimated to be about 4500 years old and the ones on the other side to be around 7000 years old. There is more rock art in the north of the country too, in Jasuká Renda, the sacred centre of the Guarani world.'

The rock face opens in the middle into a kind of tunnel which allows us to pass through to the other side of the rock. There is shade here and we sit basking in it, while looking at the scribbled grey board of rock on the other side. Here, there are star-suns, a series of lines cut deep into the stone and a perfect spiral. I trace my finger around the spiral, linking it to the spiral on the Saint's Road in Ireland. There are a number of lines, both vertical and horizontal, with smaller

lines off of them. ‘These look Celtic,’ I say in surprise, ‘these lines here look like a kind of Ogham, the first example of writing of the Irish language.’ Is it possible that St. Brendan and his monks passed by here in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century and created this rock art, using the ogham script and copying the rock art that adorns so many ancient Irish sacred sites?

‘There is a myth circulating that these are a form of Scandinavian runes. Some say that Vikings came through here, centuries before the Spanish or Portuguese arrived and made these inscriptions. This area is called Totorō, some say from the name of the Scandinavian God Thor. There was also a myth circulating that the natives who lived here up until a few decades ago, the Guayakí were of Viking origin. Others suggest that this was the tomb of an Inca, who was killed during an effort to expand the Inca empire, the tahuantinsuyo, further to the east.’

‘Has any research been done? What do the experts say?’ I ask, intrigued.

‘We here in Paraguay are quick to dismiss even advanced rock art like this as being from another culture, rather than to see it as Guarani or native to Paraguay. Some researchers last year, financed by the Spanish international development agency, suggested that the rock art is native and dates up to 7000 years old,’ L. informs us, ‘but who knows? The legend is that Sumé taught the Guarani writing here and some researchers think that the Guarani were on the brink of developing their own alphabet and writing system, when the Europeans arrived. Some call these symbols the Guarani runes.’

‘When I was in Ciudad Del Este, I visited Moises Bertoni’s old house,’ I tell L. who nods his head in recognition of the name, ‘Bertoni wrote that the network of Guarani paths were used for an ingenious postal system, where they would send little leather bags filled with small symbolic items, seeds, plants, shells, twigs, crafts – each with their own precise meaning, a meaning that was shared by all the Guarani in all four directions. It reminded me of the crane bags of the Druids in Ireland thousands of years ago. Bertoni once saw the arrival of such a bag, with more than 100 items, where the message was quickly and confidently translated and communicated to the rest of the village. It seems they had already developed a symbolic system to communicate amongst themselves.’

L. nods his head with interest.



‘I have read though that Guarani was an oral language and that there was disagreement of whether or not it should be written down,’ I say, in doubt.

‘Yes, the spoken word is of huge importance to the Guarani,’ L. says, nodding, ‘They believe that it was created before the world or human being. At the beginning there was the Great First Sound. Sound or the spoken word is like the essence of God. Their songs, the Porã Hei, are a way of remembering and passing on their origins, myths and social rules but also the intonation of the words themselves brings healing. Sound cures for the Guarani. I’m not sure how that works once it is written down. Perhaps it becomes an abstract collection of symbols, losing its healing power.’

‘For better or worse though,’ L. continues, ‘the Jesuits soon wrote down the Guarani language when they arrived on the continent. The Jesuit priest de Montoya, published a book in 1639 called *“The Treasure of the Guarani Language”*, and said it was as complete and elegant as any other language in the world.’

‘I am learning on this Peabiru adventure that lots of the words that I use are Guarani and I never knew it,’ Maria says, shaking her head, ‘all the animal names like Tátu or Arara and tree and plant names like goiaba, araçá, jabuticaba, urucum, marcela.’

‘You know even in English, we have Guarani words or influences like Jaguar, Tapir, Pirana, Guava fruit. Guarani is a language to be reckoned with and nobody knows it. It is a kind of open secret,’ I add.

Maria nods her head, saying with a smile, ‘Remember in the Jesuit missions in south Brazil, I heard that maybe even Che, the word people in Argentina and the South of Brazil use as ‘guy’ comes from the Guarani for ‘I’ or ‘my’. Who knows, maybe Che Guevara got his passion for liberation from using this Guarani word in his name. He did spend his first four years living in the missions region in Argentina.’

‘Could be,’ I laugh, ‘but his grandmother was an Irishwoman with the surname Lynch, so I put his rebellious spirit down to the the blood of the Irish rebels that flowed in his veins.’

Maria pummels me in the arm, ‘you Irish are so bloody nationalistic. Such a small country and such a big ego.’

As we laugh together, my eye falls on some bare, uneven parts on the rock face. 'Is the rockface eroding?' I ask, pointing. 'Those spots there,' L. says, 'are where people hacked off pieces of the inscriptions. The site isn't protected at all. Some people believe that there is some kind of treasure hidden here, so there has been some damage done to the rocks because of that too.'

I gawk in dismay at the vandalised rockface. 'Why is there no protection for this rock art?' I ask in frustration, 'or some way of saving it from vandals. It's not like you can make new ancient rock art. Once these treasures are gone, that's the end of these clues to another time.'

'There isn't enough interest in the Paraguayan government or among the Paraguayan people to invest in that.' 'But the Paraguayans I have met in Brazil have always struck me as being so proud of their country,' Maria says. 'You're right,' L. agrees, 'there is a strong sense of national pride, but more a macho stance than a desire to learn about it or invest in our heritage. There is so little investment in archaeological sites in this country. It's a disgrace.' L. stands up and walks away from the rock art. 'Come on, let's walk on to the Dragon's Stone,' he invites us.

I take one final look at the spiral and the sun on the rockface and go to follow him. I pass under the mango tree, and green parrots squawk overhead. I look up and see a hummingbird flitting in the trees about me. 'A hummingbird,' I sigh in delight. L. looks back. His voice lightens, 'you should come to Villarrica in high summer, the place is filled with hummingbirds.'

The mud road to the Dragon's Stone is red, dry and parched. There is little shade now, as we enter an area of cleared fields for grazing and small plantations. We trudge lethargically along, drinking the last of our water. After 40 minutes of dragging ourselves through the heat, L. breaks the silence. 'See that tuft of grass there,' he points out, 'that is the eye of the dragon. The stone is also called the tehu, the Guarani for worm.' 'Tehu is a word used in São Paulo,' Maria remarks, becoming once again aware of the Guarani legacy in her native tongue. I make out the eye and the back profile of a resting dragon. 'In China, they call the underground magnetic force the dragon current,' I muse, 'they believe that certain places have intense spiritual energy based on these magnetic lines. Even in Ireland and England, many ancient sacred places, often mountain peaks, are connected

with dragon legends and Christian dragon slayers like St. Michael and St. George. Who knows, maybe this dragon is resting here while guarding Ita Letra, this sacred place of prehistoric wisdom.'

'Then he had better stop resting,' L. retorts with a bitter laugh, 'and get to his feet and protect it before treasure hunters and soy farmers do away with it completely.'

## MOTHER'S WOMB

The next morning is blissfully cooler. Heavy torrential during the night has taken the sting from the Paraguayan heat. We take public buses from Villarrica the next morning on a serendipity search for the rock art at Jasuká Renda, the centre of the Guarani world in the sacred Amambay hills.

Our first bus has a picture of Jesus pasted on the windscreen and takes us to the central bus station in Colonel Oviedo, where we need to wait for another bus to bring us north. Nobody in Villarrica or here at the central bus station could give us any information of how to get there, so I google on my patchy internet access on my mobile phone. I can only find a reference to rock art in the area of the natural reserve Cerro Corá in the Amambay region where it is said that Jasuká Renda, the heart of the Guarani is located, so we head in that direction. We wait for a couple of hours in the bus station, an open-ended corrugated warehouse with simple restaurants and stalls on each side. Maria and I eat in one of the modest canteens. We walk around the little stalls to kill time. The terere stalls are small tables filled with mounds of different medicinal herbs. The Guarani's deep knowledge of herbal medicine is evident in the herbal terere stalls at every train and bus-station around Paraguay. On request, the salesman makes up a fresh terere for us and fills a large bottle of cold water. He points to the medicinal herbs that are added to the terere to fight indigestion, circulation problems, cramps and untold other ills. In Paraguay, the diet is high in meat and low in vegetables and the lifestyle in the oppressive heat is largely sedentary, leading to a lot of problems with indigestion and stomach ulcers. The terere herbs seem to offer some respite. I try the cold terere, but it makes my stomach lurch. The cold is refreshing but to me, it tastes like cold, bitter tea. I lived too long in Ireland, the land of boiling hot mugs of tea or coffee to warm your hands, to be able to stomach cold tea. Maria drinks the full jug alone, shaking her head at her gringa friend. Soon, both Maria and I

need to go to the bathroom and we pay the customary 1000 Guarani to the man at the door, receiving a neat fold of toilet paper in return. We go to wash our hands in the dirty sinks, but there is no water. As I turn the loose tap futilely in my hand, I notice too small indigenous children huddled underneath the sink. One little girl is about five and the other is only about two, certainly no older than my youngest son Eoin. They sit so still under the sink, looking wide-eyed up at us. Their clothes are torn and their faces dirty, but they smile back at us with timid charm. When I ask their names, the older girl whispers, 'Angelica y Marina', the perfect Spanish protection names for these two little angels. Maria offers them some sandwiches and fruit from her backpack, while I take out my tin whistle and play for them. The two children start to giggle and hide their faces in their knees. I feel a lurch of love for them and a bitter tear at my heart for their material poverty – surviving on handouts on their own ancestral land.

Finally, our bus arrives. It is heaving with people already, but we manage to find two aisle seats opposite each other. The seats are filthy, tattered and uncomfortable and the bus lurches from side to side as it hurtles past the endless crosses and alcoves that mark the frequent deaths along the road. Maria and I grimace at each other and fall into a silent haze of heat and discomfort. We drive through endless scrub fields with vendors sitting listlessly under pendulent mango-trees, lost next to the huge mounds of green, stripy watermelons. Each stop at a clump of poorly built houses makes the heat rise to a crescendo. A bustle of young girls jump on the bus, selling breadcrumb slabs of meat, traditional dry bagle-like Chipa bread and cold soft drinks. The stench of meat exposed to the sun turns my stomach. Catholicism is stamped forcefully on every town, with every shop and stall named after some Catholic Saint — San Blas, Santo Bernardino, San Criostabal, San Ramón. Large canvas, hand-written signs are strewn across trees in front of houses from time to time: 'Thank you San Expedito, for the favour received.'

After three hours on the bus, a young girl in front of me, who gorged on soft drinks and breadcrumb meat, begins to vomit right between Cida and my seats. I take the baby quickly from her mother's arms as she stands up, scolds and cleans her older child. As the baby starts to cry, I silently hand her back and all three sit down in front of me again. I feel a lurch of sympathy for the little girl, which is quickly wiped away by the stench of the vomit. Maria and I exchange

glances and lift our eyebrows at each other. The vomit slips and slides between us, threatening to cover our shoes. Maria throws a paper tissue over the vomit, but it quickly seeps into the brown mess. At the next stop, a girl selling chipa bread sees the vomit and without ceremony, takes out some sandy dirt from her apron pocket and throws it on the vomit, before offering her basket of chipas to the rest of the bus.

The road forks at a place called Yby Yau and our bus goes in the direction of Pedro Juan Cabellero on the border with Brazil. Isolated small, green-topped compact hills, stand out on the landscape now and clumps of palm trees stand lost in open fields. Cerro Corá, our day's destination, means *a circle of mountains* and from the bus, I catch glimpses of the circle of eleven mountains forming in the distance.

The hills are like a natural Stonehenge. Cerro Corá is the Guarani's enormous, natural and sacred stone circle. The bus conductor gestures to us that we have arrived at our stop. Maria and I gratefully grab our backpacks, step over the dirt-covered vomit and jump off the bus.

As we dust ourselves down, we realise that we are the only ones to get off the bus and that we are in the middle of nowhere. The bus lurches off into the hazy distance and there are no more cars on the road. There are no buildings and no towns, just a sign saying 'Cerro Corá nature reserve' and a dirt road leading in off the road, through a thicket of trees.

'Where on earth are we?' Maria asks, taking out a bottle of water and gulping it down. I laugh nervously. 'I guess we follow this road,' I answer, starting down the road, 'at least we are off that stinking bus.' 'You're lucky it's me you're dragging on this Peabiru adventure of yours,' she half-jokes with me, 'not everyone would put up with this.' 'But I wouldn't invite just anyone along,' I say to her, smiling ingratiatingly, 'only *very* special people can share a pilgrimage.'

We walk along the dirt road, jumping from side to side to catch the shade from the trees as the road curves. We walk for about a kilometre before coming to a low building, the administration of the park. The building is lifeless, completely still in the oppressive heat. We try the handles on the doors and walk to the four corners of the small compound, but we can see nobody. Maria and I sit down and eat our remaining sandwiches and drink some of our water in the welcome shade.

We have arrived at the middle of nowhere and it is closed.

I find a telephone number taped to a sign on a door and ring it. It rings and rings, until finally somebody picks it up. 'What time does the park open in the afternoon?' I ask, relieved. 'It doesn't,' he replies. I cry out, 'but we have come all the way from Villarrica today and we have no idea when there is a bus back. In fact we have come all the way from Brazil, and before that I came from Ireland to see the park and the rock art here.' There is a pause on the phone. 'I'll see what I can do,' the disembodied voice says, before hanging up. After fifteen despairing minutes, a wary, blue-eyed park ranger comes out of nowhere and approaches us. 'My supervisor rang and asked me to open the museum for you, but I can't bring you to the rock art. The nearest example of the rock art is fifteen kilometres away and I don't have enough gas in the park's truck to take you.' We nod in acceptance at him. He shows us the way along a corridor, 'Which one of you is Irish?' he asks and I wave my hand at him. 'You'll find the museum interesting,' he says quietly. I follow him, intrigued.

Maria and I leave our bags at the corner of the air-conditioned museum and plunge into the world of Cerro Corá. I have come here looking for sacred rock art and to pay homage to the centre of the Guarani world, but I find something very different instead. I come face to face with another Irishwoman.

Unbeknown to us, Cerro Corá was the site of the final battle of the Great War, known in Brazil as the War of the Triple Alliance. In the 1860s, Paraguay had isolated itself from its neighbouring countries, in an effort to achieve self-sufficient economic growth under President Carlos López. His son Francisco Solano took control and tensions escalated between Paraguay and its Latin American neighbours. Local whispers suggest that the English investors had their hand in stirring the tensions too. Francisco López declared war on Brazil in 1864, who were interfering in Uruguayan affairs and possibly endangering Paraguay's vital access to the sea, and soon Argentina and Uruguay entered the war on the Brazilian side. Five years of bloody war ensued, the last two of which were a massacre of Paraguayan forces. The war killed more than 60% of the Paraguay's population, making it proportionally the most destructive war in modern times. There were four women to every man in Paraguay by the end of the war.



Here in Cerro Corá, the museum tells the story of the last battle of that war, which happened here on 1st March 1870. López was with a group of an estimated 200 officers and a group of women supporters or residentas led by his mistress Eliza Lynch. Eliza Lynch was an Irish woman, who had met Francisco Lopez in London and bore him five children, following him into the trenches, along with their children. Their eldest son, fifteen year old Pancho, was a colonel in the Paraguayan army. At this site, the Brazilian forces found López injured by a river and offered him the chance to surrender, guaranteeing his life. López responded by advancing with his sword raised shouting 'Muero por mi patria', 'I die for my fatherland'. When the allied forces came across Pancho and told him to surrender, he answered with fervour equal to his father's, 'a Paraguayan colonel never surrenders.' At that, Pancho too was shot dead. Eliza Lynch dashed to her son's body, taking him in her arms and shouting at the enemy forces, 'don't dare touch me, I am an English woman', before burying both her son and lover with her bare hands.

I am dazed as I come to the end of the exhibition. I sign my name in the visitor's book and go outside to sit down. I am so touched by this unexpected story of a fellow Irish woman in this Paraguayan corner of nowhere. At the time of the battle, Eliza was the same age as I am now. Just like me she had left Ireland and London for the adventures of Latin America. Just like me, she loved passionately and lost her soulmate. Just like me, she was a mother, trying to protect her children. I am a subdued echo of her, one hundred and forty years later. As I look into the dense forest before me, I can almost see her crouched on all fours, digging with her hands, burying her lover and her son; digging her grief into the very soil that my feet rest upon.

I google Eliza Lynch on my mobile phone and a wikipedia page appears. *Eliza Lynch (3 June 1835 – 27 July 1886) was the mistress of Francisco Solano López, president of Paraguay. She was born Eliza Alicia Lynch in Charleville, County Cork, Ireland.* I let out a gasp. This woman that stops me in my tracks on the Caminho de Peabiru in the centre of the Guarani world is not only Irish, she is from Charleville, the same small town in the south of Ireland as my own mother and she died on my mother's birthday, 27th of July. This Peabiru pilgrimage is tailor-made for me.

The park guard approaches me on the bench. On the make, perhaps, or maybe moved by the sight of this dusty, crying foreign woman, he says to me

quietly, ‘if you pay for the petrol, I will bring you to the rock art.’ I dry my tears on my sleeve and nod my head. ‘I would love that,’ I smile shyly at him, ‘thank you.’ I call Maria from the museum and we both jump into his delapidated official truck. He drives slowly and carefully back down the dirt road into the park and then onto the one-laned highway, where he chugs along for fifteen kilometres in the searing heat, half-on, half-off the hard shoulder.

‘Are there many sites of rock art around here?’ I ask, calmer now.

He nods quietly. ‘There are many sites, mostly in small caves. Last year, some research financed by a Spanish development agency was done on them and they were estimated to be 7000 years old.’

‘Are there any Guarani living around here now?’ I ask, seeing no sign of a tekoá along the tarmac road.

‘The Pai Tavyterã live around here in different villages. The name Pai Tavyterã means *sacred people who live in the centre of the earth*. They are a very spiritual people and they see themselves as the guardians of Jasuká Renda, the most important spiritual site of the Guarani. Jasuká Renda is a bit further away, so I won’t bring you there. I will bring you to the closest site of rock art and you can stay there until it’s time to come back to the road and catch the afternoon bus to Yvy Yau at five o’clock.’

He presses the indicator on the truck to turn left off the highway and drives into the entrance to a small wooden house with a straw roof. A Guarani girl comes out to the gate, and seeing the park ranger, opens the gate, eyes down, without saying a word. We drive in on the dirt road, past the wooden house and in towards a hillside. Two Guarani teenagers on a motorbike drive past us down the dirt road and carry on towards the rocky hill before us. I wave and they smile back at us, without slowing their pace.

‘Look through there,’ he points to us, as we peer through a space between a line of palm trees. ‘That hill there is Jasuká Renda, also known as Cerro Guasú, the big mountain. It is the centre of the Guarani world.’ The mountain is off in the distance, rising up like a rock castle from the green flatlands that surround us. The shades of green in the grass and the palm trees fizz with colour in the

early afternoon heat. The lush, virgin landscape before me appears to be from a paleolithic time, its archetypal tones of green seem to predate man. This is what the earth must have looked like even before our ancestors carved the rock 7000 years ago.

We walk down a short forest path and come to a shallow cave in the rock. The guard leaves us at the entrance to the cave, shaking our hands as we give him 20,000 Guaraní for the petrol and thank him for his help.

We step into the shallow cave with jagged rock jutting out over us, which is scribbled throughout with symbols and shapes. There are endless straight lines and small round holes dug out of the solid rock. Repeated hand-sized oval shapes, with a line down the middle on one side abound in different sizes and varies. Perhaps it is the carving of the footprint of some type of big cat. Here there are a series of downward arrows, or maybe they are bird footprints. At the very base of the rock, there is the one shape that is similar to one we saw at Ita Letra. The string of lower-case n's, which might signify mountain ranges, stands out different to all of the other inscriptions. The original land of the Pai Tavyterã was bounded by these eleven hills. Could it be that this symbol is celebrating the sacred mountains and hills of Jasuká Renda, their natural sacred stone circle? The Pai Tavyterã Guaraní believe the hills are spiritual beings and they celebrate and guard them through prayer and songs, to the beat of their mbaraka rattles of gourds and beads.

Even though this rock art predates the Guaraní presence here, they still protect and celebrate it. The Guaraní historically migrated from the Amazon but the centre of their world, their most sacred place is here in Paraguay. For them, it is where the universe was created. Jasuká Renda means the place of the goddess Jasuká. This sacred place is feminine. Jasuká was often depicted as the wife of Kuaraí, the sun, whose path I am following from east to west. I have arrived at the Zenith of the Caminho de Peabiru, surrounded by pre-historic rock art in a shaded cave in the sacred centre of the Guaraní world.

Jasuká is also known as Nhandecy or the grandmother of the universe, from whose breasts the creator was nourished. A Guaraní told Leon Cadogan that *'the place where our grandmother originally lived is called the place of the surging waters. That place is the centre of the earth, the real centre of the earth.'* Underneath the earth on

which we are standing, there is indeed a huge subteranean aquifer, the second largest in the world, which the Guarani have known about for hundreds of years. It is called the Guarani aquifer in honour of the tribe that has lived for over 2,500 years on its surfaces. With the future threatening water shortages, I wonder how long it will take for the Guarani's sacred underwater land to be carved up in private ownership, like the rest of their sacred land. Even the Amambay hills, this seemingly untouched corner, is being encroached upon by Paraguay's slash and burn farming. If you put your ear to the earth, you can hear the hooves of endless herds of hungry cattle approaching.

Over the border in Brazil, this same people, the Pai Tavyterã or Guarani-Kaiowá as they are known in Brazil fight in vain to stay on this sacred land. Squeezed out by big business, they recently wrote an open letter to the Federal Justice.

We (50 men, 50 women, 70 children) Guarani-Kaiowá original communities of the indigenous village Pyelito Kue/Mbrakay, write this letter to present our historic situation and definitive decision in the face of our expulsion ordered by the Federal Justice of Navirai-MS.

We received the information that our communities will soon be attacked, violated and expelled from the margins of the river by the Federal Justice itself. Therefore, it is evident to us that the action of the Federal Justice itself creates and fuels the violence against our lives, ignoring our rights to survive on this riverbank, close to our traditional territory of Pyelito Kue/Mbarakay.

We understand clearly that this decision is part of an historic act of genocide against the native people of Mato Grosso/Brazil. We want to clarify to the government and Federal Justice that we have now finally lost hope to survive with dignity and without violence on our ancestral territory and we no longer believe in the Brazilian Justice System. To whom can we denounce the violence practiced against our lives? To what Brazilian Justice can we appeal? If the Federal Justice itself is creating and fueling violence against us. We have evaluated the situation and we conclude that we are all going to die within a short space of time, we do not have any chance of a dignified or fair life either here by the riverbank or far away from here. We are camped 50 metres from the Hovy river where 4 deaths have already occurred, two by suicide, 2 by beating and torture at the hands of

armed henchmen from the farms. We have lived on the riverbank of the Hovy for one year without any support, isolated, surrounded by armed henchmen and we are resisting until this day. We eat once a day. All this we suffer day in, day out to recuperate our old territory of Pyleito Kue/Mbarakay.

We know very well that in the centre of this old territory many of our grandmothers and grandfather, great grandmothers and great grandfathers are buried and that here lie the cemeteries of all our ancestors. Knowing this historic fact, we want to be killed and buried together with our ancestors right here where we are today. We therefore ask that the government and the Federal Justice not decree an order for our expulsion, but we request that you decree our collective death and that you bury us here. We ask, once and for all, that you decree our total decimation and also send some tractors to dig a big hole to throw and bury our bodies. This is our request to the federal judges.

I think of these desperate Guarani as I sit in this decorated cave in the centre of their world. Leaning up against a tree at the mouth of the cave, I marvel at the ancient engravings that whisper of a different time. I take out my tin whistle and play music for all those who chipped away at stone here thousands of years ago and all those who struggle to protect this sacred land even today. Somewhere in the lilting tinny notes of the music, we meet. Maria and I lay out our towels on the dusty ground and lie down for a siesta under the rock, making out star shapes among the inscriptions above us. I quickly fall asleep, cocooned in the fold of this cave inside the sacred stone circle of the Amambay hills. I am back in mother's womb.

#### GOLDEN MOMENTS

*'You only protect what you love. You only love that which you know. Get to know nature.'*

I read this wooden sign, bleary-eyed, on the walkway up to the Franciscan church at the foot of the Yaguarón hill, 48 km east of the Paraguayan capital of Asunción. We have arrived here at day-break, after spending a fitful night on an overnight bus from Amambay and we are in desperate need of a reviving maté. This town of Yaguarón used to be a mission, where the Franciscans tried to catequize the Guarani. I imagine St. Francis of Assis would have felt at home with the Guarani. From the signs about the church, it seems that the Guarani converted the Franciscan missionaries, rather than the other way around. 'Nature

does not belong to us – we belong to nature,’ I read on another sign, before trying the church door. The church door is locked, so we walk slowly around the varanda, where we find an open side-door. Framed by the old wooden door, we see a cleaning lady in a blue smock, bent over a bucket and squeezing a mop by hand. We walk into the church, greeting her sleepily as we do before we sit down in the first pew by the altar. After the understated simplicity of the exterior of the church, the intricate ornatation of the interior is overwhelming. Every surface is covered in blue, gold and silver brocade. We are inside a musty, priceless chalice. The Franciscan churches are simple on the outside and exquisitely ornate on the inside, as Francis of Assis himself was. Like Celtic Christianity in Ireland, I see the Franciscan movement as one of redeeming moments of Christianity, where they preached of God and man immersed in, and in harmony with, nature.

We wait inside the church, more resting than praying, until it is 7 o’clock and the municipal building across the road is open. As I leave the church, I see a final sign with a quote from St. Francis that finds a nook to rest within me — ‘What you are looking for, is where you are looking from.’

There is a small, well-maintained lawn in the front of the low municipal building, that invites us in. Having researched on the internet, we ask the janitor if the municipal tourguide is available and he invites us to sit on a wooden bench in the reception area and wait for him. In the corner of the room, there is a water-dispenser that offers both hot and cold water. Cida prepares the chimarrão, as I fill the flask with hot water. We smile at each other as we pass the cuia gourd between us, registering our good fortune at finding such a well-organised public-funded oasis. Slowly, the maté shakes us into wakefulness. A tall, thin man with smiling eyes and a strong dose of indigenous blood arrives and introduces himself as G. ‘That’s my father’s and my son’s name,’ I say, as I shake his hand. ‘And my ex-husband’s,’ says Maria with a smile. He laughs and welcomes us. ‘We are on the Caminho de Peabiru or St. Thomas Way,’ I tell him, ‘and were hoping you are free to guide us up the Yaguarón hill to where St. Thomas is said to have lived.’

‘As luck will have it,’ he says with a grin, ‘I am guiding a researcher, an argentine writer up the hill at 8 o’clock. You can join us if you like.’ ‘Could we please start with breakfast?’ Cida asks in halting Spanish. ‘Of course,’ he says



graciously and leads us to a comfortable café up the road. Over a strong, black coffee, we tell G. about the Caminho de Peabiru. He has only passing knowledge of the pilgrimage but has a lot of information about the mysteries surrounding his home town. He strikes me as friendly and funny and his conversation is intelligent and insightful. He has no problem understanding our mixture of Portuguese and Spanish, though he himself was brought up speaking Guarani at home. We tell him of our experiences in Paraguay, ending with our experiences of rock art in Amambay. 'It was so beautiful, but such a huge shame that it is not better known or appreciated and protected,' I conclude. He laughs quietly, without any defensiveness. 'For us Paraguayans, if you question whether or not our history is rich, we will vehemently and passionately tell you that it is. It will be a point of great honour. But we are not so active in learning about it or preserving it, we are in general sedentary and like to eat. No doubt you have seen our round bellies, our speed in talking and slowness in acting.' Maria and I laugh gently at his light-hearted, self-deprecating manner.

Soon the Argentine researcher appears and sits next to us in the café. He is a short, sinewy man in his mid-sixties, with a quick laugh and clever, pointed eyes. He is a writer and a publisher, and is writing a book on the town of Yaguarón. By the time we have finished breakfast, a friendly banter of shared interests has developed between us all and we move off together to explore the town like old friends.

In the centre of the square, G brings us to a series of hand-painted murals created by local artists. 'These murals tell the story of the Guarani's Tumé,' G. begins, 'in the beginning of time, God made the earth and man and woman. Three men were created, among them Tumé and Marangatu and many women. The bad spirit Tau raped Marangatu's daughter Kerana and to punish the act, Kerana gave birth to seven monsters, all of them gestating only seven months. Each monster was a mixture of two animals. The first to be born was Teju-Jagua, an iguana-dog with seven heads, who lived in a cave here on Yaguarón hill.'

'When I visited the Guarani village next to the Bertoni museum near Ciudad Del Este, I saw seven pedestals for statues of these seven monsters with names like Ao ao and Kurupí, but the statues no longer existed,' I remark.

G. nods. 'These seven monsters are central to the Guarani myths to this day,

each monster associated with a particular kind of place like graveyards or caves and certain diabolic behaviour,' he explains, leading us to the next mural.

'The wise Tumé gathered the Guarani together and told them to be united and peaceful and to love each other and resolved to end the curse of the seven monsters. He talked to his sister Porasy, who agreed to seduce the monster called Monai, convincing him to marry her with all of his six monster siblings present at the wedding. Monai gathered his siblings in the cave in Yaguarón and when they were all there, Tumé and the Guarani blocked the entrance of the cave with wood and stones and set fire to the cave for seven days and nights, killing all seven monsters and Porasy. Porasy became the morning star and the seven monsters became the Pleiades constellation, which the Guarani call Eichu, which means honeycomb. The monsters' mother Kerana was so afflicted by the death of her seven children, that she died herself and turned into a water spring on top of the mountain.'

'Many indigenous people have stories about the Pleiades constellation,' A. says, thoughtfully.

'Yes,' I agree, 'for the Celts in Ireland, the Pleiades are associated with mourning and death, not unlike the fate of Kerana and her seven monster children.'

'Is this Tumé?' I ask G., pointing to a mural, which depicts Tumé as a tall, handsome blond prophet revered by the Guarani. I look at Tumé for several minutes in silence and inhale another representation of Tumé or Sumé on this Caminho de Peabiru.

'So was Tumé somehow turned into St. Thomas?' Maria asks G.

'I guess this is a place where the Guarani myth and the Christianised version meet,' G. answers, 'Yaguarón hill was where Tumé got rid of the seven monsters and on the same hill, there is a cave where it is said that St. Thomas lived.'

'Sounds like it was a case of the Christians appropriating a Guarani myth in an attempt to win souls,' the Argentinian A. responds in a rasping voice.

'Let's go up the hill,' G. suggests, sensing the mood. We walk towards the nearby hill, which looks from afar like a resting jaguar. This is how it got its name

Jaguarón. The town is built in the hill's shadow, so it doesn't take long to get to the base.

As we walk, I remark: 'it seems like seven is an important number for the Guarani, as it is in Celtic tradition.'

'In the bible too,' A. chimes in, 'the earth was made in seven days and all that.'

'Yes,' I say lightheartedly, 'and I am the seventh child in my family, which I think makes me a witch.'

Everyone laughs gently and G. continues the banter, 'are you planning on having seven children yourself?'

'Not likely,' I tell him, mock panic on my face, 'I am 36 now and only have three children. I would have to hurry up the pace.' 'That's funny,' he says with a smile, 'I am 36 as well and I too have three children.' 'When's your birthday?' I ask. '10th of February,' he replies. 'Hah,' I laugh, 'speaking of the magic of the number seven, I am exactly seven days older than you!' 'And you have the same birthday as my oldest son's,' Maria chimes in. We laugh at the coincidences.

We walk along a cobbled street before coming to the rocks at the bottom of the Jaguarón hill. We pass two stations of the cross as we go. 'Each Easter Sunday, a procession starts at the Franciscan church and follows the stations of the cross up the hill to the top,' G. tells us. 'This reminds me of Ireland,' I tell G., 'the first hill I climbed on my Caminho de Peabiru was Mount Brandon and it too had the stations of the cross all along it.' 'The church has appropriated all sacred sites for itself,' A. says, 'the Guarani traditions, as no doubt the Celtic traditions, have been integrated into Christianity to better catequize the locals.' He breaths in and says with a sense of disgust, 'no doubt, this helped the conquest of the indians and ensures an orderly population and the payment of the monthly tithe.'

'What religion are you?' G. asks us as we walk. 'None,' says A. with a flourish of the hand. 'I was born and bred a Catholic but I don't identify with it much anymore,' Maria says.

'Are you Catholic too?' G. asks me.

'You know,' I reply, 'I married in the Catholic church, a lovely meaningful

ceremony with a beautifully soulful priest, and I baptized my first two sons. But five years ago, my husband died suddenly and it was as if I was shaken awake and found that the Catholic church no longer fit. It was as if I could no longer simply coast along on hand-me-down beliefs but had to find out for myself who or what God is. Since then, along with my kids, this search has become the most important thing in my life. That's one of the reasons I am here, following the Caminho de Peabiru.'

'What are you searching for?' G. asks.

I reflect for a moment before answering. 'I feel that God is within me and that is where I can find him. No church or priest has to interpret anything for me or act as a bridge between me and God. And I feel that the Church gave me rules – be a good girl, be compassionate, do as we say and you'll be safe. But it didn't keep my heart safe and most importantly, it didn't give me tools to truly awaken. I am searching for that awakening – a transcending of this material rollercoaster called life and the embodiment of a more expansive Presence.'

We fall into a silence as we walk.

'There is a story,' I begin, breaking the silence after a few minutes, 'about a village that had not discovered fire. One day a stranger came and made a fire in the centre of the village. Everyone was amazed and asked him to show them how to make fire. He showed them how to gather kindling, choose the perfect stones and how to hit them off each other to create a spark and then build a fire. The people of the village soon learned to make their own fires. In the dark of night, without looking for any thanks, the stranger left, walking to another village that had not yet discovered fire. When he arrived at the next village, he again made a fire in the centre of the village and again, the people were amazed. Soon though, the priests and the leaders were jealous of the villagers' interest in the stranger, so they jailed him and killed him. The villagers were outraged and set against the leaders. The priests and leaders though were very clever. They took the kindling and the stones, the instruments for making fire, and put them in a glass box. They built a huge temple around the glass box and all the villagers came to adore them. The leaders were not usurped and no more fire was made.'

There is a silence between us, when I finish the story.

We soon arrive at the top of the hill. The town of Yaguarón lies hazily below

us. We stand there, still in silence, looking out at other low hills in the distance. 'That hill over there is called St Thomas' hill,' G. tells us, pointing as he speaks, 'there is a type of curved engraving on a rock there, which is said to be the belt of St. Thomas and there is another one of his footprints. There is a cave there too, where it is said an image of St. Thomas, carved in stone, was found. The image was brought to the cathedral in Paraguari, but the next day it had returned to the cave of its own accord. St Thomas is now the town's patron saint. The same town is also home to the Avaré Sumé foundation that promotes local traditional music and dance and an annual Avaré Sumé festival as well, named of course after the Guarani prophet Sumé. The Guarani and Christian stories mingle there also.'

We follow G. onto a high rock. When we are standing on the rock, he points down to a long, shallow hole on its surface. 'This is known as the footprint of St Thomas,' he says. I take off my shoe and place my right foot into the footprint. 'Fits like a glove,' I laugh as I place my toes in the remaining toe-grooves. The footprint is very similar to the one that I saw in Itapema on the Brazilian coast, not perfect, but the right size for a human footprint, though quite faded with time. While the others try their feet in the footprint, I walk over to where G. is standing. 'How was this footprint found?' I ask him.

'When the Franciscans arrived in Yaguarón, the Guarani brought them to this place and told them it was sacred, because this is where Tumé led the united Guarani tribe to kill the seven monsters. They equated Tumé with Saint Thomas. Over there is the mountain spring that is attributed to Kerana, the mother of the seven monsters, who died of despair when they were all killed.'

We walk to the perfectly round spring in the rocks. The water reflects our faces peering into the water and the blue sky behind us. 'When the Guarani study the stars, instead of twisting their necks and looking up, they would study the reflection of the night sky in puddles and small lakes. In that way, the skies were brought to earth for them,' G. tells us. Maria joins us, bends down, wets her fingers and flicks some water playfully at everyone and we all laugh.

G. guides us down through the rocks overhanging the town and along a narrow precipice until we come to a natural cave in the rockface, about two metres deep. 'This is the cave where Saint Thomas is said to have lived,' G. shows us. I start to walk into the cave and G. pulls me back abruptly. 'Be careful of the bees,'

he says protectively. As I look in, I see a number of beehives with large bees swarming around them. 'How funny,' I say thoughtfully, 'didn't you say that the seven monsters were turned into the Pleiades constellation that the Guarani call honeycomb?' 'Yes,' G. says nodding with a smile, 'that's right, the constellation is called Eichu, which does indeed mean honeycomb.'

'I am learning on this pilgrimage that everything that is in the sky is truly here on earth too. This pilgrimage is a reflection of the heavens,' I say laughing, entering the cave but sitting away from the entrance to avoid the stings of the seven Guarani monsters.

Maria sits in next to me and the two men stand in front of us, peering cautiously into the cave. Behind them, I can see the town and the distant hills. We drink some water from our water bottles, relishing the view.

I take out my tin whistle and once again I start to play my favourite tin whistle melody, *Gabriel's Oboe* from the film 'The Mission.' The notes escape from the whistle, rebounding about St. Thomas' cave and falling down on the sleepy town below. As I finish, G's voice cracks as he gushes 'that music is so beautiful and is so, so special to me. Thank you.'

I smile at him, moved. 'Why?' I ask gently.

He composes himself before continuing. 'When I was at university, we did a performance based on that music. As the music started, we were all curled up like seeds and then as the music gained momentum, we began to open. We were seeds breaking out of ourselves and growing into green shoots and then filling out as stalks and finally expanding to our potential as huge, strong trees.' As he spoke, G. demonstrated a restrained version of the movements with his long, dangly body. 'Then I watched the film "The Mission" and that film, which is beautifully saturated with that music, really moved me. I watched it as part of a class on historical tourism and was told that it was very true to life and based on excellent research. It made me see my own country and its history in a whole new light.' He breathes deeply before continuing. 'Then one day this year, my eldest daughter, who is nine, made me sit on the couch and said she had a surprise for me. She took out her violin and played this music to me as a surprise.' G.'s voice breaks off and he starts to cry gently with emotion. We all breathe deeply, moved by him, moved with him. After a moment, I pick up the tin whistle again and play



the music one more time as G. composes himself. ‘That music is just so very, very special to me,’ he says softly.

Maria has tears in her eyes and A. lays his hand briefly on G.’s arm. ‘You know,’ I begin, ‘I learned to play that piece on the tin whistle because it is very special to me too. I first heard it as an eleven year old in Ireland when I watched that same film ‘The Mission.’ The film inspired me so much that it strengthened a childhood dream I had to come and do social work in Latin America. When I finally made it to Peru at the age of 22 to work for six months as a volunteer in an orthopaedic clinic, I went to a tiny little village with my host family one day. We were walking past a simple church in the middle of nowhere, one hazy afternoon, when suddenly this music started blaring out on the church’s loudspeaker. It was as if God was telling me that I was in the right place and that my determination to come to Latin America had paid off. When I married in Ireland in 2002, I chose this music to walk up the aisle to start my new life with my husband.’ My voice breaks slightly too now, ‘and less than five years later, when my husband died suddenly, I played this same music as the last song in his cremation service.’

We all sit in silence, the moment infused with compassion and intimacy. Here we are, a group of mostly strangers from different countries, brought together in a moment of gentle union.

#### DESCENDING ST. THOMAS’ MOUNTAIN

Gradually, we smile at each other shyly and start to move again, making our way playfully down the mountain. I walk next to G. as we descend. ‘I was interested by what you said about your spiritual search,’ he said, ‘I wonder have you heard of gnostic spirituality?’

I nod my head in the affirmative. ‘I have heard of it. The Gospel of a possible Sumé, St. Thomas, is a gnostic gospel, a compilation of Jesus’ sayings. I’ve been dipping in and out of it over the last few months. It resonates deeply with me.’

‘I’m learning more about gnosticism too at the moment,’ says G., ‘many believe that gnosis was the message of Jesus and the early christians. They say that the life of Jesus represents the spiritual journey that all of us can embark on. Gnostics talk of the journey as a path of looking within to awaken from the dream

that we are living as separate individuals and to become our true selves again, conscious of our spiritual nature and our oneness with everyone and everything around us.'

I sigh deeply, inhaling his words. I answer him in a quiet voice, 'that's just the insight that I glimpsed after my husband died. In my vulnerability and openness after his death, I was assailed with the knowledge, not the belief, that I was linked with him still, even after death. I had some very vivid dreams that seemed more like visitations. In one, he even told me to go to Brazil and that's the reason I returned to live here with our two small children. Over time, the connection with Alastair became more constant and more subtle. His gentle presence settled within me somehow. I am beginning to realise that this connection I have with him isn't personal. What unites my late husband and me, unites me with you, the trees around us, these rocks. In St. Thomas' gnostic testament, Jesus said 'Split a piece of wood — I am there. Lift the stone, and you will find me there.' I am discovering that that is one of the reasons I'm on this pilgrimage; to get some insight into how to live from that which unites everything, rather than the scary, goddamn insecure state of separation. The feeling of being separate and vulnerable, of being mortal and transient, of my children being vulnerable, still scares the hell out of me. I've been running away from that for five years.'

'How is the pilgrimage going?' he asks, after a few moments.

I fall into silence, as I wait for a genuine answer to surface. 'I am learning that the world around me is awash with mystery and sacred spaces that inspire that sense of connection with other people, with our ancestors and with nature. I am waking up to the living landscape and feeling viscerally that I am part of it. I guess Celtic and Guarani animism have drenched me. I notice sunrises more, and sunsets. I watch the phases of the moon. I am noticing how the sky is somehow inside me too, its rhythms, its phases, its mystery.'

I breathe deeply before continuing.

'It's not all a picnic though. I'm also becoming aware of things that I have ignored or run away from – the uncomfortable, painful feelings. I am seeing more clearly that the level of disconnect that we feel from one another and from nature leads to horrendous crimes, like the massacre and continued mistreatment of the indigenous people, the Triple Alliance war which decimated Paraguay and the

ongoing destruction of the Atlantic Forest. It is so overwhelming. It hurts me. It physically hurts me. I have felt like stopping the pilgrimage, turning away from all this again, burying my head in the sand of my busy, middle-class family life.' G nods his head and we walk on, insights exploding like fireworks within me.

'As I learn more about the Guarani,' I continue, 'I am more and more impressed with their *ñande reko*, their way of life that they have kept alive to this day. It is similar to the way of life of the Celtic Christians and Celtic and pre-Celtic pagans in Ireland, which has largely died out in my native country. It is making me look at my own way of life like never before. My day to day life is such a continuous rush away from silence and from discomfort. As I learn about the Guarani, I am beginning to wonder if I can't bring more consciousness into my everyday life – celebrate this shared nature and the changes of the seasons and the moons, slow down, sit around the fire, commune with this moment through dance and song and meditation, focus less on material life and bring the spiritual into my everyday experience. It seems like the Guarani have managed to maintain their lives as a constant pilgrimage, cultivating this link with the spiritual through nature that we in the modern material world have totally lost. They seem to me guardians of ancient wisdom, holding on to it despite all kinds of atrocities against them.'

'But the world is forever changed,' G says gently, 'we can't go back to an ancient way of being in the world that doesn't exist for us any longer.'

I shake my head and continue, 'it's clear to me that I am looking backwards to move forwards. It is not about me becoming a Guarani, even though other *juruá* have been invited to take that path. Rather, for me it is about learning the precious qualities that the Guarani have preserved and bringing these qualities into my own life. That way I can make my life more bearable, more joyful, I can bring more genuine beauty into the world and who knows, perhaps I can somehow truly experience more and more that my essence, my children's essence, everything is eternal. The qualities that help the Guarani seem to be a broader, more spiritual perspective on life, a deep relationship to nature, a sense that they are part of nature. They live primarily with a spiritual objective and at a slower pace, honouring the community and listening to intuition. And they walk of course. They are *tapejara*, a walking people. All these qualities inspire me and I want to cultivate them more in my life. Maybe this will help me to strengthen the budding awareness in me of how my essence is truly bigger than the body and reduce in equal measure the fear

of death and loss that accompany me still.'

He nods his head in understanding and we walk on in silence, walking effortlessly in rhythm with each other. As we near the town, he tells me that he is practicing astral travel at night-time. He offers me a beautiful image that strengthens the silent flame within me.

'For me, being in the body is like being in a small room. If I believe there is nothing beyond the room, I feel oppressed, claustrophobic and desperate to stay in the room and keep all my loved ones there with me. When I realize deeply to my core that I am bigger than the body, regularly experiencing that the windows and doors in the small room are wide open, I feel a sense of peace. I can come and go as I choose. Other people can leave the small room but they don't cease to exist. I am still in the room but the experience is totally transformed. I can see now all the corners and contents of the room, explore them, appreciate them but without attachment or fear of leaving or letting others leave.'

Arriving at the town, we hug each other and say our heartfelt goodbyes. As Cida and I walk away from G and L, I realise that our little haphazard group represents the same nations as those represented in the battle of Cerro Corá that I learnt about yesterday. At Cerro Corá, the Paraguayan troops and their leader Lopez, his Irish mistress Eliza Lynch and the allied forces of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay clashed in a battle of death and despair. Today, with G. from Paraguay, Maria from Brazil, A. from Argentina and me from Ireland, only Uruguay was missing from our little group.

However tiny the moment that we shared on the top of the Yaguarón hill, more than 140 years after the battle of Cerro Corá, it fills me with a ripple of hope that a more peaceful tribe is beginning to emerge.

## TO LOOK UP OR LOOK DOWN?

Cerro Lambaré, on the outskirts of the Paraguayan capital Asunción, is another hill rising up above the flatlands, marking the Caminho de Peabiru. It is aligned with the Cerro Ahati and the Dragon's Stone that we saw in Guairá and it signals the point where the pilgrimage turns northwards towards modern day Bolivia. In a world before GPS, road names and endless buildings, the natural

landscape was one, large living map. Its slopes and contours were felt in the legs of the Guaraní and used as signposts along the Caminho de Peabiru.

A wide road has been carved out of the native forest of lampacho trees and winds up the hill to the statue of Lambaré, a Guaraní cacique who fought for these lands when the Spanish conquistadores first arrived in the sixteenth century. The heat is suffocating as Cida and I walk slowly up the hill, passing a cross in honour of San Roque, the first Paraguayan Saint that was canonized in 1988, over 300 years after his death at the hands of indigenous people, who resisted his efforts of catequization and ‘reduction.’

On the top of the hill, the statue of a cacique stands immobilised, petrified into submission, looking out over the lands which once sheltered his family and his ancestors. For millennia, the native pajés or shamans would come to the top of this hill to look upwards and communicate with their gods. Now though, the hill is a tourist attraction and our gaze is only downward, hypnotized by the view below of the sprawling city of Asunción and the wide, snaking curves of the Paraguay river.

#### WAYMARKER TO YVY MARA EY

Maria and I walk, tired, hot and laden with our backpacks through the crumbling colonial streets of Asunción. We walk along Alejo García, a street named in honour of our Peabiru hero. We see a decaying corner building which used to be home to Eliza Lynch. As I look up at the house among the deafening sounds of carhorns and street vendors, I catch a glimpse of its former glory and can almost see Madam Eliza leaning out the window. Her long blond hair is flowing down her back and a seductive smile plays on her lips as she watches out for her beloved.

We walk, tired, hot and laden with our backpacks through the crumbling colonial streets of Asunción. We walk along Alejo García, a street named in honour of our Peabiru hero. We pass the pantheon of dead heroes and the obsolete train station still celebrated in Paraguay as Latin America’s first train line. The whole capital exhales a lament of former glory and current decay. We walk to the cathedral, which has a mural at its entrance of the Spanish founder of Asunción with a plan of the cathedral visible in his hand, and an indigenous man in a subservient position. From here we can see the bloated Paraguay river.

There are signs advertising a walkway that is being built along the river but when we begin to walk towards it, we come across precarious houses made of slats of wood cobbled together among a sea of rubbish. At a distance, we see two men crouched over, smoking crack. We turn back quickly.

Asunción was Cabeza de Vaca's destination when he followed the Caminho de Peabiru from the coast of Brazil in 1541. Following in the footsteps of Aleixo Garcia, he arrived in Asunción and took up the role of governor of Paraguay and attempted to conquer the area by kindness and not by violence, with efforts to make slavery of the indigenous illegal and to pacify the area around Asunción. His earlier experiences in North America, where he himself was taken as a slave and then a hesitant healer by several indigenous tribes had matured the wild conquistador in him. He managed to achieve peace in the short-term with his pacific approach but his policies made him a mortal enemy of the European settlers, led by Domingos de Irala. In 1544, de Vaca was imprisoned in Asunción for a year and then sent back in chains to Spain to face spurious charges of crimes against the crown of Spain. After he was expelled from the region, a fierce war lasting three years broke out between the Spanish colonists and the indigenous tribes. Cabeza de Vaca himself died penniless in Seville fifteen years later.

Our last stop in Asuncion is the craft market in Liberty Square. At one stall, a woman with strong Guaraní traits is selling handicraft waves us towards her. She has crafted simple necklaces with small stones engraved with Guaraní runes or symbols, based on the rock art of Ita Letra and Amambay. When we tell her that we are on the Tape Aviru, as Peabiru is called in Paraguay, she solemnly puts a necklace with a sign for Tape, the Way, around my neck. 'We Guaraní are always following the Way looking for Yvy Marã Ey, the land without evil,' she says to me, fixing me with her stare, 'but remember, Yvy Marã Ey is inside us, not outside.'

I walk away from her, pondering her words. To what extent is Yvy Marã Ey outside us or inside us? The Guaraní in general claim that it is a physical, external place. They walk en masse for hundreds or even thousands of kilometres along the Caminho de Peabiru towards the coast and wait for apikás to take them further to reach their land without evil. They talk of older or wiser Guaraní having gone there, body and all, and never returning. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, some Guaraní willingly sent their children in European slave ships to be transported to Yvy Marã



Ey. We Europeans are no different. St. Brendan may have come to the Americas looking for the land of eternal youth, Tír na nÓg. Hy-Brasil, the island paradise, was chartered on maps for centuries. Columbus himself thought he had arrived in the Garden of Eden. I am here too, having travelled from the other side of the Atlantic from my native Ireland, guided by a dream from my late husband. All of us putting peace, paradise at a distance from us, both in space and time. Did any of us truly find it though?

In the 1960s, a female pajé Tatatin Rua Retée led a mass pilgrimage from Rio Grande do Sul to the more northern coastal state of Espírito Santo, guiding her community along the Caminho de Peabiru. In Santa Cruz in Aracruz, they found their Yvy Marã Ey and pacifically began to reclaim their ancestral lands, despite violent reprisals. Tatatin was greatly revered. One newspaper article referred to her as an equivalent to the pope among the Guaraní. Her sole mission in life was to lead her community to Yvy Marã Ey. Perhaps she could have gone herself, but perhaps due to a Guaraní version of the bodisatva vow, she stayed behind to lead her people there too. On her deathbed, at the age of 104, she was finally convinced that she had been wrong about the exact location of Yvy Marã Ey and was no longer sure they had reached it at Aracruz. She gave her grandson Tupã the mission to go to the God of the Mountain to ask him to redirect them to the true Yvy Marã Ey. Tupã built an Opy, a prayer house at one of the highest points of Caparaó Mountains and has been seeking redirection every since. Will he ever find it? Can we ever find it outside of ourselves?

I know the power of place. On this pilgrimage, some places evoked in me an experience of expansion and of unity with all about me; places such as the Brazilian sacred coastline, by the fire in the Guaraní's opy, at the Iguazu Falls and in a cave in Amambay. Other places filled me with feelings of despair and a sense of separation and contraction; places such as a deliberately burnt stretch of Atlantic forest, fields of GMO soy and corn and the ruins of the Jesuit missions.

Place can enable an opening, the Guaraní aguyje or lightness of being but nothing external, not even the most beautiful and peaceful place imaginable can fill an internal hole. I bring my right hand to the Tape pendant on my neck and allow the Guaraní saleswoman's words settle within me.

## KURUSU GARCIA

The Paraguay river is the thick central vein of South America, that winds its bloated, blue-green way over the flatlands around Asunción. Many Spanish explorers in the 16th Century tried to follow it in a bid to find the riches of gold and silver that were rumoured to be in the West. Seven years before Pizarro overthrew the Inca empire, the Paraguay river led Aleixo Garcia towards Bolivia, where he fought with the Incas near Potosí. The Paraguay river was Aleixo Garcia's escape route too, as he retreated from the Incas on his way back to his coastal home. After sending a couple of his European co-shipwrecks back to the coast with some of the gold and silver they had plundered, he set up camp ten kilometres from the riverbank, 330 km north of Asuncion, now known as the town of San Pedro de Ycuamandijú.

Maria and I arrive by bus at San Pedro in search of any trace of Aleixo Garcia. As we approach the town from the eastern town of Santa Rosa, the bus, properly air-conditioned for once, drives straight into the golden-red sunset. At the entrance to San Pedro, there is a three-metre long silver painted wooden key: Saint Peter's key to paradise. The silver I am looking for on this pilgrimage is this key, not the riches that turned Aleixo Garcia's head and that of so many conquerors and treasure hunters after him. Perhaps it was this greed that led to Aleixo's fate in this far-flung spot. Just beyond the silver key, we alight from the bus at a wooded area.

In a clearing among the trees, we find a large wooden cross called the Kurusu Garcia, Garcia's cross, marking the spot where Aleixo Garcia was killed while he camped after having fled from Inca territory. Cida and I take a moment by the cross, feeling the last rays of the setting sun on our faces. I say a silent prayer for this Peabiru pioneer, who we have followed for more than 1500 km from Massiambu on the Brazilian coast. As Maria and I stand either side of the cross, I take out my tin whistle and play a melancholy melody in his honour.

The location of Garcia's death was discovered 400 years after it happened, when a child called López, who later became a teacher of the Guarani language, found a cross made of native lampacho wood strung up by vines among the trees in a thick part of the forest. An old indigenous man told him that this was the place where Garcia was killed.

The cross that I touch now was erected in 2005, a replica of a replica, but historians agree that this was the location of Garcia's death. We walk to a nearby mural which depicts a Garcia that clashes strongly with my internal image of him. It depicts him in colonial dress being handed treasure by an indian in a feathered headdress. I imagine Garcia again before me, dressed sparingly as a Guarani, bare-chested and tattooed and proudly wearing the tembeta metal rod piercing the skin under his lower lip.

Nobody knows who killed Aleixo Garcia. Perhaps it was the paiaguás, a warring tribe that ruled much of the Paraguay river. Others suspect that it was his Guarani companions that killed him, perhaps out of disgust at his use of the Caminho de Peabiru to find riches and his efforts to bring more Europeans along this sacred trail. Guarani men using his name were reported throughout Paraguay, which suggests another reason for his death. In the Guarani tradition, prophets and great leaders were sometimes killed and then their flesh eaten as a way for others to attain the same state of grace. Some suggest it to be the highest honour that can be paid to a man. They would not be the first group to kill their own prophet and to eat his body in ritual.

Maria and I walk around the sodden forest trail guided by the last wisps of light from the sinking sun, before heading four blocks westward toward the town's pretty square. It is surrounded by low government buildings and a small colonial white-painted building proudly named 'Museo de Alejo Garcia.' The museum is shut as are most of the buildings around the square. We retreat to the Santa Ana hotel in the pitchest black night. I am suddenly struck now by how safe I feel. The warnings of my Brazilian friends over our safety in Paraguay ring hollow here. The worst thing to befall me here in Paraguay has been a bout of fleas from one of the mangy bus trips – nothing that a hot shower and a wash and steaming of my clothes couldn't fix.

The next morning, Maria and I walk back to the square and enter the small, white colonial house of the Alejo Garcia museum. We find an unaired deposit of forgotten, crumbling colonial history and the usual echoing silence of thousands of years of indigenous history. The air is musty with decay and everything is decomposing, from the stand-up piano to the corset and photos of several old families of the village. The only item possibly referring to the time of Alejo Garcia and the Guarani that accompanied him is a broken Guarani funeral urn, standing

solitary and unexplained in the midst of old colonial bric-o-brac. Perhaps Aleixo Garcia was buried under the cross in this urn by his Guaraní companions.

Before taking our bus, we pay a quick visit to the Franciscan church on the edge of the square that is in the process of being restored. We step over ladders and paint pots and enter by a side entrance. The high-ceilinged church is airy and light after the dank museum. The altar is made of a single piece of carved wood. As I kneel before the altar, saying a prayer for Aleixo Garcia and the few Europeans and many Guaraní who died on the Caminho de Peabiru, I make out the outline of a caravel ship among the exquisite details in the altar's carvings.

When Alejo Garcia stepped into his caravel in Europe to come to Brazil, he had never imagined what he would experience; a shipwreck, being rescued and welcomed by the Guaraní tribe, embracing a new culture, new language and new culture, marrying, become a father, embarking on an adventure along the Caminho de Peabiru to find El Dorado and dying on the banks of the Paraguay river. In total, he lived seven years in Brazil, living and dying intensely.

I also left Europe and have now spent seven years in Brazil. When I stepped on the airplane to come live in Brazil, going to live with Alastair, I also could never have imagined all that I would experience; setting up home with a partner for the first time, winning at Carnaval in Rio de Janeiro, working in favelas, embracing a new climate, new language and culture, marrying, becoming a mother, returning a widow, setting up an NGO for sick children, having a third child, writing and publishing a book and embarking on an adventure along the Caminho de Peabiru to find Yvy Mara Ey, a paradise within me. On this continent, live seems more intense, the rhythm accelerated.

Kneeling here before the altar, my mind goes to the onward trip I will now continue without Maria, who has to go back to Brazil. I am dreading this part of the Caminho de Peabiru. I think of Aleixo meeting his death unexpectedly here at the edge of the Paraguay River and as I imagine myself travelling alone up the same Paraguay river, a chill descends my spine.

#### ONWARDS AND NORTHWARDS

I say my goodbyes to Maria and take a bus to travel northwards alone, with only my pocketbook of the *Tao Te Ching* as a companion. As Aleixo Garcia and the

2000 Guarani did, I follow by land the serpentine bends of the Paraguay river to Concepcion, a city over 85 km north of San Pedro. I plan to wake up early the next day and take a morning bus to Vallemi to catch a cargo boat for two days up the Paraguay river through the Chaco area to Bahia Negra. From there, I hope to take a taxi-boat over the Bolivian border to Puerto Busch, followed by a bus or a ferry to Puerto Suarez in Bolivia, close to the Brazilian border. Although the schedule is tight, I have made contact with a German man living in Concepcion, who assures me it's possible.

As the bus lurches northward, I cannot distract my mind from the memory of my five day trip on a cargo ship up the Amazon river fifteen years ago. Just thinking of it makes me nauseous. The boat was overloaded with endless cargo, cattle and a huge tractor. When the boat finally pulled away from the port into the middle of the wide Amazon river, a day after it was due to leave, water started to pour onto the deck of the boat. Panicked, I grabbed for a life-jacket, as did the others on the boat. It was then that I realised that there were only about twenty life-jackets for more than one hundred people. The boat stabilised and continued, undeterred, but my jitters never managed to stabilise again throughout the whole trip. The food was unpalatable and my water supply limited. I couldn't sleep on my hammock, due to the whole family of Peruvians lying underneath me. There were people and animals in every crevice of the boat. I used to sit on the roof of the boat to escape the crowds on deck and spent my time looking out on the endless churn of the bloated, brown water of the Amazon, flanked on each side by monotonous green forest. On the roof, there were hundreds of caged cute yellow chicks. At the beginning of the trip, the sound of them was deafening. By the end of the trip, their cheeps were completely silenced. Over the five days in the blistering sun, the chicks had died in droves. The gurgling sound and decomposing smell of their slow deaths in the oppressive heat returns to me now as the memory surfaces and I shake it away with dread. I swallow my hesitation though, steadfast in following the Caminho de Peabiru.

I arrive in Concepcion with the sky streaked red with the last light of the day, crossing a bridge over the sprawling Paraguayan river before entering the town. The word Paraguay in Guarani means *water that runs to the sea*. The river runs down to Asuncion, before entering into the Paraná river and then the Rio de la Plata before spilling out into the Atlantic ocean. This is landlocked Paraguay's access

to the sea. For the areas of Paraguay north of Concepcion, the river is a lifeline and a weekly cargo ship called the Aquidaban travels up and down the river from Concepción to Bahía Negra near the border with Bolivia to sell and buy goods from the farming communities on the river's shores. Roads beyond Concepcion range from precarious to non-existent and travelling by boat is the safest route. The ferocious Paiguas tribe, who possibly killed Aleixo Garcia, are long extinct now.

I alight from the noisily airconditioned bus into the hot night, viscerally aware both of the darkness of the tiny bus station and the fact that I am alone. I flail around looking for P, the German tourist guide and organic farmer whom I have agreed to meet. I can only make out the shadows of some large Paraguayan men by the bus-stop, who seem to leer at me in the darkness.

There is a horse drawn cart in front of me, taking supplies off the bus, but no sign of any European man. I walk haltingly to the nearest bar and peer inside. There he is, drinking a beer and smoking a thick cigar. I smile at him and move to kiss his cheek in greeting. 'You give two kisses in Paraguay,' he reproaches me gruffly. Embarrassed, I kiss his other cheek. He is a sinewy man in his late forties, tall and thin with lined, weathered skin from 20 years of Paraguayan sun. Everything about him is brusque as he drinks down his glass of beer and grabs his half-empty bottle. 'You are one hour late,' he spits at me, 'but that is pretty much on time around here. Let's get going, it's already dark.' I follow him as he leads me to his pick-up truck. 'Be prepared for anything when you get in this truck,' he says to me over his shoulder. I brace myself and climb up into the truck. A loud squaking noise greets me and I jump back. In the back seat, there is a large bird, flapping its wings menacingly and protesting its capture. 'Get in quick and shut the door,' P shouts at me. 'This bird was found on the street in Concepcion today and of course, whenever they find a wild animal, hurt or lost, I am called to look after it. It is a shahá bird, pretty dangerous if he stabs you with his wing.' He shows me the nail on the fold of his wing. I move forward in the front seat to avoid his stabbing movements. 'But he is a beautiful bird, in the morning, he wakes you at sunrise with a shahá call, sha-há, sha-há.'

He takes a swig from the bottle of beer that he holds between his thighs as he drives. 'You owe me 50 dollars,' he growls, almost playfully now, 'I booked a cabin for you on the Aquidaban cargo boat. If you want to get to Bahía Negra, you have to catch the boat from Vallemi tomorrow. That means a 6 o'clock colectivo



bus tomorrow morning. God, you are speed-dating Paraguay. You won't even see Concepcion in the daylight!' 'I can always come back,' I tell him with a laugh, 'I live in Brazil, so it's not too far, but for now I have only until Saturday before I have to get back to my kids.' He is quiet for a while as he takes another swig of beer. 'You might just make it,' he says, 'from Vallemi, you take the Aquidaban cargo boat for two days. Then, there is a guy called Don A. who will bring you across the border on another boat to Puerto Busch in Bolivia for 200 dollars. From there, you should be able to get to Puerto Suarez, near to the Brazilian town Corumbá. I don't know how long that takes, but it should cost between 150 and 200 dollars.'

'Do you know this Don A. guy?' I ask doubtfully. 'Not personally,' he says, without taking his eyes off the road, 'but I have sent a number of backpackers to cross the border with him and none of them has come back, so I suspect they made it over the border alright.'

'What about the exit visa to leave Paraguay?' I ask. 'You are in luck,' he says, taking another swig of beer, 'in no other town in Paraguay would a customs officer come to the office at eight in the evening. But I promised her that you would give her a propina, a tip, so she is going to come back especially.' He takes a mobile phone out of his shirt pocket and shouts in loud, crude Spanish that we are on our way.

In the middle of the road, along a strip of unkempt grass, a line of old, rusting farm vehicles stand incongruous. At the end of the street, a huge, yellow statue of Mary and child hails me.

We arrive at the government customs office and five minutes later, an attractive young woman appears on a motorbike. Her jeans are skin-tight and her movements slow and deliberate as she parks the motorbike and swings her leg over to dismount. As she takes off her motorbike helmet, her long, dark hair swings provocatively. P. gulps audibly behind me as we follow her into the building.

The young woman gives me a guarded smile as I hand her my passport, before switching on the computer and entering my data. 'You will leave on Friday, is that right?' she asks coolly, matter-of-fact. I nod and wait for her to finish. When she passes me my stamped passport, I thank her, handing her 50,000 Guarani. She smiles broadly at me now and wishes me a 'buen viaje'.

P. and I climb back into his jeep with his flapping shahá bird. We drive for half an hour along dark, uneven, pot-holed mud roads outside of Concepcion. Most of the time, the car is on the wrong side of the road. I hang on tightly to the open window frame, trying to seem relaxed. P. manages to drive, swig his beer, smoke and answer the telephone, while keeping up a conversation with me.

‘What are you?’ he throws at me, ‘some kind of consul’s wife?’ I guffaw. ‘No, I am nobody’s wife now. I am a widow.’ P. shakes his head, momentarily silenced.

‘So how did you end up in Paraguay?’ I ask. He takes a swig of beer and holds the beer against the steering wheel as he drives. ‘I was born in East Berlin and I was always desperate to move away to Latin America. I had a Cuban frog when I was 11. I’ve always been crazy about nature. My dad got posted to Cuba and I was so excited, but there was no school for me there, so I would have to go to boarding school in Germany and then visit for 3 months a year. I was happy enough with that, but my mother decided not to leave me. Her mother had left her when she was a kid to go and live in Western Germany and she said she couldn’t do the same thing to me.’ He laughs, ‘I was dying for her to abandon me, but she wouldn’t.’

‘Hah,’ I said, ‘when I was about that age, growing up in Ireland, my Dad got a job in Burma. The whole family was going to go and I was so excited. But the job never materialized because of the political problems there. I so wanted to go abroad and experience new places and people. I was so frustrated.’

‘Maybe that explains why we are both here, looking for adventure on the other side of the world,’ he says in a low voice, ‘the things that don’t happen are sometimes more important than the things that do.’

We arrive at his eco-farm hotel in pitch darkness. I can hardly make out the wooden structure of the house in front of us. Two young boys run to the car, ignore me and coo over the shahá bird in the backseat. As I sidle out of the truck, insects pulsate around me in the warm air. P. grabs the bird out of the car and brings him by torchlight to a big cage, home to a blind anaconda snake. In the next cage, a howler monkey peers suspiciously from his little tree house. ‘I don’t like keeping animals caged up,’ P. says in the darkness, ‘when possible, we release them as soon as they are well again.’ He signals to one of his sons, who reluctantly

shows me to my own little wooden cabin with a bedroom and bathroom. He switches on a dim light at the door entrance and the light is swarmed with insects. They try to follow me in as I open the door of the room, but I just manage to keep them outside. The bedroom is large and basic, with a double bed that looks welcoming after a long busride. The bathroom is home to a family of little frogs that jump in all directions when I turn on the light. I turn on the shower and place my hand under the water to test the temperature. My hand relaxes as the water runs hot.

After a shower, I go back to the house, where P. and I have dinner together in his make-shift kitchen, while his wife and children watch television in an adjoining room. The sounds of the television are incongruous with the deafening sound of nature surrounding us. P's wife is about my age and she responds to my questions about her kids with a notable waryness. She serves us a delicious tilapia fish from the river next to the farm and I devour the food gratefully.

As my hunger subsides, I ask P. about his organic farm and he tells me that he barely eeks a living out of it. 'Are there any more organic farms around here,' I ask. He guffaws. 'Not that I know of and I have been here for twenty years. Around here, the big business is cattle raising. In the south of the country, it is soybeans and cotton. It's a small country and its the biggest producer of soy beans and the second biggest in cattle. There is no organic farming though. Paraguay destroys nature instead of preserving it. Paraguay is the current world champion of clearing forest. Even in the Chaco here. Even in the nature reserves.'

'I went hiking in Ybytryzu and saw from the top of Acati mountain how the forest has been felled there,' I say in agreement, 'there were only clumps of trees around the rivers.'

'You went to Ybytruzu?' he asks, surprised, 'well, around there, in the natural parks, there is so much logging going on. I went to the police there once, there in Ybytruzu, and told them about some loggers near a waterfall and you know what the answer was?' I shake my head. 'They said they didn't have any fuel to come and apprehend them,' he shakes his head and finishes his food. 'No fuel, they're bloody useless. In this country, you have to take matters into your own hands.'

'How?' I ask, as I cut into my tilapia fish.

‘There are ways that I can sabotage at least some of the illegal felling that is going on,’ he says evasively, ‘I know every tree along this river and I am prepared to protect each one.’

‘If you’re so frustrated, do you not think of going back to Germany?’ I ask, finishing off my fruit juice.

‘Ah,’ he says, deflated, ‘I would probably be just as frustrated there. Everything in Germany is about rules and regulations. If you disagree with something, all you can do is fill out a form. Here at least I can be a brutal idiot.’

I smile at him. ‘There is something very endearing about this ‘brutal idiot’, who in his own way, protects and cares for nature around him.

‘Are they really destroying the Chaco?’ I ask. ‘Yes,’ he tells me, ‘even in the reserves, where it is strictly forbidden because there is a tribe called Ayareo in there with little or no contact with the white man.’ ‘I thought that there were only uncontacted tribes in the Amazon,’ I retort. ‘No here too, in the Chaco. There are a number of very different tribes here. Even I can tell many of them apart, because they have different origins. There are Guarani called Chiriguanos but not just them. The Chaco is so inhospitable and difficult to penetrate that it became the place where all the losers in battle escaped to. I bet you the tribe that was in Peru before the Incas escaped to the Chaco.’

‘Like the menonites?’ I ask, ‘I hear it isn’t unusual to be on the Paraguay river or on a bus in the Chaco and come face to face with a group of tall, blonde-haired, blue-eyed men in denim overalls and wide-brimmed hats.’

‘Ye, I guess you could say that the menonites are another tribe that came to the Chaco to flee from persecution, but they have been really successful here. They are the second largest group in the Central Chaco region now, second only to native groups. They even manage to make the inhospitable Chaco productive. They came here to escape bad treatment in Europe and to live according to their own customs and up until now, that is what they have done. They still speak German and live without much technology.’ His voice is quite defensive now and I wonder if he is involved with them somehow. ‘Outsiders criticize the Menonites, but they were persecuted because they believed in adults making a conscious choice of being baptised to follow Jesus, not just being baptised as babies and that’s it. The

church hated that because all the church wants is sheep, not free-thinking people choosing their religion.'

P.'s wife comes out and I help to clean off the table. 'I'll call you at 5 am,' P. says as a cue for me to leave, 'that's in less than seven hours. You have a long day ahead of you.'

In my room, I fall into my bed and a night of fitful sleep. The heat is mercifully diffused by torrential rain throughout the night.

The house is silent when I awake the next morning. Even the insects seem to be sleeping. After a while, a half-sleeping P. appears with a terere in his hands, a gourd with cold mate tea. Without saying a word, he gruffly lays the table with some bread and cheese and a flask of coffee. As I wait for him to call me to the table, I look at the large map of the north of Paraguay on the wall. I trace my finger along the Paraguay river, where the Aquidaban boat will take me. To my left is the Chaco, to my right, the Brazilian Pantanal. On the map, north of Concepcion, I come across a port called Puerto Itapocu. My heart skips. I gasp. The Peabiru researcher Researcher had told me that Itapocu comes from the words I Tape Poco, the water by the long road, and that there are several Itapocos along the Guarani's long Caminho de Peabiru. The names of rivers, ports and places are like subtle signposts, surviving the ravages of time and colonialization. I was at the river Itapocu earlier in the year where it empties into the Atlantic on the coast of Brazil but Rosana never told me where the other Itapocos are along the route. And now out of nowhere, I have found one. Finding Puerto Itapoco feels like proof that the long road of the Guarani passed here, proof that I am following the sacred Caminho de Peabiru. Proof that I am where I should be.

## THE GOOD TRAVELLER

P grabs a slice of bread in his hand. 'Come on, I want to show you our tapir before we go,' he calls to me and I pour myself a quick coffee and follow him, elated still. The very first wisp of light is in the sky as we walk one hundred metres to a small enclosure by a muddy lake. A yellow-brown tapir trots up to P, who pours some feed into a bowl and pets him like a big, furry dog. 'This tapir was emaciated when we found him,' P says, 'we had to feed him with baby bottles at first. The big thrill in our family at the moment is to go swimming with the tapir in

the lake. They are such friendly, loving creatures.' I approach the tapir gingerly and pet him lightly, delighted at the bristling touch of his blond-orange hair. On this Caminho de Peabiru, guided by the Milky Way or the Guarani 'Way of the Tapir', I have come across a live, tame, adorable tapir. Once again, a part of the heavens is appearing here on earth before me.

'Come on,' P says roughly, 'we're going to be late.'

We jump into the jeep, which bumps along the roads out of P's farm. The sun is streaked red again now, this time with the first wisps of morning. 'The sun was like this when I arrived in Concepcion last night and like this now when I am leaving,' I say to P, satisfied.

P shakes his head at me and tuts at the shortness of my visit. 'We have to stop to give a lift to a family that works for me. I have never dropped anyone in town for this early bus, but today by chance, I am leaving both you and them.'

We stop at a simple house by a roadside, where a young man and woman with a small child, sit on the ground next to three bulging, white, potato sacks that hold all their clothes and possessions. The young man throws the bags into the back of the truck and then his family files into the back seat of the truck, where the shaha bird squaked the night before. 'Are you going to Vallemi too?' I ask, as P starts his truck again. 'No,' the man says in a quiet voice, 'we are going to work in a farm on the way to Vallemi, but now we are not going to the bus, but will be picked up by a truck, that will bring us straight to the farm. The truck will meet us at the bus station.' I smile at him and turn back to watch the dusty road.

We screech into Concepcion, late, just after six o'clock and P's tension is palpable. He punches numbers into his phone as he drives and shouts down the phone. After a couple of minutes, he hangs up the phone and sighs. 'This is the worst case for you,' he says, putting the phone back in his pocket, 'because of the rain last night, the morning bus is cancelled, so there is no way you will get to Vallemi in time for the boat.' 'Isn't there any other way to get there?' I ask, disappointed. We arrive at the entrance to the bus station and the young man offloads his family's possessions. P talks to him in a huddle and then the young man makes a phone call. He smiles as he hangs up. 'You can get the truck with us,' the young man assures me, 'the truck will leave you in a town, where you can get a motorcycle taxi that will bring you to Vallemi. Cars don't pass on the road when



it rains, but a motorcycle will.'

I smile at P and pay him the money I owe him. 'All's well that ends well,' I say glibly. He looks unconvinced. 'It's a shame what a mess this country makes of itself and it's a bloody problem for somebody like me who makes a living out of tourism. In January, I have a German television station coming and they have scheduled for every minute of their three week stay. I am trembling just thinking about it.' He kisses both cheeks goodbye before jumping back in his truck and driving off in a cloud of dust.

I sit with the small family on plastic chairs at the edge of the bus station and we chat gently as we pass around their terere. I linger in the morning sun until it is too hot, glowing still from the discovery of the Itapocu port. I congratulate myself on the synchronicity of the family's truck as an alternative to the cancelled bus. As the sun rises higher in the sky, I have to move my chair several times to follow the shade. And still I wait. After three hours, there is no sign of the truck and I am literally bouncing around on the chair in frustration. 'Can you please ring the truck one more time to see how long it will be?' I ask again. The young man reluctantly takes out his phone and talks into it in a low whisper. 'Soon,' he responds to me, 'still soon.' I am astounded by how patiently the couple wait and how they keep their one-year old daughter quiet and amused with minimal effort. My kids would be causing havoc at this stage.

Finally, four hours after we arrived, the truck saunters along. The family get into the front of the truck, where the driver's wife is also seated. There is no more space in the front. The young man talks to the driver. 'Now it is too late for you to get to Vallemi in time to get the boat,' he says quietly, not looking me in the eye. 'What?' I ask, incredulous. The driver's wife clucks matter-of-fact, 'if you wanted to get to Vallemi today, you should have left earlier.' I can feel the tears well up in my eyes and I breathe deeply to keep calm. The truck revs up and leaves me behind in a cloud of dust and smoke. I sit down on the edge of the road. Not knowing what to do, I pull out my book of 'Tao Te Ching. It opens randomly on a page; *the good traveller has no fixed plans and is not intent on arriving.* 'I however had very fixed plans and was very intent on seeing them through.

Bulbous tears fall on the pages of my book. I put out my hand to stop a passing taxi. 'The bus to Vallemi was cancelled, but could you bring me there?' I

ask, as I look up from the curb. 'If the road is too bad for the bus, then it is too bad for me,' he says shaking his head. I wave him off and stand by the side of the road, defeated. I walk into the bus station and ask at the different ticket kiosks if there is any other bus to Vallemi. 'You could have gotten one that goes through Brazil,' one kind-faced man says to me, 'it left at 8 o'clock and should be arriving in Vallemi in an hour or two.' Tears slip down my cheek again and I pull faces at the ground to stop them from falling in a torrent. 'I have something that will cheer you up,' the man says, as he guides me into his tiny ticket office. He turns to the metal filing cabinet in the corner and takes out a beige recorder. He sits down at his desk and he starts to play a simple, happy tune for me. I think he may have made it up. I laugh out loud through my tears. I can't believe that I am meeting another piper on my path, someone else who whips out a recorder in the same way I whip out my tin whistle. This is indeed the pilgrimage of the walking flute.

As he finishes, I clap enthusiastically before taking out my tin whistle and playing for him in gratitude. As the music swirls around us, sparking amused and confused looks in those around us in the bus station, I sense relief within me. Relief that I don't have to get my cargo boat up the Paraguay river. Relief that I won't have to haggle my way alone over the Bolivian border at night with some unknown Don. Relief that I get to go back home early to my three boys.

Maybe the important thing is that I have made myself available, that I have done everything in my power to follow my pilgrimage as well as I can. What seems like an obstacle may actually be a gift. Maybe it is divine protection.



Paraguay, October 2012.



Guarani Village, Ciudad del Este, October 2012.



Garcia Cross, Paraguay, October 2012.



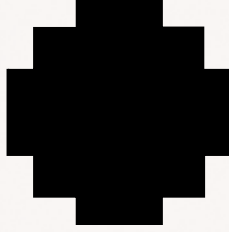
Concepción, Octubre 2012.





Paraguay River, October 2012.

THE WALKING FLUTE



WEST



Samaiyata, Bolivia, December 2012.



## THE TRAIN OF DEATH

‘The train of death?’ seven-year-old Liam asks, stricken. I take my children to Bolivia to ride on the train of death. In one way I have been riding the train of death with them for five years now. When their father died suddenly, I realised viscerally that death is not only my constant companion, but my childrens’ constant companion too. I have no guarantee that they will grow up and make their own way in life, that they will search for life’s meaning, fall in love, have professions, grow old or have children of their own. Therefore, each day we say thank you for another day. We always move like a noisy whirlwind to get out the door for school before 7 a.m. but when we sit into the car, no matter how late we are or what tempers have exploded over breakfast, we all join our hands together in the centre of the car and say ‘thank you life for another day of living and loving.’ I bring up my children as if they have a future, but I cannot ignore anymore that we are all on the train towards death, with no guarantees that we will live one more day, or month or year.

The train of death will carry us for sixteen hours from Puerto Quijarro, on the Bolivian-Brazilian border to the Bolivian industrial city of Santa Cruz de La Sierra. It is the second week in December and the boys’ school closed for holidays a couple of days ago and here we are ready to undertake the western station of the Caminho de Peabiru together. The two older boys and I will travel through Bolivia and then meet up with Tahmid and our youngest son in Cusco for the summer solstice and Christmas, before moving on together on the Caminho de Peabiru to the Pacific Ocean.

9 year old Tom, 7 year old Liam, and I, have survived three hours of waiting in 40 degree heat to cross the Bolivian border, where I dutifully presented my late husband’s death certificate as I do every time I leave Brazil with the boys. Even the Brazilian government colludes in reminding me of our mortality. Entering into Bolivia, we walk through the heat to the nearby train station.

The train of death is so named because of the many workers who died of cholera when the tracks were laid down along an old indigenous path. That path could well have been the Guaraní’s Caminho de Peabiru. We queue for half an hour at the train station, before clambering onto the hot train. Our seats are dirty but reclining. We are next to a toilet which has no toilet paper or paper towels. There is an old television set hanging from the ceiling, about four seats ahead.

The train is exactly midway between the advertising on the internet and my worst fears, and I inspect it critically before sitting down. How much more demanding a traveller I am when I am with my children! How much more aware of physical discomforts and risks.

The air whistles through the cracks in the windows, as the train picks up speed. We hurtle through the Chaco, the large semi-arid salty-soil bioma, where rumours abound of environmental degradation and exploitative labour of the Guarani at the hands of big landowners. All I can see though is unkempt, parched land, dotted with palm trees and occasional glimpses of houses and village life between the trees.

We buy a dinner of rice and beans wrapped in aluminium foil on the train and eat it with plastic forks. The old television revs up and starts to show films in English with Spanish subtitles and to our delight, the boys can just about hear what's being said over the clank and shudder of the train as it races through the east of Bolivia. The red-orange glow of the sunset ahead of us spills into the carriage and I bathe in it for a moment until Tom moans about the light hitting the television screen. I pull the precariously-railed red curtains across the window, shutting out the light. Soon, the sky is in darkness and the boys are asleep. I manage to doze in a comfortable half-sleep, keeping some awareness of the boys' movements and the safety of the bags.

The night passes with whistle stops at unnamed stations, followed by the banging of the doors and hushed chatter of new passengers. We pass the San José dos Chiquitos area with its circuit of Jesuit mission ruins and continue onwards towards Santa Cruz de La Sierra. Though Paraguay is the zenith of the Guarani universe, there are now more Guarani indians living in Bolivia than in any other country. Of the estimated 240,000 Guarani, one third live now in the east of Bolivia. Some were here more than a thousand years ago, others probably came with Aleixo Garcia along the Caminho de Peabiru in 1524 and stayed.

As morning breaks, a swarm of children invade the train. They all carry flasks and a packet of plastic disposable cups and they sell coffee in laughing, bright-eyed Spanish. My boys watch them silently as I buy a coffee. 'She is no older than I am,' Tom whispers to me after the girl moves on to the next customer. 'Aren't you lucky you don't have to work yet,' I say, squeezing his knee. As we approach the

city, the area becomes more populated and the unkempt and wild mesh of bushes and banana trees gives way to more orderly and contained plantations.

#### GUARANI GOODBYE

Santa Cruz de La Sierra is built, like Plato's capital of Atlantis, in concentric circles. Its centre is dotted with sky-scrappers, not temples however. The city was founded by Ñuflo de Chavez in the 16th Century, who had arrived in Asuncion with Cabeza de Vaca in 1541 by walking along the Caminho de Peabiru. We get a cab from the bus-station to bring us the 120 km to the next destination on our pilgrimage, Samaipata, at the foothills of the Andes. Samaipata is a very special place on the Caminho de Peabiru. IT is the cultural crossroads of the Caminho, the place where the Guarani world meets the Andean world of the Incas.

As we are leaving the city sprawl, we pass a statue entitled *El Chiriguano* on a dias in the middle of a roundabout and I point it out to the boys excitedly. Many Guarani-speaking people here in Bolivia are called by the quechua name Chiriguano, which they received when they attacked the Inca forces close by in Samaipata, where the taxi-driver is taking us. The Guarani killed the important Inca captains Guancani and Condori, causing the Inca emperor in Cusco to send a military force to launch a fearsome attack against them. An estimated 500 Guarani were killed and 200 taken prisoner. Without mercy, the Inca ordered that these hot-country prisoners be abandoned naked on a snowy Andean mountaintop, where they all died. On hearing of their deaths, the Inca exclaimed contentedly, '*Allallan! Chiripiguanabiri!*', which can be translated as 'brrr, brrr! they were punished by the cold'. After that, the Guarani survivors and the Chané people that became integrated into their tribe, became known as Chiriguanos. Though considered a pejorative term by the people themselves, who prefer to be called simply Guarani, they continue to be called Chiriguanos in Bolivia.

The statue on the roundabout is of a muscular Guarani, his hair blowing in the wind and his hand gripping a large bow. In his other hand, he grips two large arrows. He seems to embody the meaning of the word Guarani - warrior. The Guarani in the east seem to me to be more warriors of their interior world rather than warriors in the external world. In the West however, the Guarani are considered bellicose and staunch defenders of this region against the Incas, the Spanish and even modern Bolivia and were only fully pacified in 1892. The boys

and I turn our heads to see the statue out of the rear window of the taxi, waving goodbye to him, as we move towards the most westerly edge of the Guarani's empire.

We drive into lush countryside, winding up and down valleys on narrow roads that fall straight down to the river. Rock-falls block our path and our driver hugs the cliff edge to avoid them. The fields about us are dotted with idle donkeys, who look on nonchalantly. We are leaving the flatter lands of the east and climbing now to 1600 metres above sea-level to the village of Samaipata towards the Andean world of the Inca and pre-Inca civilisations. This road is most probably laid over the original Caminho de Peabiru. About half-way, we stop to pay a toll in the little village of Angostura. Laughing quechua women in blue aprons, with long dark plaits and wide-brimmed hats stand next to fruit stalls, where green watermelons clash with the orange of the mangos and mandarins, oozing succulence. Young children come up to the car window selling peach stones in a bag of water called mocoichinchi and tames wrapped in banana leaves. My boys smile at them shyly, recoiling from the unfamiliar food.

As we drive away from Angostura, the Caminho de Peabiru becomes the Capac Ñan, part of the elaborate network of Inca trails that criss-crossed their Tahuantinsuyo empire. The empire spanned three million squared kilometres along the four cardinal points, from Colombia to Chile, Peru to Bolivia and Argentina. It is here that the most eastern base of the Incas meets the most westerly stronghold of the Guarani.

Samaipata is 1600 metres above sea level and it is a village that grew up around the base of El Fuerte, an enormous sandstone rock which is sculpted with felines, snakes, birds and geometrical motifs. It is a pre-inca monument, though the incas too carved it further and built a small town around it. The Guarani invaded El Fuerte and took control of it for a time too. The Spanish in turn used it as a base between Santa Cruz de La Sierra and Vallegrande.

I strike up a conversation with the taxi-driver, one of the many quechua immigrants that have come to Santa Cruz de la Sierra in the last 10 years. 'Samaipata has a very special energy,' he tells me, 'We celebrate the solstices there. We worship Inti, the sun, with dances and music. Amautas, holy people from Cusco came here too and said the same thing. Samaipata has a very special energy.' He stops the car

suddenly and points out the profile of a woman lying flat on the mountain top to our right. I breathe deeply; Nhandecy. I am once again in a living landscape.

#### CULTURAL MELTING POT

We arrive at the pretty village of Samaipata and I fall in love with it at first sight. Its tidy square is dotted with outdated statues and surrounded by small shops and cafés painted in bright colours. A large cloth banner hangs on the entrance of the square promoting next week's festival of honey and flowers. The taxi drops us at the square and we walk around slowly, looking for accomodation. Drums beat as we walk and we glance into a cultural centre, where a group of children are drumming and singing. A notice on the door advertises rebirthing and temascal workshops in the area. The half-doors of the B&B's open onto the streets. We stop for a coffee and brownie in a corner café, before collapsing exhausted onto our beds at the 'Sun Inn.'

The next day, I put my hair into two plaits in honour of the quechua women. I wonder if the Guarani women plait their hair when they go on pilgrimage in order to emulate the ayмара and quechua women in the west.

The boys and I walk to the picturesque town square and come across a group of taxi-drivers huddled together playing cards. 'How much is it to get a taxi to El Fuerte?' I ask in my accented Spanish. They look up from their cards begrudgingly. One of the men in the centre of the circle, with piercing blue eyes in his dark-brown, weathered face, looks the three of us up and down before answering. '70 Bolivianos.' I nod my head in acceptance and he reluctantly lays down his cards and shows us to his delapidated car on the curb. I sit into the passenger seat and search for a seatbelt in vain. The radio in front of me seems to have melted. He starts the car by hotwiring it. I look out the window, feigning indifference.

'How old is the village of Samaipata?' I ask, as we drive the nine kilometres to El Fuerte. 'Almost four hundred years old,' he answers me, warming up, 'it was founded by the Spanish who were attracted by the mild climate, just like the Incas, the Guarani and the Chané before them. The land is good here, plants grow sweeter.'

‘I hear the climate is still attracting people here,’ I say. ‘Yes,’ he agreed, ‘Samaipata has many foreigners. There are more than twenty five nationalities among our village of 3000 people. Some are very welcome. They start up small businesses, like a Dutch couple who bought land and grow medicinal plants, others who keep bees and sell the honey. We even have a French women who keeps an open zoo, a place to house hurt or abandoned animals.’

‘So it is a peaceful coexistence between the different nationalities here,’ I sum up. ‘Mostly,’ he agrees, nodding.

‘What does Samaipata mean?’ I ask, after a short silence. ‘Samaipata is the indigenous name. The Spanish didn’t always call it that, they founded it as ‘purification of the waters of castille’ but it has been returned to its original indigenous name. In quechua, it is *sabay pata*, which means ‘rest place in the moutains’ and in Guarani it is similar, *sanay guata*.’

‘What a cultural crossroads,’ I smile, ‘even the name is a mix of Quechua and Guarani.’

‘Oh yes,’ he says, nodding his head. ‘Samaipata has always been a melting pot. You can even still hear it in the local language here. A popular phrase in the Vallegrande area near here is ‘*andar cara al cuchí*’, which means *to go give food to the pig* and it’s a mix of Spanish, Quechua and Guarani.’

‘What brings you to Samaipata?’ he asks.

‘I’m on a little-known Guarani pilgrimage called the Caminho de Peabiru from the Atlantic to the Pacific and I am here in Samaipata because the Guarani path interlaces with the Inca network of trails here,’ I explain to him, ‘did you ever hear of the Caminho de Peabiru?’

‘Yes,’ he said, delighting and surprising me. ‘A cyclist came here about 5 years ago on that same pilgrimage. His name was E, I think.’ ‘Yes,’ I tell him, ‘E left from Florianópolis, where I live. I read about his trip on the internet.’ Even with five years time difference, it is good to meet another Peabiru pilgrim on the road. I am not alone in my contemporary search. We turn off the main road and the car chugs up a winding road, over potholes and past precarious cliff-edges. We then descend to the bottom of the valley and cross over a stream in the car and before long, we start to climb again. The car stalls and I am not sure we will make it to the top.



‘Does the government maintain the road?’ I ask dubiously.

‘The government?’, D responds bitterly, ‘this is a major tourist site in Bolivia but the government doesn’t do anything. The only useful thing they did was to prohibit people from walking on El Fuerte in the 1990s. They even sold parts of the land around El Fuerte, which should be protected forest and part of the Amoro national park.’

He shrugs his shoulders and sighs. ‘But at least there is a road. I first came here in the 1970s when I was in my early 20s. I had just dropped out of college to my father’s disgust and he got me to help him for a few months building the first ever protective fence around El Fuerte. There was just a trail here then, you can see it still going up the mountain. He points out a thin trail and I can almost see the Guarani warriors trudging along it, followed at a distance by the delicate steps of the Inca sun virgins.

‘We had to carry all the material and the tools up the mountain on our backs. A couple of months of that hard manual work and I was ready to go back to university,’ D. tells me, with a laugh, ‘I went to Santa Cruz de la Sierra, married and had children and I didn’t come back to El Fuerte until thirty years later. When I came back, the ceremonial rock had eroded so much, due to a mix of natural erosion and tourism. I helped the archeologists to reconstruct it in paintings because I remembered it so well from before. We cleared out a big area of scrubland around El Fuerte and it was full of poisonous snakes. I never saw so many in my life. We had to work in knee-high rubber boots.’

The car continues to climb, spluttering. ‘It is very high, isn’t it?’ I say, my voice slightly strained. ‘El Fuerte is over 1900 metres above sea-level,’ the taxi-driver tells me, ‘that’s why the Inca stationed themselves here for a while, as they explored the possibility of expanding their empire eastward. They were a mountain people, it is where they felt safest.’

‘I guess for the Guarani, such a high place was important too as it is close to the Gods,’ I ruminate.

‘This is a very sacred place and it was for the Chané, the Guarani and the Inca,’ he agrees vehemently, ‘some people think that it was a place to clean gold or that the designs on the rock mark the passing of the Halley’s comet in 1066. Some

even think it was a landing pad for spaceships.’

‘What do you think?’

‘I think it was a spiritual centre. It is such an unusual rock by nature and the carvings make it even more special. There really is something magical about it. In the solstice, the Quechua amautas come and celebrate, the Guarani pajés celebrate, even we European descendants celebrate. Everyone celebrating in their own way, sharing this one sacred space. A Christian Gnosis centre has even opened up close by.’ I smile at the idea of different tribes sharing this sacred space, not appropriating it from each other

We arrive at the base of El Fuerte and pay our admission fee. Before leaving us to walk around the stone, our taxi-driver points out the breath-taking views all around us. Lush green spreads out over folds of endless hills. The day is clear but grey clouds threaten in the distance. ‘Over there, the mountain looks like an armadillo, and that peak is called the Devil’s tooth,’ he points out, bringing the landscape to life before me. ‘What are those small fires burning on the sides of the mountains?’ I ask. He swears under his breath. ‘The farmers are burning their scrubland. Fires are a big danger here. A few years ago, a forest fire nearly reached the northern face of El Fuerte.’

The boys run ahead up the path and I turn to join them, waving goodbye to the taxi-driver. The boys have found wild blackberries on a bush, so we stop to savour them. With purple fingers, the boys find sticks that become swords and they move up the hill towards the ceremonial stone, swords clashing. They are the Guarani and the Incas fighting for ownership of this sacred rock. We climb up to the viewing point, which gives us our first glimpse of El Fuerte.

There it is spread out beneath us, a 500 metre long slab of black rock, rising up and widening out along a green, mossy hill, as it stretches eastward. Below our feet, I can make out two carved circles and I recognise them as the jaguars, the sun symbol. One of them has feet facing east towards the Guarani in Paraguay and Brazil, the other’s feet face westward towards the Inca’s tahuantinsuyu empire. I cannot make out the snake or the ostrich, that I have read about, as the engravings have been greatly eroded. The three-step remnants of an Andean cross, the chakana, are clearly carved further along the rock. The three steps depict the three Inca worlds, the world above, Hanan Pacha where the gods live, the earth,

Kay Pacha where we humans live and the underworld, Uqhu Pacha, where the ancestors live. These three worlds are represented in turn by the condor, the puma and the snake.

Right on top of the rock, in the centre, there is a circular groove carved out of the rock, with nine niched seats carved into it. I can only barely make out a curve of the circle. It can only be seen properly from above. The sun itself is the main spectator. From the circle, zig zag channels run down the middle of the rock. Is it possible that this was a place of sacrifice and the channels allowed the blood to run off the top of the stone? Or that these channels pointed to some specific point in the night sky?

I am filled with a sense of awe at this co-creation of God and man. I play my tinwhistle as we stand looking down on the sacred stone and the music echos about us. Even the boys stop their constant chatter and movement and look down in reverence.

We move down to the side of the rock, where long benches are carved out of the stone. They look mostly southward over the market square of the Inca village and the agricultural terraces that were built on the southern side, protected from the harsh north wind. On the other side, five deep rectangular grooves look northward. Two different Incas were involved in strenghtening and expanding Samaipata, both arriving here at the pivotal age of 35, around the same age I am now. The Inca village was unfinished by the time of the Spanish conquistadores, as were the expansionist interests of the Inca. This was an eastern outpost, used as a base to send spies eastward towards the Brazilian coast. If the Guaraní had not been such fierce warriors, defending their own eastern homeland, could it be that the Inca's Quechua rather than Guarani would be the language of Paraguay today?

The clouds gather, grey and brooding above us. Thunder roars out of nowhere, breathing life into the enormous stone. Lightning cracks dramatically through the sky. We are all alone at our private show of lights and sounds. I wonder if Tupã, the Guarani God of the west and of thunder and lightning, is welcoming us or warning us to the western part of the Caminho de Peabiru. As the rain starts to beat heavily down on the rock, we run, shrieking and laughing, to a covered view-point and huddle together, sheltering eachother from the splash and spray. We wait, watching the rain on the rock, spellbound, until nature is ready to let us continue.

As the heavy rain subsides, we saunter down the mountain to where the taxis await. On the descent, we make out the contours of a face, five-metres long on exposed rock. Its nose juts out above its protruding lips. How lifelike he is! His eyes seem closed and the peaked llacho hat on his head is covered with green moss. The face seems carved with such precision that I wonder if nature and man have not teamed up in some way, as they did on the sacred El Fuerte rock itself. 'This is our first sighting of the Inca's Sumé, Viracocha,' I tell the boys, impressed. 'Who is Viracocha?' Tom asks.

'According to the andean legend, Viracocha created the world on the Island of the Sun, which lies on lake Titicaca, and then wandered through the land disguised as a beggar, teaching his people the basics of civilization, as well as performing miracles. He was described as a medium sized man, white, bearded. Remember, the Guarani's Sumé was also described as a white, bearded man who walked from village to village, preaching and teaching. Viracocha left the continent at the city of Tumbes which is on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. He left walking on the water, just as Sumé arrived on the Atlantic. When the Spanish conquistador Pizarro and his crew arrived at the same city of Tumbes in 1526, they were initially mistaken as gods and called Viracochas, just like the Portuguese were called Sumés by the Guarani on the Atlantic coast.'

'Was it the same person?' Tom asks, curious.

'No-one knows but maybe it is possible that they were speaking of the same man, who was called Sumé in the east in the Guarani world and called Viracocha in the west, in the Andean world. On hearing of this white man who walked through the continent, preaching and teaching the natives, the Europeans of the XVI century that arrived both on the Atlantic and Pacific coast equated him with St. Thomas.

Descending in the direction of the taxis, I saw contentedly to Tom, 'yesterday, we said goodbye to the Guarani warrior on the roundabout outside Santa Cruz de la Sierra and today we found the Andean Viracocha on the rocks here. Remember that yesterday the Caminho de Peabiru became Capac Ñan, the Inca road. We have come from the Atlantic ocean following in the footsteps of Sumé and from now on, we are going in the direction of the Pacific ocean in the footsteps of Viracocha. Samaipata really is the bridge between the Guarani and Andean worlds.'

## BOLIVIAN TREASURE HUNT

The air is crisp and bracing as we arrive in the colonial city of Sucre. It lies at 2750 metres above sea level and the boys are complaining of headaches, feeling the altitude. We have left Samaipata at the foothills, leaving the meeting place of the Guaraní and the Andean cultures, and have begun out climbing upwards into the heartland of the Andes, following in the footsteps of the belicose Guaraní from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Century and Aleixo Garcia and 2000 Guaraní in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

We see some Menonites on the street, with their startling blue eyes, identical denim jumpsuits and broad hats. When I try to talk to two young men, they avert their eyes and giggle like embarrassed school girls. We wind our way through the narrow Spanish streets of Sucre, near to where Aleixo Garcia and the Guaraní raided gold and silver from Inca settlements in 1524.

As we walk, the sun peeps through the gaps in the colonial façades to melt the remnants of cold in the morning air. We arrive at the main square and I sigh in admiration. Well-preserved colonial buildings surround the orderly lushness of the main square where a variety of mature trees offer clipped shade to those strolling within. On one of the corners, a quechua woman in a black bowler hat and yellow puffy skirt sells oranges to passers-by, adding an exotic air to this classic Spanish setting.

We only have an hour in Sucre and I hope to visit the Cathedral that stands regally opposite the main square. We cross the road to the wrought-iron main gate of the cathedral, which is resolutely shut with a thick chain. I rattle the chain in vain and sigh in frustration.

‘Not a churrrrrrch,’ the boys groan. ‘We’re on a treasure hunt,’ I cajole them in an enthusiastic voice, ‘we are on the hunt for the mysterious Carabuco cross.’ ‘What is that?’ Tom asks, mildly interested. ‘Tunupa, or St. Thomas as he was called by the Europeans like our Guaraní Sumé, was said to have carried a cross and planted it in the ground in a place called Carabuco, on the eastern shore of Lake Titicaca, near the border with Peru,’ I tell him, ‘But that’s still a *long* way away,’ Tom laments. ‘Yes, but the cross was cut in half and one half is in the church in the tiny village of Carabuco and the other half was brought here to

Sucre and placed in the cathedral. At least that is what I have read, but I have no idea whether the cross will be here or not.'

'What's so special about this cross?' Liam asks, wide-eyed.

'The indigenous in Carabuco said that Tunupa planted the cross near their village a long time before the Europeans arrived. When they saw that the Europeans were planting crosses as a sign that they controlled the area, the natives tried to burn the cross, but it wouldn't burn. Then they weighed it down and threw it into Lake Titicaca, but it wouldn't sink. It floated on the water until it they took it out again. Imagine! Wood that doesn't burn or sink! They worshiped the cross because they said it was left there by their prophet Tunupa, who was a tall, light-skinned man with a long white shirt who talked about one God. To the shame of the villagers, he was stoned to death by the ancestors of the Carabuco indians, who did not like his teachings. Once the Christians arrived, they heard the story from the indians and said that Tunupa was St. Thomas or St. Bartholomew.'

'Why does the same person have so many names?' Tom asks, frustrated. 'It's confusing alright,' I respond, counting on my fingers, 'we have come across St. Brendan, Sumé, St. Thomas, Viracocha, Tunupa and now Saint Bartholomew. Seven names and perhaps they are all different names for the same light-skinned, bearded man who walked from place to place, creating the Camino de Peabiru as he went!'

We come to the side gate of the Cathedral. 'Well it's closed,' Tom says, as he tries the lock. 'So we won't get to see if the cross is there or not. Can we get our hot chocolate now?'

I rattle the chain on this gate too, more frustrated still. 'I guess it's not to be,' I sigh and start down the side-road. Resignation is just setting in, when I see a sign for an ecclesiastic museum. Maybe they know how to get into the cathedral.

'Just one minute,' I assure the boys, luring them into the museum. A prim, well-dressed lady sits at a desk, barring the entrance to the museum. 'Do you know whether the cathedral will open today?' I ask in my broken Spanish. 'A tour of the cathedral is part of the museum experience,' she clicks at me, 'and there is one starting right now.'

I smile broadly at her, 'can you tell me if the Carabuco cross is in there?'



She looks unsure, her prim poise wobbling visibly. ‘The Carabuco cross, I, I think it is being restored.’

‘Really?’ I insist, ‘we have come all the way from the coast of Brazil to see it.’ She looks at the boys and our small rucksacks and sighs. ‘It’s the curate’s day off today, but I will ring her up and see if she knows anything. Why don’t you start on the tour and I will see what I can do.’

I usher the boys into the museum, where a small group is starting a tour in Spanish. Behind glass cases, we are shown an endless array of chalices, crosses and priests’ vestments encrusted with precious stones. The boys’ eyes bulge to see so much pure gold and silver, encrusted with diamonds and other gemstones. In this unassuming museum, white-washed and wooden floored, we encounter the opulence of a plundered continent. This is of course only a fraction of the plundered booty, as endless boatloads of gold and silver were sent back to Europe where it continues to ornate European spiritual sanctuaries. We read how many precious stones were exchanged for indulgences, the colonists plundering the continent with its indigenous slave labourers and buying their way to heaven with the spoils. The museum is but the ante-room to the opulence of the cathedral of Sucre itself. We walk through the chapel of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a shrine dripping in gold. Almost no natural light comes through the intricate stained-glass windows and the electric lights bounce off the yellow gold in overwhelming abundance.

We walk into the main nave of the cathedral, with the ceiling paintings towering ten metres above us. The opulence continues, with a huge gold enclosurement between the pews of simple wooden benches and the ornate altar. Everywhere I look there are crosses. All along the huge columns, crosses hang announcing the stations of the cross. On the altar, an array of crosses are displayed. On top of the gold enclosurement, a thin cross is draped with a circle of silver. ‘Which one is the right cross?’ Liam asks his face lifted upwards.

I look at the crosses again. ‘I don’t know,’ I sigh at him, ‘there are so many of them.’ I kneel down on a pew and lean my head on my hands clasped in prayer. Time is running out and the museum receptionist has not turned up, so I call the boys to go. I take one final look around. ‘My guess is that it is that cross on top of the gold enclosurement with the silver circle around it,’ I point out to the boys, ‘it

looks like a Celtic Cross with its circle around it. Stand below it and I'll take your photo.' As I finish taking the photo, someone calls out 'señora'. I turn to see a robust, energetic woman walk up the aisle towards me. 'Señora, you are looking for the Carabuco cross?' she says with a hint of excitement in her voice. 'Yes,' I respond. 'I am the curate here and when they rang me to tell you that you wanted to see it, I came to show you. It is unusual for somebody to ask for that cross.'

'Is it that one with the silver circle around it above the gold enclosure?' I ask, shaking the hand she offers me. She looks up. 'Yes,' she says laughing, 'how did you know?' I laugh and shrug my shoulders. I tell her briefly how we have come from Ireland in the footsteps of an Irish and Guaraní Sumé and now in search of the cross belonging to their doppelganger Tunupa. To my delight, she confirms the story of the Carabuco cross.

'So will you go to see the other half in Carabuco?' she asks me, 'I have never seen it and I am not sure if it is still there.' 'I hope so,' I say to her, 'the next stop for us though is the silver mines of Potosi, to see the source of so much of this blinding wealth.'

We shake hands and the boys and I leave the cathedral through the museum door, rushing to the spot where we have agreed to meet the trufi driver who will bring us on the three hour journey to Potosi. We have just enough time to order a quick hot chocolate from a market stand before we leave. 'Now, this *iss* the kind of treasure I like,' seven-year-old Liam hums happily as he slurps his well-earned drink.

## DEATH IN THE ANDEAN FOOTHILLS

Cerro Rico, Potosi's mountain of silver, looms ochre and sagging before us. A cancer called greed has riddled it with a criss-cross of endless mine shafts. A man-made honeycomb. Any day now, it will collapse in upon itself, exhausted and defeated. The Inca's called it Sumaj Orcko, the beautiful mountain. The mountain, like the city of Postosi scuttling at its feet, stinks now of long forgotten glory.

Aleixo Garcia never saw this mountain on his treasure hunt along the Camino de Peabiru, but he and the Guaraní plundered villages between here and modern-day Sucre of their gold and silver before the Inca army blocked their path, sending them in quick retreat to Paraguay. Though he didn't make it back to the

coast alive, Aleixo sent one of his European co-shipwrecks back to the coast with some samples of the Inca silver and gold to convince passing ships to sponsor an expedition of conquistadores en masse along the Caminho de Peabiru towards El Dorado. Aleixo Garcia was therefore the first European to encounter the Inca empire in 1524, a year or two earlier than the famed Francisco Pizarro. Pizarro managed to return to Spain and secure financing for an expedition to conquer the Inca empire. Aleixo Garcia's death as he retreated back to the Eastern coast meant that he would not go down in history for this infamous achievement.

As we sit squashed in the shared trufi taxi, the road winds down through parched valleys, before clambering steeply upwards again. As we climb from Sucre to Potosi, over 4000 metres above sea-level, the earth around us becomes dry and cracked. The air thins into a whisper and I pull on a jumper as the cold begins to bite. The low sky is clear and crystal blue and if I stand on the roof of the taxi, I might just touch it.

The beautiful mountain of Cerro Rico was sacred to the Inca empire, who would observe the stars in the Hanan Pacha, the upper world, from its summit, marking the movements of the sun and enacting rituals. When the Spanish came, they found a sacrificial rock on top of it, along with ritualistic monuments made of silver. The church soon destroyed all vestiges of this adoration and transformed the mountain into La Virgen del Cerro, a representation of the virgin Mary to win quechua souls for Christianity. Mary's body was raped of over 40,000 tonnes of silver under Spanish reign and millions of indigenous people and Africans were sacrificed in her womb under the mita system of drafted or slave labour. Now desperate miners scour the mountain for scraps of tin and are rewarded with a life expectancy of 40 years.

We arrive in the city centre and pay the Trufi driver. The city, once the biggest in the Americas, continues to be a glut of churches and even the hotels still bear the names of saints. On the street, fleece jackets mingle with wool cardigans and shawls. Hiking boots cross paths with thick ankle-length woolen socks and sandals. In the square, plaited-haired women in dark green shawls and grey puffy skirts peel and sell ripe oranges, perfuming the streets as we pass. Aging men with leathered faces and ruddy cheeks crouch to shine shoes. We weave our way through the labyrinth of narrow streets with no footpaths, pressing ourselves against the buildings to avoid the endless stream of honking cars. Young boys

in woolly hats shove pretzels and nuggets of lead and zinc before our noses and laugh at Tom and Liam's wide and startled eyes.

Potosi is all about money. Money and death. Some say that the dollar or peso sign \$ comes from the mint mark on the Spanish coins that were minted in Potosi, the largest mint in colonial times. The letters PTSI are superimposed on the mint mark and may have given rise to the now ubiquitous dollar or peso sign. In the Casa da Moneda, Potosi's old mint and current-day museum, you have to pay a hefty entrance fee as well as an additional fee if you want to take photos. Despite the silence now of the mint's machinery, they still pride themselves on knowing how to make money.

Potosi reeks too of death. We encounter our first skeletons in the mint museum. A huge portrait of a palid, afflicted Saint Francis bears down on me, holding a skull in his hands. 'The skull is the symbol of meditation,' our guide assures us, 'to consider one's death is to come closer to awareness of one's spiritual nature.' With no comment, the group passes on to the next attraction, while the words resonate strongly within me. In a room downstairs in the labyrinth of the mint, naturally mummified new-born colonial children are laid out, stiff dolls with empty eye-sockets. We pick over them like vultures as they lie incongruous next to the explosive devices and weapons used to mine the mountain and control its miners. The mummified remains of an Inca are in another corner of the room, crunched up in foetal position. 'An Inca's death was celebrated much more than his birth,' our guide informs us, 'when dead, he was paraded around and put to sit on his throne. His subjects would dance for him, sing to him, talk to him, before bringing him back to his tomb.'

The boys and I scuttle from the mint museum into a tourist agency across the road and sign up for the last mine tour of the day. We are the only tourists to jump into a beat-up little van, sitting crouched and expectant in the backseat. My head hits off the roof of the van so I have to duck down to look out the windows. Our guide, P, has the same leathery and lined face as the shoe-shiners and he introduces himself as an ex-miner, who spent five years working underground. 'I can't believe we are going into a real mine,' Tom squeals with delight. 'Do you think I can keep the silver I find in the mine?' Liam asks, wide-eyed. They are awash with images from bedtime stories and Disney movies and their excitement is palpable. For them, this is the highlight of the trip. They are the newest wave of

Europeans fascinated by South Americas precious metals.

Their father was fascinated by the Potosi mines, so much so that he wrote his dissertation about them as part of his degree in History at Oxford University. I wonder if his interest in the mines included some premonition that his sons and widow would come here one day on pilgrimage.

The van stops at the base of Cerro Rico where a cluster of tiny shops sell their wares in huge flaxen sacks spilling out on the road. One sack is filled with dynamite, another with coca leaves. 'We need to bring presents for the miners,' the guide tells us gruffly, 'so each of you needs to buy a bottle of pure alcohol, coca leaves and soft drinks. We give these to the miners that we meet.'

'We're going to meet miners?' I ask, taken aback 'are we going into a working part of the mine?' 'Yes,' he nods, laughing at my ignorance. As soon as I have paid, he helps himself to a handful of our coca-leaves and stuffs them into his mouth. He offers some to me and I shake my head. 'My mother has chewed coca-leaves every day of her life,' he assures me, 'and she is still well and in good health in her seventies. All of the miners chew it. You should too for the altitude.' I take a leaf from the bag and nibble on it cautiously.

Further up the hill, we stop at an empty house and change into over-sized overalls and big black wellington boots. We are each given a battered miner's hat, with a lamp at the front. The boys struggle with their oversized sleeves and huge wellington boots, the miners' cap falling comically over their eyes.

As we approach the mines, the land around us is a clawed mess of quarries and shards of rock. The ground is thick with mud as we walk through a row of squat, wooden miners' shacks. The sky is low and grey above us. Around the entrance to the mine, I notice streaks of deep red ceremonial blood that makes me shiver. Seeing my distaste, our guide points to the blood. 'It isn't human blood, just llama blood. Llamas are sacrificed in honour of Pachamama, mother earth, and their blood pasted on the mine entrance for good luck. If Pachamama tastes the llama blood, her hunger for human blood might be assuaged.'

A group of men are sitting around, at the end of a shift, drinking pure alcohol. They jeer drunkenly as we arrive. Our guide joins them and takes a swig of alcohol from the plastic bottle. His cheeks are fat with coca leaves and thick saliva

is caught in the corner of his mouth, his eyes dilating fast. He is back in the world of the miner, a drunken fraternity of self-destruction. 'Donde está el esposo?' one of the miners, leers at me, 'where's your husband?' 'Murió,' I spit at him, 'he died.' 'You need a good Latino man,' another laughs lecherously. 'I have a Latina,' I reply coldly. They press the bottle of alcohol on me, but I shake my head. The guide pours a little in the plastic cap of the alcohol bottle. 'First offer a drop to pachamama,' he tells me, holding the bottle top out to me. I take the plastic cap and let a large drop fall on the ground. I raise the cap to my lips and swig the remaining drop. It stings my throat and makes me gag. The men cheer loudly.

We leave the men and enter into the narrow mine. The darkness pounces on us. We adjust the lamps on our helmets and they cough out a weak stream of light along the metal tracks before us. The walls close in around us, rough and jagged. Sagging eucaliptus logs are wedged into place, holding up the ceiling. The air is thick and caustic. I cough to expel the air, but it sticks in my throat. Fear squeezes my heart. 'Is it safe to walk inside the mine?' I ask in a tight voice. The guide slurs over his shoulder, 'we have tours every day, a number of times a day and nothing happens.' At that, the whole tunnel starts to shake and he hastily pushes us to the side. I grab the boys and pull them to me. A battered wooden cart appears around the corner, hauling 800kgs of silver oxide from the mine. Three miners are crouched behind the cart, pushing it with their whole body. As they stand up, I see two lined and weary old men, sweating profusely and wheezing deeply. The third is a boy, no more than 14 or 15 years old and his eyes are dilated, drunk under the layer of dust that engulfs his whole body. I have fallen into another dimension, where blatant exploration and injustice are unapologetically par for the course. Our guide hands the miners a bottle of cola and they gulp it between them thirstily. They nod at us and without a word, put their shoulders to the cart again. 'How old is that boy?' I ask in horror, as they move out of earshot. 'Probably around fifteen,' he responds unconcerned, 'the life expectancy of a miner like him is about forty years. Those other men you saw were only in their thirties, but the mine has aged them.'

'How much money do they make?' I ask, hurrying the boys along to keep up with his pace. 'They get to keep whatever they find. Some of the miners work in groups, some alone. You can chose between earning a set daily wage or earning a percentage of the find.' 'So how much on average?' I insist. 'About 110 bolivianos



a day,' he says quietly. 'About 11 or 12 Euro then?' I say, calculating roughly. He shrugs and walks on.

The boys pick up small rocks at the side of the mine and examine them under their hat-light. 'This doesn't look like silver,' Liam moans, his body visibly drooping. Tom starts to cough and strains at the buttons around his neck. 'What's in this air?' I ask, coughing too. 'Dust, alot of dust. Oh and arsenic too,' our guide answers, striding ahead.

I walk quickly to catch up with him. 'Look, I don't feel very safe. How long does this tour go on for?' 'We'll go about 2 km into the mine,' he replies. '2 km,' I exclaim, 'I thought we would just peer down a mineshaft.' 'About 500 metres in, we'll come to the statue of El Tio, the miners' deity. The miners make offerings to him every day, ask him for his protection in the mines and guidance in life.' He adds, sighing, 'we could just go as far as that and then turn back.'

'Look,' he points to a low spot to our right, 'it's through here, you have to go on all fours to squeeze through.' He crouches down and crawls out of sight. I peer down the dark shaft we have come down. Do I dare walk out of the mine alone with the boys, without the guide, along a mine riddled with tunnels? I kick at the earth in frustration, before urging the boys into the hole after the guide and round off the rear of our little group. My mouth fills with thick arsenic-laden air as I crawl ahead and my back scrapes off the roof of the tunnel. For a moment the boys move out of sight and panic throttles my heart and throat. *My boys could die, I could die. One small shift in this mountain and we are all buried by rubble.* 'Shit, shit, shit,' I curse under my breath. After years of trying to avoid death, I am face to face again with my mortality and my children's mortality, an animal caught in the headlights.

I try to calm my breathing and fail but manage to keep going on all fours. I come to a clearing and stand up, shaking the dust off and righting the miner's hats on my head. Leering at us from a corner, we see a black, life-size statue of a grotesque, red-horned man with an enormous erect penis. He is surrounded by mounds of coca-leaves and cigarettes. We have arrived in hell and the devil himself is here to greet us.

The boys are too stunned to laugh at the oversized penis of El Tio. Here, deep inside the earth, we have come face to face with Satay, the god of death and the ruler of the Inca underworld, the Uqha Pacha. He is the polar opposite of the

virgin Mary. What is on the inside of this Cerro Rico is a direct contradiction of how it is represented on the outside.

Feeling constricted and claustrophobic, I am assailed by fear for me and for my boys. I chastise myself internally for having brought them here.

‘The miners spend thirty minutes every day talking to El Tio or Satay,’ the guide says, as he sprinkles some coca leaves on top of the statue. He laughs at the grimace on my face. ‘You Europeans don’t like to talk to the god of death, but we believe you must face Satay not ignore or run from him.’

I have no desire to address Satay as the miners do. I am in a pit of foul-smelling despair and I want out.

‘Talk to him,’ the guide urges, half-smiling at my obvious discomfort, ‘we believe in facing our fears, not repressing them.’ I kick at the ground once again and slowly look up at Satay once more. The boys are standing either side of him, wide-eyed.

I am face to face now with death, with what I have been running away from for five years. Fear rises in me, restricting my throat. Is this holiday going to end in the same way as our family holiday five years ago? Is more loss waiting in the shadows?

Slowly, reluctantly, I take the coca-leaves that the guide is holding out to me on the palm of his hand. I scatter them over the black, grotesque statue and close my eyes. ‘All is lost if I lack courage,’ I think to myself, ‘all is lost if I lack courage.’

‘I’m afraid,’ I say in silence to Satay, ‘I’m afraid for me and for my boys. Death is so close to us and so beyond my control. I am afraid to feel again the despair I felt when Alastair died. It is hard to breathe sometimes, hard to live joyfully. The risk of that pain again seems sometimes too big a price to pay for life.’ I breathe deeply, my eyes still closed. I slowly do the Walking Flute breathing — breathing through each chacra, one by one. I inhale and exhale slowly and deeply.

After a while, I open one of my eyes and then the other and see the round, bulbous-eyes of Satay are leering at me, still and unflinching. Death is before me and

this time, I don't try and escape it. Time seems to stop. Slowly, something begins to loosen in me, an internal shield that I slowly lower. I realise that it has taken me five years to stop long enough to begin to face death, to open to its presence. A part of me is amazed that death didn't swallow me whole. I just remain where I am – quiet, unmoving, disarmed .. could it be that I can face death and survive?

Time passes in slow motion. It feels like hours have passed when I signal to our guide and to the boys and we begin to make our way back through the tunnel and down the mine-shaft. As the faint light from the tunnel's end gathers force, my heart begins to decelerate into a bearable rhythm. I sigh audibly, and listen to the sound echoing along the Potosi mineshaft.

When we get back to the mini-bus, darkness has fallen. As the bus lurches off, Liam starts vomiting. By the time we stop at a pharmacy, his body is quite limp and his breathing is laboured. The pharmacist comes to the mini-bus to check him. 'Soroche,' he diagnoses nonchalantly, 'altitude sickness. It's very common here.' I go back with him into the pharmacy and he sells me some medicine over the counter. 'If he gets worse,' he says to me, matter-of-fact, 'bring him to the hospital.'

Back at the hotel foyer, Liam vomits again, this time into a small round-holed bin in the lobby. There is no plastic-bag in the bin and his vomit seeps out onto the floor before us. I throw a glance of apology to the man at reception as he winces at us and I carry Liam straight up to our room. After a quick, cold shower, I give him some medicine and he falls into a fitful sleep. His breathing is still a bit wheezy and I lie next to him in the bed, unable to sleep. I recognise the shadow of his father's death stalking me from the corners of the room. I watch Liam's chest rise and fall, facing the inexorable fact that the possibility of death is always with us. I feel a familiar tension in my shoulders and neck but I am totally present to Liam – alert but surrendered to what is happening. I manage to breathe along with him.

As I lie beside him, it strikes me that for five years, I have run from death, I have turned from all the uncomfortable feelings that threatened to overwhelm me and swallow me whole. I thought I was being optimistic — clinging to anything that would give me a sense of purpose that would make me feel alive... like a drowning person gasping for air. I had moved countries, thrown myself into a time-consuming charitable project, had another child, dived into the day to day

of bringing up three boys, written and published a book, explored spirituality and flown back to Ireland again and again. I realised that my mind had been telling me that stopping would kill me, as if really facing the rumbling feelings associated with death and loss would be the end of me and leave my children orphans.

And now the Caminho de Peabiru has stopped me in my tracks. It cornered me in an alcove in the heart of a sacred Andean mountain long enough for me to twist myself in the direction of death and these surging feelings. Maybe I just wasn't ready until now. The overriding feeling now though was one of amazement - facing death had not been the end of me. My mind had scared me with untruths. I am lying here still - breathing, surviving.

#### LA PAZ — THE LLAMA FOETUS

After Potosí, something relaxes in me. I have twisted my body in the direction of death and now I tentatively move closer. In the mines, the miners leave coca leaves and cigarettes for Satay everyday and make offerings to Pachamama, spreading llhama blood on the entrance to the mines. An offering is the Andean way of facing Death.

The boys and I continue on in the direction of northeast and arrive at the Bolivian capital of La Paz. After checking into a hotel, I take the boys to the famous Witches' Market.

A quechua woman squats on the ground before us, bundling together an offering for Viracocha and Pachamama, Nhandecy. The witch's market spills its kaleidoscope of herbs and candles, ekeko statues and llama foetus' from narrow white-tiled floors onto the streets. We are in a small shop, watching as the saleswoman creates our offering in front of us. She lays a large sheet of paper on the ground of her shop and begins to build up the offering, first a circle of coloured llama wool, then coca leaves, sacred herbs like coa, palo santo, cloves and anis, chunks of llama fat, large coloured candies, thin slivers of silver in the shape of a frog and a sun, slips of gold and silver paper and she tops it off with brightly-coloured sprinkles and twelve cigarettes.

'Women like sweet things, that's why we offer these coloured sweets for Pachamama,' she explains to us, 'and each herb has a different function, one asks for courage, another for abundance and so on. The final part of the offering is the

llama foetus. 'She points out the foetus hanging dried and gruesome by the dozen across the shop. "These are llamas that were still-born," she assures me, seeing the reactive look of distaste that passes over my face, 'they haven't been killed for the offering.' Half-convinced, I point to a small llama foetus, which she picks up and includes in the offering. 'Now you need this wine to pour over the offering while it is burning. You will also need this bottle of pure alcohol to help the offering burn fully and of course some matches. It is a good sign when the offering burns completely. It means it has been accepted by Pachamama and Viracocha.' She bundles up the offering, the alcohol and the matches and hands the final package to me.

'When do people usually make offerings?' I ask. 'Whenever they need to,' she replies, 'but most usually on the first Friday of the month. In August, the month of Pachamama, a lot of offerings are burned.' 'Is it ok for me to burn this out in the open?' I ask, suddenly unsure. She looks me in the eye, her face serious. 'Of course,' she says, enunciating clearly for the gringa to understand, 'this is our religion. Making an offering is a respected activity, like kneeling and praying in a church for a Catholic.'

The Catholic Church is still the dominant religion in Bolivia, with over 80% considering themselves Catholic. Much fewer Bolivians practice the religion however and nobody sees any contradiction in professing the Catholic faith and participating in indigenous customs and rituals. Like other colonised countries in Latin America, church and state were intertwined and intimate and had significant influence on each other. In addition, the colonial church became an extremely wealthy institution in Bolivia, owning not only extensive tracts of land but also serving as quasi-official moneylenders to the elite and high-ranking colonisers. By the end of the colonial era, a combination of money lending and shrewd real estate investments had made the church the dominant financial power in Bolivia. This power has been reduced over time and in 2009, Bolivia became a secular state, breaking with almost five hundred years' of recognising Catholicism as its state religion.

When the saleswoman finishes our bundle, I thank her and carefully place the offering in my backpack, propping the wine and alcohol in the two side pockets. As we walk back to our hotel, I am acutely aware that I am walking around La Paz with a llama foetus on my back.

## TUNUPA'S CROSS

From La Paz, we move toward Lake Titicaca. In early accounts to the Europeans in the 1500s, Guaraní said they had been to very tall mountains in the west where there was a lake with a lot of water. This indicates that the Guaraní came along the Caminho de Peabiru all the way to Lake Titicaca.

Lake Titicaca is a brilliant blue before us, stretching out still and placid on top of the world. It was considered a deity, Mamakhota, to the Andean cultures and a sacred lake of purification for those going on pilgrimage to the lake's Island of the Sun, where Viracocha created the world.

We hire a car with a driver, who takes us along the eastern shore of Lake Titicaca, stopping briefly at four police stop-points to let young, crumpled-faced policemen peer suspiciously at us in search of illegal imports destined for nearby Peru. They wave us on and we pass through rundown single-street towns with half-finished buildings. Sheep dot untilled fields. Women in brown bowler hats, carrying firewood in striped blankets around their shoulder, herd cows and flash their gold teeth at us, smiling at the boys as we pass. Fat, pink pigs tug at the grass unfettered by the roadside.

The lakeside fields of potato and quinoa plantations are tilled by the bent profiles of old men and women. The rhythmic movements of their picks as they sink them into the soil again and again is a hypnotising dance. As I watch, their bodies merge with the landscape around them.

These rural people were called cholos for centuries, originating from colonial sarcasm as the word referred to people from a town in Spain that wear beautiful, refined clothes. In the 17th Century, after the revolt of the indigenous Tupac Amaru, native dress was prohibited and the women began to wear European clothes of the time, with a shawl and a long skirt. The bowler hat was introduced from Italy in the early 20th Century and when it proved unpopular with the men, savvy salesmen promoted it among the country women as a hat that guarantees fertility. There is a complex code of dress, completely baffling to my tourist eye, that differentiates the aymara and quechua women, married and single women and women from different social standing and different areas. The indigenous President Evo Morales discouraged the use of the word cholo, because of its



prejorative undertone and promotes the word 'indigena' instead. It is inspiring to see a country in Latin America throw off the shawl of colonial prejudice and assert its own indigenous identity once more.

We are on our way to the tiny village of Carabuco on the edge of Lake Titicaca and I have no idea what we will find there. There is little information on the internet and there are no tours going there. We have to hire a car and a driver for the day and try our luck. We stop in at a roadstop for Tom to use a public toilet, which turns out to be a simple hole in the ground. A large, unsavoury poo lies unapologetically on the rim of the hole. 'This is the most disgusting thing I have ever seen,' Tom says, almost gagging, 'I really don't like Bolivia.' 'This is a French-style toilet Tom,' I wink at him, amused at his reaction to this whole new world, 'very chic'.

Back in the car, I am aware that any semblance of filial patience with the car journey, with the unfamiliar Bolivian food, with the Camino de Peabiru has disintegrated. 'Where are we going?' Tom whines. 'I told you,' I tell him, 'we are going on another treasure hunt to see if we can find the other half of the Carabuco cross that we saw in the Cathedral in Sucre.'

'Another cross, another church,' Liam moans in unison with his brother. 'If you're good,' I tell them, remembering the results of my googling of the area, 'you'll get to see a dragon before the day is out.' Both boys look at me with raised eyebrows. I fish out a sweet for both of them from my backpack and buy myself a few more minutes of peace.

The road is uneven and we bump along interminably through scrubby lands. Finally, to my right, I see a sign for Carabuco and my heart leaps. The road winds onwards and I strain my eyes ahead of me, eager to explore the village that is slowly coming into view.

One version of the Carabuco legend, taken down from the words of an old indigenous man in the year 1600, tells of a tall, light-skinned outsider that came to Carabuco before the Spanish. He carried a cross and spoke of one God and warned against the indigenous vices. He was tied up and beaten with rocks by the Aymara indians. Birds descended to unbind him and he escaped walking on the Titicaca lake through the totora reeds in the direction of the lakeside village of Copacabana, leaving his cross in the ground at Carabuco. A part of this cross is in

Sucre, which we saw in the Cathedral and the other part is said to be in the church at Carabuco. The man has been identified as Tunupa, Viracacocha and St. Thomas. Our Andean Sumé.

We come to a traditional square in the centre of Carabuco, deserted now in the midday sun. The small church, painted a heavy red-wine colour, overlooks the square. Next to the church, there are several buildings in bright colours and an office for the local Radio Tunupa. Just beyond the square, tall totora reeds hide the lake from view. We park the car and I walk quickly over to the church. Just as in the Sucre cathedral, a heavy lock and chain is wrapped around its iron-wrought gates. There is nothing straight forward about this Carabuco cross. I look around the deserted streets and spy a building with the Bolivian flag at the other side of the square — the municipal building. I walk briskly across the road, waving to the boys who are waiting in the car and enter the municipal building. There is no reception office, so I start walking up the steps. A cacophony of sounds and colours comes down the steps in my direction. It is a delegation of traditionally dressed Aymara men and women, conversing and flashing gold-tinged smiles at each other. We are two cultures colliding and I am not sure which of us is most taken aback. We all smile, nod our heads and bellow friendly greetings at each other. I stand aside to let them pass and then continue up the stairs and go through an open door into a large conference room. A young man is standing in a corner, responding to a journalist's questions in polite, hushed tones, amidst the remnants of a meeting. I wait until the journalist finishes and introduce myself to the young man. 'Do you know where I could find the priest to open the church and see the cross of Carabuco?' I ask. 'What a pity, the priest is away. He knows everything about the cross, everything. But he is travelling and won't be back until tomorrow.' 'Does anyone else have access to the church?' I ask in dismay, 'we have come all the way from Ireland to see it.' He reflects for a moment, before answering quietly, 'there is an old man who is caretaker for the church and lives at the edge of the village. He should have a key too.'

After convincing the young man bring us to the old man's house, we all get back into our hired car. We drive to a little shack. I knock on the corrugated iron door and after a short wait, an old man opens it. I explain in my broken Spanish that we want to see the church. Without saying a word, he nods and then shuts the door on me. I saunter back to the car, not quite sure if he is going to follow me.

Five minutes later, the door of the shack opens and the old man walks, head bent, towards the car. I sigh with relief and put my backpack, llama-foetus and all, into the boot of the car, while Liam scrambles on my knee to make room for the old man. We drive back to the village of Carabuco and walk with him to the church. I smile with contentment as he opens the church for us.

The plain exterior of the church contrasts starkly with the overwhelmingly elaborate interior. As I enter, I have to shade my eyes from the busy, brooding murals and tapestries on the walls and the ceilings. The colours are vibrant but in need of restoration. An ornate gold and silver brocaded pulpit stands out from one of the walls. The original wooden beams arch above us.

‘Carabuco church is the Sistine Chapel of the Andes,’ the young man nods at me proudly as I examine the intricate murals, but I am soon to learn that several ornate churches throughout the Andes boast this title. The road from Potosi to the coast runs through this region and much gold and silver was siphoned off to ornament these colonial churches on its way to the boats destined for Spain.

Fear-inducing murals at the entrance of the church, depicting a bloodied, suffering, crucified Christ and the fires of hell. Closer to the altar, a mural tells the story of Tunupa’s cross and the tall, light-skinned man who planted the cross here and was revered before the arrival of the Spanish — our Bolivian Sumé.

I kneel in the first pew, next to the altar, and try and locate the cross. The old man kneels next to me and quietly points at a framed cross, about a metre long, high up above the altar. ‘The Carabuco cross,’ I coo, appreciatively. The old man nods. He tells me that many years ago it was framed behind glass to avoid it being destroyed by the pilgrims who came and cut off small pieces of the cross to make use in healing teas or as personal idols. On feast days, the priest takes the cross down from above the altar and carries it through the village.

For now, all I can do is kneel on a pew and look up at it from below. The cross is so lovely in its simplicity, contrasting with the overworked splendour of the church. I kneel there in the church, seaped in pleasure at having found the missing piece of Tunupa’s little-known cross, even if it is kept at arms-length from me by the intermediary priest.

I notice how the simplicity, the humility of the Carabuco cross soothes me

internally amidst the elaborate fear-inducing images about me.

I sense my aversion to the suffering face of Christ on the murals but I don't turn away now. This Carabuco cross seems to whisper of a simpler spirituality — the spirituality of Tunupa, of Viracocha, of Sumé. Tunupa's cross seems to speak to me more of heaven than hell, more of the celebration of a resurrected Christ than the suffering of a crucified one. Perhaps I have to face both heaven and hell, both life and death, both joy and suffering to move forward in wholeness.

#### THE SLEEPING DRAGON

'What about the dragon?' Liam asks, as we bundle back into the car to leave Carabuco and following Tunupa's footprints in the direction of Copacobana. 'Keep your eyes open for a sign,' I say to Liam cryptically, 'and then we can have our picnic by the dragon.' After a quarter of an hour, we pass the small village of Santiago de Okala — '*el dragon dormido de quilini es nuestro. Ici*' is painted with limescale on the exterior of a house at the side of the road telling us that the sleeping dragon is here. I signal to our driver to take the mud road towards the lake but we quickly come to a fork in the road amidst a spattering of houses. I jump out of the car and knock on the corrugated gate of a house. An elderly, indigenous man opens it. His long, blue woolen cardigan is well-worn and his woolen llucho hat flaps over his ears. He grins a toothless smile from the weathered ripples of his face as I explain to him that we are looking for the sleeping dragon of Okala, the low mountain whose body curves along the edge of Lake Titicaca. He talks at me animatedly in what I think is Aymara and gesticulates wildly, before I get a door shut in my face for the second time in one day. I move slowly back to the car, once again not quite sure what is happening. Suddenly the gate is flung open again and the old man and now his wife come out, laden with bundles wrapped in home-spun blankets of faded blue and pink and rusted tools for working the land. They follow me to the car, talking at me as we go. The man sits in the front passenger seat and his wife squeezes in the back with the boys and me. Tom looks wide-eyed at me and then nods shyly to the woman. She smiles her golden smile for him. 'They are going to bring you to the dragon,' the driver says, translating, 'their fields are near there, so they will come with us. They want to bring you to where there is some ancient rock art on the dragon's tail.' I nod my head enthusiastically

at the couple, smiling profusely, as our bodies sway wildly about the car with each elaborate bump on the road.

We arrive at the end of the mud road and the couple urge us to follow them. The lake lies just beyond the small tilled fields, separated by rows of orderly stone. The wind has picked up and the lake is stirred into agitated waves breaking on its thin strip of sand. I shuffle the boys ahead of me and follow the quechua couple, while our driver waits behind, visibly sceptical of our intentions. 'We won't be long,' I call over my shoulder to him in reassurance. I sidle up to the quechua man and between us, we manage to patch together a decent conversation in Spanish. We walk past the orderly rows of fields of yuca, potato and quinoa, that are separated by rows of stones. The soil is mixed with sand and the plantations stretch out almost to the lake. We walk past tiny mud-brick houses with open doors. The quechua woman laughs warm-heartedly and hugs Liam closely before sinking her spade into the earth and bending over her day's work. Her husband beckons us onwards to follow him and we have to jog to keep up with him as he winds his way through the fields and down onto the little sandy beach. With his back to the lake, he points to the hill before us, pointing out the bulbous tail of the dragon with his scaly back and curved body. 'El dragon, El dragon,' he says repeatedly, smiling excitedly. The boys and I whoop and marvel as we make out the shape of a dragon before us from the low-lying hills that hug the lake. Along the scaly body of the dragon, perennial sprigs of vegetation spike up like unwanted hairs.

The man points towards the tail and then clasps my hand to say goodbye, before hurrying back to work in the field with his wife. The boys and I are alone now and we pick our way along the edge of the field. The wind by the lake has picked up another notch and we huddle together as we move.

At the tail of the dragon, we find a sheltered, secluded nook overlooking the lake where we can have our picnic. The remnants of offerings to Pachamama are visible amidst the sand. I make out the swirls of white rock art on the dragon's tail, outlined and covered in graffiti. I trace my fingers along them gently with a mix of delight and dismay. Unlike the rock art in Brazil or Paraguay, these shapes are painted not engraved on the rock. There are circles and lines with swirls on each side, human figures and x-like crosses with curved ends, an indecipherable whiteboard of symbols. As we sit down on the soft sand, between the rock art and the immense lake before us, cocooned against the wind, I play a tune on my tin

whistle. The past is alive in the present at this lake on the top of the world. The ice-cold air has preserved it through time. The sky, heavy with thick, white clouds, sags over the lake, almost touching the water. The hills on the other side are brooding dark-blue mounds in the far distance. We eat our sandwiches hungrily and then the boys move towards the edge of the lake, playing in the sand. They bring me smooth sleek stones of pastel greens, oranges, yellows to inspect. Soon, the clouds above us darken and swoop down in our direction. It is now or never.

‘Who is up for a purifying dip in the lake?’ I call to the boys, ‘to prepare us for our trip to the sacred Island of the Sun tomorrow.’ Tom moves to the water-edge, crouches down and touches the water with his hand. ‘It’s freeeeezing,’ he says, wide-eyed. ‘I’ll put my feet in,’ Liam concedes quickly, taking off his shoes and running towards Tom. ‘Me too,’ Tom says, ‘only my feet.’ The two boys roll up their trousers and wade knee-high in the lake’s clear waters. Tom runs back to the sand and shakes the cold out of his feet. ‘It bit me,’ he shouts, laughing, ‘I think the water bit me.’

I laugh out loud at him. I feel a rush of excitement at being in this secluded spot of the lake — lying lonely and lovely before us. How delicious life is. How far away we are now from the annoying hassles of the journey, the stinking death-pit of Potosi. ‘Boys, I am going to have to get naked and immerse myself in the water,’ I say to them, with a grin. Tom groans, ‘not naked, Mum, what if someone sees you.’ I laugh off his nine-year-old prudism, ‘the only one who could see me is the dragon,’ I say as I quickly take off my clothes, ‘and she’s sleeping.’ I undress quickly and run naked towards the lake, the icy wind hitting me before the water does. Immersing my feet in the water itself is like immersing them into a bucket of ice. Tom is right, the cold is biting. I wade in until I am thigh-deep and then, immerse myself in the freezing water. My whole body tingles with sensation. Here I am floating naked and freezing in purifying waters at the top of the world.

As my body floats, head down, I relax consciously into the water, thinning and expanding into the lake. When I emerge from the water, I yelp and shake my body vigorously as I run back to my clump of clothes on the sand. My whole body is shaking and my teeth chattering as I struggle to pull my jeans up over my wet legs. ‘You’re crazy Mum,’ Tom says, shaking his head. I laugh with him, dress quickly and then hug the two boys to me.



We start to walk back along the strip of sand, but the wind has whipped into a fury now and we have to put our heads down to move forward. The water of the lake is choppy and laps angrily against the shore. A blue and red striped boat pulled up on the sand suffers the brunt of its spray. Liam picks up a stick and charges at the wind, shouting defiantly as he goes. His hair is swept back off his face from the wind and his eyes are shining. We scurry along the sand and then move inland where we pick our way carefully over the furrowed fields until we come to an old abandoned church. From behind the church, our driver appears, walking quickly, headbent, in our direction. 'There you are,' he says in a voice balancing relief and annoyance, 'I was coming to see if you had gotten into any trouble.' 'Because of the wind?' I ask surprised. 'No, because of the dragon,' he says in a low voice, less sceptical now, 'the old couple warned me about it when they were in the car with us. They say that this dragon can possess people to do awful things.' Tom looks at me disapprovingly. I laugh off his look with a light heart, as we rush back to the car to shelter from the wind.

#### TIWANAKU

the next day, we visit another village near Lake Titicaca, but this village, Tiwanaku, is totally lifeless. This advanced empire flourished for many centuries in the fertile lands of the Titicaca Lake basin with its innovative farming methods of flooded-raised fields and this prosperity enabled it to extend its influence widely through the surrounding regions. Tiwanaku was the centre of this civilization's world until its collapse around 1000 AD. Tiahuanaku era o centro do mundo dessa civilização até seu colapso por volta do ano 1000 AD. It was a place of pilgrimage and we too arrive as pilgrims. It seems that the Guarani did not come here on pilgrimage. It appears that they came here between the 7th and 10th Century, attacking this advanced Andean empire and possibly, playing a part in its demise.

The Tiwanaku ruins themselves are visibly and viscerally looted. We enter into a complex of rectangle and highly symmetrical open-roofed temples that are aligned with the four cardinal directions. One temple has human and puma stone heads projecting from the walls. In the middle of this temple, there is a huge monolith of a bearded man. I look at this monolith with reverence, face to face once again with Viracocha, our Andean Sumé. We walk up some stone steps and enter into the Kalasasaya, a huge pátio with its entrance gate looking east, aligned with the rising

sun. Looking closely at the walls, I see they have been fitted together without using any type of mortar. They remind me of the sixth century Gallarus Oratory that I passed on the Saint's Road in the southwest of Ireland at the beginning of the pilgrimage and are probably of a similar age. Is it possible that St. Brendan taught this advanced technology that he knew from Ireland to the burgeoning empire at Lake Titicaca, gaining himself the title of Viracocha in return?

In the far southwest of the courtyard, we come to the famous Sun Gate, cracked in half but still standing. It is a square arch decorated with 48 squares depicting a God of thunder and lightning that remind me of the Guarani God Tupã, who is also the God of the West. The central image is of Viracocha, the creator god of the Tiwanaku and the Inca empire after them.

I stand before the gate, looking through it to the desert-like wastelands stretching out into the west behind it. The sophisticated irrigation system developed by the Tiwanaku empire no longer exists and the desert has taken ownership of the region. It appears that a drought around 950 AD ruined the soil's fertility and the empire's abundant food source and therefore, its empire.

I am eager to pass through Viracocha's Sun Gate but it is heavily cordoned off and looks like it might fall on top of me if I dared. Instead the boys and I lie on a large slab of rock on the ground near to the sun gate, which is called *the energy stone*. The boys lie down on the energy stone laughing and joking together. I play a quick, lively tune on the tin whistle, as they lie there.

When the boys stand up, I bend down to lie sprawled across the stone, pressing my cheek against it and inhaling the energy of the sun that emanates from the hot stone. Tiwanaku is said to come from the indigenous Aymara language and means 'stone in the middle'. It looks like we have found it.

We pass some grazing llhamas and walk up the dry slopes of a hill that turn out to be the ruins of a pyramid called Akapana; here the human constructions are being reintegrated into the landscape. At the end of the day, Nhandecy or Pachamama takes back all that we humans build, even our most imposing stone creations.

This stone complex, totally in ruin now, was at the middle of the world for

the Tiwanaku people, as Jasuká Renda was for the Guaraní. When the Guaraní clashed with the Tiwanaku people, what must the Guaraní semi-nomadic warriors have thought of this massive city of symmetrical stone and the elaborate agriculture surrounding it? There are reports of the Guaraní venerating the Candirs of the West, the men of metals. There is evidence of pilgrimages westward along the Caminho de Peabiru in search of these Candirs. The mountains and later the Incas were obstacles for them. Could the empire of Tiwanaku be the origin of the Guaraní legend of the Candirs in the West?

The construction of Tiwanaku and its surrounding lands is so much more complex than anything I have seen in the east of the continent. Jasuká Renda, the centre of the Guaraní world and the sacred Guaraní coastline were enjoyed in a fully natural way. The Guaraní did not alter or control nature about them, but received the abundance that was on offer. Even the rock art is pre-Guaraní and the Guaraní did not add to it. The Sambaqui sacred burial grounds and the guardians created by rocks on the headlands were also created before the Guaraní arrived. They revered and used the sambaquis as burial sites and included the guardians in their mythology — more gifts offered by Nhandecy. In the East, the landscape was largely untouched, unaltered by centuries of Guaraní habitation. This suggests a tribe more in rhythm with Nhandecy, mother earth. Meanwhile, the people of Tiwanaku strongly manipulated nature to meet their demands, creating a large city and creating sophisticated stone sculptures in worship of their gods. Perhaps nature here was not as abundant as the Eastern lands. The necessities of surviving and thriving in the high altitudes may have led the people to develop a more separate, more active, more controlling consciousness and relationship with nature. Perhaps they stopped seeing the earth as their mother and started to see her more as a resource to be exploited.

The decline of the Tiwanaku empire serves as a warning for our current civilization. More than a thousand years after their bellicose encounter, the Guaraní people who interfered little with Nhandecy are alive and growing and the Tiwanaku people who tried to control and subjugate Nhandecy have vanished off the face of the earth.

## VIRACOCOA LINE

Viracocha walked through the west of the South American continent, stopping in places aligned on a straight line that creates an angle of 45 degrees with the equator — the Viracocha line. This songline begins at the ruins of Tiwanaku in Bolivia, passes through Copacabana on the edge of Lake Titicaca and continues in Peru through Raqchi, Cusco, Ollantaytambo and Machu Picchu and reaches all the way north to the coastal town of Tumbes near the border with Ecuador. Viracocha eventually disappeared at Tumbes, walking on the waters of the Pacific Ocean as he went. His name Viracocha literally means ‘foam of the sea’. Sumé arrived walking on the waters in the Atlantic and his possible doppelganger Viracocha left walking on the water in the Pacific.

The information about the Guarani incursions into the west come from 16th Century and contemporary Guarani sources and refers to the 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Century. To construct my itinerary, I will follow the few hints and clues of the Guarani as I travel westward and accompany the line of our Andean Sumé, Viracocha.

## NEARING THE SOLSTICE

We cross a small channel of Lake Titicaca at Tijuina in the late afternoon and take a shared taxi to the sacred bay of Copacabana, continuing our pilgrimage on the Viracocha line. There is a young off-duty police officer in the taxi with us. I put my backpack in the boot, so he can't smell our llama foetus that I have been carrying around for 3 days. The police officer is on his way to Copacabana as part of the Bolivian president's entourage for the high-profile celebrations of the 21st of December on the Island of the Sun. The summer solstice is just five days away now. 'Where will you be for the solstice?' he asks. 'We plan to see the sunrise at Machu Picchu,' I tell him, 'the Inca's lost city.'

We arrive at Copacabana, the namesake of the more famous Brazilian beach in Rio de Janeiro. Kotakawana was the name of the fertility God in ancient Andean mythology that lived in the Titicaca lake, served by a court of mermen and mermaids. The Basilica of our Lady of Copacabana, patron saint of Bolivia, was built right on top of the Temple of Fertility. The basilica includes a 16<sup>th</sup> Century shrine with a gold-lamenated statue of the Virgin of Copacabana, resembling an Inca princess and carved by the grandson of an Inca. Many miracles have been

attributed to the Virgin of Copacabana, including achieving independence from Spain. Similar to Paraguay or Brazil, here too in Bolivia, a famous statue of the virgin Mary was created by an indigenous person. I wonder to what extent the prominence of these images is driven by indigenous Christian fervour and how much by clever Catholic marketing.

Like Pachamama whom she substituted, the Virgin is celebrated in August. The other annual celebration of the Virgin of Copacabana is on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, next to the feastday of Brigit, Ireland's most important goddess and female saint. A message on the Fuente Magna, an ancient bowl that was found on the shores of Lake Titicaca with proto-sumerian writing, has been deciphered as a request for increased fertility from the goddess Nia. There is an ancient, global celebration of fertility, that has been shoved out of view for millennia. What a loss to us women that the once vibrant, celebrated image of woman's fertility has been papered over so successfully by the sexless image of a virgin.

For a panoramic view of Copacabana, I have two options. We can climb up Calvary with its stations of the cross high up on one side of the bay or up to the Horca Del Inca, the pre-Inca astronomical observatory on a hill on the opposite. I have had enough of stations of the cross and quickly chose the Horca Del Inca. The boys and I clamber up a steep hill rushing to see the sun set from the observatory. Two large thin stones balance a smaller cross-stone between them, forming a tiny roof. These stones were aligned to mark the winter solstice on 21st June, marking the beginning of the sun's reapproximation to the earth. We get our breath back sitting on a rock, while looking through the two tall stones of the observatory towards the lake beyond. The curve of Copacabana shore looks like a cold-slapped ocean bay and the lake expands like the sea before us, framed by long low hills on distant shores. I can see the Calvary with its stations of the cross opposite us. Below it, at the shore of the lake, a cave called the Mouth of the Frog offers indigenous blessings from the indigenous healers, the amautas.

The sun is beginning to set over the lake and the clouds are a purple haze blasted with the last of the day's yellow light. The town of six thousand inhabitants and its port for the Islands of the Sun and the Moon is nestled at our feet, streaming with tourists. Some of the Horca del Inca has been damaged and some stones have been displaced in the incessant search for treasure, with graffiti scribbled all over it. Nevertheless, it still holds a majesty as the sun bellows its

last blaze through it. On this December evening on the border between Bolivia and Peru, the sun is almost at its closest point to the earth. We sit there, the boys and I, spotlight by the sun's last dance as it dips in scarlet hues behind the western Andean peaks.

## SUN ISLAND

Rain thunders down on the roof of our hotel room and half-asleep, I pull the wool blankets tighter around me. Liam's little body is still sleeping, curled in my embrace as my own personal hot-water bottle. I kiss his hair and settle down to sleep some more. Tom wakes up in the bed next to us. 'Mum,' he yawns, waking himself up fully, 'it's *raining*. How can we go on a boat to the Island of the Sun, if it's raining?'

After breakfast, we walk to the boat, draped and dripping in blue and pink plastic rain capes. The lake is a grey mist before us. 'Is the boat going to the Island of the Sun today?' I ask a man on the pier hopefully. He looks doubtfully out to the lake, before slowly nodding his head. Relieved, the boys and I buy tickets and find half-dry seats under the sheltered part of a boat tied to the pier. I place my backpack loaded with our offering, our alcohol and our llama foetus at my feet. We huddle together to warm up as we watch the boat fill up with local men in their thick chord trousers and long wool cardigans, and local women in their shawls and pleated skirts laden with enormous coloured bundles. There are 800 families living on the Island of the Sun, a mixture of Aymara and Quechua people. They live from subsistence farming, arts and craft and tourism. The boatman throws the bundles into wet corners, making dry space for the more demanding foreign tourists who spill into the boat in single file like a trail of ants. The boat revs its engine and pulls away into the grey mist.

Rain beats down incessantly on the roof of the boat for an hour as we plough across lake Titicaca in the direction of the islands of the Sun and of the Moon. Visibility is low and a wet, wintery darkness surrounds us. Suddenly, it seems like a tap has been turned off and the rain stops and the sun begins to chase away the clouds.

A few intrepid passengers climb up the metal stairs to the roofdeck and the boys want to follow them. I let them go up ahead of me, ready to catch them if they fall from the ladder. The wind is bitterly cold on the roof, but the sky is



steadily brightening. We wipe the rainwater off the seats, and sit on our rain-capes. As the clouds dissipate, the contours of the island begin to appear. We have almost reached the island when the mist lifts, pulling back the veil shrouding this most sacred of islands. We pass the length of the rocky island with its terraces of crops, until we come to the northern town of Challampa. From above, the island is said to be in the shape of a puma, with a hare caught in its mouth. We are arriving at the place where the mouth of the predator meets its prey. We alight from the boat and pass dutifully through the small museum, admiring the gold and silver offerings from the Tiwanaku and Inca culture that were found in the lake — offerings to Viracocha, our western Sumé.

The boys and I walk along a stretch of paradise beach, dotted with tents, drying quickly in the sun. How I would love to camp here, to savour this island slowly and carefully, but all we have is this one day, one quick glance. We stuff our rain capes and heavy jumpers into my backpack and walk along a stone road, the lake sparkling an electric blue as we move. The Island of the Moon accompanies us too, just three kilometres to our right. Tall cactus plants point up from the scrub vegetation on the rocks below us, their white flowers like huge daisies blooming everywhere about us at eye-level.

We pass ruddy-cheeked children selling bracelets and zampona flutes. Tiny mud-brick houses sell bottles of water and coca-cola. A woman in a green puffy skirt and a checkered apron sits knitting on a low stone wall, her long black plaits extended by curls of woven wool, almost touching the ground beneath her. The charm of this island is palpable.

The air is thin at 3800 metres and I move slowly forwards. Meanwhile both boys leap about the rocks energetically, like the mountain sheep herded by shy local boys their age.

Once on the island, pilgrims in Inca times would have to leave offerings to enter the sacred area of the rock and walk barefoot in a sign of humility. We are met close to the Sacred Rock by a local woman and two children charging an entrance fee. I give my offering gladly, but keep my shoes on. On the ground before us, we see large footprints – the footprints of the sun, indented on the rocks like Sumé's footprints on rocks along the Sumé songline on the coast of Brazil. The stone road continues on a few metres before giving way to fifteen rows

of the tiny sacred coa herb and a large rock about four metres high — the sacred rock. It was here that Viracocha is said to have created sun, moon and the world.

I can make out a rough shape of a puma in the hole in the rock which is filled now with white lillies and tiny mounds of rocks, laid in offering and prayer by the endless stream of tourists and pilgrims.

When the Spanish came here, the rock was covered in a thin film of gold, reflecting the light of the low sun on this lake on top of the world. The superficial film of gold was quickly dismantled, but the rock, the sacred rock of the spiritual foundations of the quechua and aymara people, was left intact.

I grasp the boys hands in mine and stand looking at the rock, mesmerised, waiting for the trail of tourists to touch the rock and move onwards to the next attraction. To the left of the rock, I can make out the eyes, nose and mouth of Viracocha beaming down on me. Here I am at Viracocha's rock — the sacred site of the Tiwanaku empire, the goal of the Inca pilgrimage — both cultures that clashed with the Guarani who arrived here along the Caminho de Peabiru.

There is only a trickle of tourists in front of the rock now, so I lead the boys towards it and we touch the Sacred Rock together in silence. There is a light hue of red in places where llama blood has been smeared on the rock during some sacred ceremony. A small group of backpackers in their early twenties are laughing loudly by the rock. 'It's just a bloody rock,' one tall girl says loudly to impress the group, dismissing millenia of worship in a blasé show of irreverence. The boys giggle and look up at me. 'Everything is sacred if you know how to look at it,' I assure them with a smile, 'don't think about this place, just feel it.'

We head towards the Chinkana, the labyrinth home of the sun virgins nearby, where a guide from our boat is waiting for his tourists to regroup. 'Would it be ok if we burned an offering to Viracocha in front of the rock?' I ask, cautiously. A broad smile breaks out on his brown, leathery face. 'Of course,' he says, visibly touched, 'of course.' He takes me by the arm and points over to a spot just beyond the Sacred Rock. 'There is a circle of rocks on the ground there. You can make your offering there.' I smile gratefully at him as he accompanies us to the circle of stones. 'Ok boys,' I say, turning to them, 'find some sticks. We are going to make a fire.' The boys run off in peels of laughter and start to collect kindling from among the scrub vegetation and we soon meet back at the circle of stones.

Together, we mount a fire. As we do, a couple of tourists come and join us.

I take the package with the offering from my backpack and place it on top of the mound of sticks and I screw off the lids of the pure alcohol and wine and put them to the side. Our guide comes to sit with us and we create a small circle around the offering. The sacred rock is right before me, as I take my tin whistle and play in its honour. A small gathering of tourists nearby clap my playing and take out a guitar and serenade us as we light the fire. The local guide joins us and shows us how to soak the offering in alcohol and then takes a match to light it. It flares up in a blue flame, making the boys jump back. I watch as the gold and silver papers burn away. The llama foetus crackles and slowly turns into dust. The metal forms and sweets melt into each other in a multicoloured mesh. I take the bottle of wine and pour some drops over the fire, saying a silent prayer of thanks as I do. I help Tom and Liam in turn as they take the bottle of wine and carefully let a couple of drops fall. Their eyes are dancing with the flames of the fire and the excitement of the ceremony. Tom picks up the tin whistle from the ground and starts to play it — my little walking flute.

The local guide pours some wine on the offering and says his own silent prayer with his eyes closed. He hands me the bottle of wine. 'I must go to guide the people back to the boat, but stay here longer. I will ask the boat to wait for you.' I nod at him gratefully, before letting my gaze fall back onto the fire. We sit there, watching the leaping flames swallow our offering. We empty all of the alcohol onto the fire and it roars to a crescendo as I give thanks for our precious and transient lives and ask for a pilgrim's blessing from Viracocha, our western Sumé and Pachamama, Nhandecy, our mother earth.



Samaipata, Bolivia, December 2012.



Potosí, Bolivia, December 2012.



Carabuco, Bolivia, December 2012.



Lake Titicaca, December 2012.



Tiwanaku, Bolivia, December 2012.





La Paz, Dezembro 2012.



Island of the Sun, December 2012.





Island of the Sun, December 2012.



Island of the Sun, December 2012.

## VIRACocha'S TEMPLE

We cross the border to Peru at Lake Titicaca and stay the night in Hotel Del Sol in Puna before taking a bus northwestward. One of the thirteen sub-areas of Puna, on the shores of Lake Titicaca in Peru, is called Huancané. They have a dance called 'Chiriguanos' that commemorates to this day Guarani or Chiriguanos attacks on Tiwanaku. The Caminho de Peabiru of a Guarani Sumé winds its way westward with me, as I follow in the footsteps now of his doppelgänger Viracocha.

The bus climbs up through the Andes, past tin-roofed houses, plantations of potato and quinoa and herds of cattle on the altiplano. We stop at La Raya, at over 4300 metres above sea level and inhale the awe-inspiring panoramic views of snow-capped mountains above the endless folds and peaks of the Andes. We wind down to the Andean valleys, more verdant now and more populated with their schools spilling laughing children onto the streets. We spot roaming herds of llamas and alpacas and the boys point in delight.

We stop in the village of Racqui, where eighty families live from the traditional ceramics and agriculture in the brooding shadows of three dormant volcanos, one hundred kilometres from Cusco. Racqui too is on the Viracocha songline that leads to the Pacific ocean. Here, the volcanic rock and adobe remains of the Temple of Viracocha rise us behind the church of St. Michael on the main square. The square is full of stalls where handicraft is sold by local women wearing their traditional round, flat hats decorated with the cross of the four cardinal directions. We walk past the square along the stone-clad Inca trail to the ruins.

To our left, I see the remains of the ceremonial baths used to purify pilgrims before entering the temple. The source of their icy waters remains a mystery to this day. To my right, a single enormous wall of stone and adobe looms down on me. I try to imagine the large rectangular building with its high walls and thatched roof, streaming with pilgrims and priests. In the wall of the temple, I can make out the outline of the Andean cross, the Chakana of seven levels, representing the seven colours of the rainbow, one of the symbols of Cusco. There was once a statue of Viracocha in this temple, described as a statue of a tall man, with a long beard and a long, flowing tunic and with a lion-like animal on a chain. Like Saint Michael, Viracocha too had control of the wild animal within.

The temple was constructed in honour of Viracocha, by Inca Pachacuti, the 9th of 13 Inca emperors, in the 15th Century, only to be destroyed by the Spanish less than one hundred years later. Pachacuti is known as the talented emperor who reformed and expanded the Inca empire and is still seen as a Peruvian hero today. It was he who greatly expanded the Tahuantinsuyu, the vast Inca empire that expanded in all four directions. Pachacuti was the son of Inca Viracocha, who got his name because of his prophetic visions of the god Viracocha, our Sumé doppelganger, as a bearded man, wearing a long, loose garment.

I follow the boys as they run beyond the temple, where twelve living quarters are built on either side of a path. Twelve living quarters, one for every Inca emperor until the ill-fated thirteenth, Atahualpa. Atahualpa, this thirteenth and last Inca emperor, was kidnapped, mercilessly tricked by the Spanish, forced to receive baptism into the Catholic Church and hanged. If he had refused baptism, he would have been burned alive by the compassionate Christians.

The path between the twelve living quarters is aligned with the rising sun on the summer solstice. The temple may be destroyed, but the sun is never vanquished. In a few days time, this path will be flushed with light again.

## CUSCO — THE NAVEL OF THE INCA WORLD

When Viracocha's son Inti, the sun, created the first two Incas Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, he gave them a golden staff. They were told that the place where the staff sunk into the ground was where they should build their city. This place was Cusco, high up in the Andes, the centre of the Inca empire. Just as Jasuka Rendá in the Amambay hills in Paraguay is the navel of the Guarani world to the east, Cusco in Peru is the navel of the Inca world in the west. It is another station on the Viracocha songline.

Remains of a large adobe wall signal our entrance into Cusco by the south Collasuyu gate. As we reach the outskirts of the city, a large statue of Pachacuti welcomes us. His son Tupa Inca Yupanqui would not have been so pleased to see people coming from the far east of the continent. It was he who had to deal with the Guarani incursions on Inca territory in Lake Titicaca. The attacks on Tiwanaku and later the Inca empire would suggest that the relationship between the Guarani and the cultures to the west was belicose, but that is only half of the story. They

also had meaningful cultural exchanges, beyond the looting of gold and silver. The Guarani's sacred type of corn 'moroché' was the corn used to feed Cusco's army and the Guarani's sacred herb maté that doesn't grow on the high Inca altitudes was used and revered among the Incas, even found in Inca tombs. The word maté itself is even a Quechua rather than a Guarani word. The Incas too appear to have used the Camino de Peabiru eastward to send spies to the land where the sun is born each day, perhaps with intentions of expanding its empire beyond the foothills of the Andes to the east. Intentions that were impeded by the Guarani warriors and perhaps cut short by the sudden arrival of an even more ambitious empire, the Spanish.

The Guarani in turn adapted the Inca's potato to the lowlands, including it in their traditional diet under the name mbagueró and they used the Inca's long path from east to west, the Hatun Ñan to make their incursions into the west. When not attacking their territories, the Guarani idolised the Candires in the West with their precious metals of gold and silver. The apiká or flying boat that brings you to Yvy Marã Ey is said to be covered in gold and silver.

The Guarani and Inca cultures both adored the sun, linked to the mythical figures of Sumé and Viracocha and the sacred symbols of felines and snakes. However, there is no recorded Guarani attack on the Inca empire at Cusco. The Guarani trips to the Pacific ocean, specifically northern Chile, are dated to an earlier time of around the 6th Century. It seems that the Inca empire cut the Guarani off from the end of their world, where the sun hides itself every day.

We arrive in Cusco, which was built in the shape of a puma, with the Inca fort of sacsayhuman at its head. I rent a car and head straight to the airport to collect Tahmid and Eoin, who are arriving from Brazil. When they arrive, two year old Eoin toddles towards me and I swoop him up into my arms and kiss him repeatedly. Together, the five of us go into the centre of Cusco to explore its sacred heart — Coricancha, the golden temple. During the time of the Inca empire, there were five temples draped in gold and silver within Coricancha, honouring the sacred elements of nature — the sun, the moon, the stars, the rain and the rainbow. The windows of the temples are each aligned with the sun at a solstice or the equinoxes. It was here that the revered mummies of the Inca emperors sat on golden thrones. It is also from here that the ceques, 42 ritual pathways or energy lines, radiated from Cusco's core to link with 328 sacred shrines or huacas in the

surrounding areas. The floor of Coricancha was covered in sand from the shores of the Pacific ocean in reverence to Viracocha, who left the continent walking on this ocean.

To enter this sacred place, a pilgrim in Inca times had to be barefoot, fasting and carrying a weight on her back in a sign of humility. I try to arrive with humility in my heart. The feeling I encounter however, more than any other, is one of shame as a European.

The Spanish destroyed much of Coricancha and built the church and convent of Santo Domingo on top of its remains. Most of the Inca mummies were incinerated, though some were smuggled out and brought to Vilcabamba, the secret site of the resistance against the Spanish in the 16th Century. To this day, Juan Pizarro, the half-brother of the infamous conquistador of Peru, Francisco Pizarro, is buried here.

Earthquakes destroyed parts of the convent and church over the last five hundred years, but the anti-seismic remains of the Coricancha did not falter. The superimposed falls away easily, the spiritual essence stands firm. Part of the black rounded wall of the Coricancha's sun temple stands polished and resolute, its huge stone protruding from under the brown walls of the Santo Domingo church, proclaiming still the grandeur of Inti, the Sun God.

I walk through the garden at Coricancha, with the boys running ahead of me. We descend a slope to a large Christmas manger where a baby Jesus lies next to an incongruous and enormous llama. For a moment, I feel a wave of gratitude that this simple story of humility, of the king born in a stable, has made its way through the millenia to meet me and my children.

The garden is full of fuchsia, like little red bells ringing me into awareness. These same fuchsia were imported to Ireland from South America and lined the St. Brendan's Saint's Road in the southwest of Ireland that I followed with my parents almost eight months earlier at the beginning of my pilgrimage.

Thousands of poor families come on pilgrimage to Cusco from the countryside at Christmas time. At night, they sleep huddled together in colourful



handwoven blankets under the arches of the Plaza de Armas. By day, the women stand hungry in endless queues with babies tied in bright blankets on their backs. They stand outside the Church of Santo Domingo to receive donations of blonde-haired barbies and plastic made-in-China toy cars. They sit for hours outside the Church of Saint Francis to get left-over bits of old clothing.

Cusco is still a place of pilgrimage and the people still arrive barefoot, fasting and carrying burdens on their backs. Now though they are offered material not spiritual sustenance and the streets are strewn with plastic packaging and discarded, broken toys.

#### NATURAL WONDERS OF THE INCAS

The summer solstice beckons us to leave Cusco and enter the sacred valley of the Incas. Surrounded by Apus, the spirits of the mountains, we take the train to Machu Picchu from Ollantaytambo, the charming Inca town, built by Inca Viracocha and still inhabited today. Ollantaytambo also lies on the Viracocha line and is nestled at the base of looming mountains and built of huge polished Inca rocks fitted together in anti-seismic perfection, supporting cobbled-together stonework from colonial times.

I leave Tahmid and the children in a café and go alone to see the llama-shaped Inca ruins. I delight in the chance to discover the ruins in silence and try to connect to the sacred spirit of the place.

I see the great advantages of tourism, offering a safe experience to the tourist and enabling the sustainable care and protection of the site itself, as well as offering a source of income for the local community. I do feel however that when sacred places become tourist destinations, something is lost. In general, the place becomes more a commodity to be consumed by the body and mind than an active experience for the soul.

I walk up along the side of small agricultural terraces, once blossoming with medicinal herbs. At the top of the ruins, I put my hand on a large flat stone, the eye of the llama. Everywhere, there are huge stones with the sharp, precise cuts for which the Incas are renowned, as if a laser cut through them in perfect symmetry. Odd mysterious t-shape holes and rounded hinge-holes are carved into the stones, perhaps to join the stones together in some way. What type of metal could join



such colossal stones? Some believe they were linked together to create a chain of electromagnetic energy, harnessing the invisible rays of the sun, especially at solstices, for healing or spiritual purposes.

Opposite me now, two Inca ruined buildings stand on a huge craggy mountain, one of which was a natural refrigerator used to store Inca corn. The Inca's had such an intimate relationship with the geography of their sacred valley, using every natural advantage in their favour. Between the two ruins, the imposing craggy profile of a bearded face bears down on the town of Ollantaytambo — the face of Viracocha. The creator God, the itinerant civilizer, eternally alive and alert in the landscape. It reminds me of the Guardian stones etched into cliffs and standing on outcrops in the sea and mountain tops in Brazil. Sacred landscapes abound on this continent.

I walk down steps to the Temple of the Sun, where its enormous smooth megaliths bare their chest towards the face of Viracocha on the opposite mountain. These megaliths were brought from an area more than six kilometres away, carried painstakingly over the urubamba river by diverting it ingeniously in times of high water. The temple was not finished in the time of the Inca empire. Spanish conquistadores found megaliths strewn about the valley in the slow and arduous process of being brought to the temple. I pass my hand over the central megalith, where the outline of three Andean crosses, chakanas can still be partially seen protruding from the stone. The sun bears down on me as I sit on the ground in front of the temple and play a song for Viracocha. The music is caught by the megaliths behind me and hurtled up at Viracocha on the mountain in front. High up, way above the brooding face of Viracocha, I can make out the more chiseled profile of an indigenous face — the Guardian. On the winter solstice in June, the sun is said to rise at the top of the head of this Guardian, on his crown chakra, and shine first on the eye of the llama stone and then on the chakana crosses on the Temple of Sun central megalith — nature and man complementing each other in a choreographed dance. It seems that the landscape, all the elements, are in a conversation and that the Incas listened attentively and heard the music of the moment. In this way, they could align their temples and constructions and even contribute to, and enhance, the conversation. How different to us contemporary humans, who not only are misaligned and alienated to the conversation, we are unaware that it is happening.

As I sit there alone, I imagine the golden light of the sun entering my crown chakra and passing through each of my chakras, one by one, cleansing this walking flute. After a moment of delicious, solitary meditation, I stand up to leave the ruins. I pass the fountain sector, where the water continues to pour to this day. I stop by the fountain of the ñusta, which is in the shape of a half-chakana. Water flows in a constant gush from its smooth, polished spout. I look about me to see if there is anybody nearby and then I step over the chord barrier to get closer to the waterflow. I pass my finger lightly across the lip of the spout from left to right. Immediately, the water stops flowing. I have closed some invisible tap. I gasp audibly, before passing my finger quickly from right to left and liberating the flow again. I hurry back behind the chord barrier and leave the ruin complex of Ollantaytambo, mystified.

#### ALIGNMENT

We awaken at 5 a.m. on the summer solstice, 21st of December, in the Wiracocha Inn in Aguas Calientes at the foot of Machu Picchu. We eat our breakfast in a hazy silence, half-sleeping and wrapped up in fleece jackets against the icy cold darkness. I had originally planned to walk the final part of the Machu Picchu Inca trail, which I had walked once before, 14 years earlier with my parents and my sister Úna. They had come to travel with me in Peru at the end of a six month voluntary placement in an orthopaedic clinic in the north of the country. We walked three days of the Inca trail and the experience gave birth to the tapejara, the walking person, in me. Ever since then, walking has become a passion, the activity that leaves me feeling most alive.

This time though, we had decided that it would be too difficult to walk with two year old Eoin to Machu Picchu. 'It's more important to be together,' Tahmid had said and I had agreed, but I can still feel that familiar frustration at the thought of my children restricting my spiritual search. Like the indigenous families who came to Cusco from the countryside, we spend the morning huddled together in unending queues. We queue first at the bus-stop waiting our turn to get the bus up to the old mountain. Light slips stealthily into the sky as we wait. 'So we're going to see the solstice sun rise in the queue for the bus *near* Machu Picchu,' Tahmid jokes.

'The sun has to rise over the mountain in Machu Picchu,' I wink at him,

‘that still won’t happen for a bit longer.’ There are no local people in the queue. They are all in Sacsayhuaman in Cusco, having celebrated the Kapak Raymi festival and the proximity of the sun with a night of fire and music. I imagine them hushed now in reverence, watching the sun rise as I buy a weak coffee in a scalding paper cup at an extortionate price.

The bus drops us off at the entrance for Machu Picchu and we stand in a winding queue once more — a heaving mass of separate individuals on a pilgrimage of tourism and spirit. As we finally make our way to the look-out point over Machu Picchu, I admire the terraced ruins with contentment and I see a line of people by the curved wall of the Temple of the Sun, looking eastward and waiting in silence for the sun to rise over the mountain. How I would love to be there with them, standing in silence, instead of warning the boys in a high-pitched voice about the dangers of the mountain edge.

Ever since the boys were born, the free spirit in me has struggled with moments of frustration at my curbed independence. When Alastair died, the sense of responsibility for the boys was heightened and I felt restricted to follow the urge to walk myself back to wholeness and to more fully follow my spiritual path. I still feel so split between my responsibilities as a mother and my desire to follow a more monastic, more silent path.

The day is miraculously clear. Machu Picchu falls iconic and dazzling in steps down the old mountain, the majestic Huayna Picchu mountain standing guard behind it. Some well-placed llamas kneel on the grass beside us looking nonchalantly down on the Inca’s lost city. Many theories abound, but I am drawn to the theory that Machu Picchu was a sacred Inca site, situated among mountains of spiritual importance and aligned with astronomical movements. Perhaps it was even the home of the sun virgins, the chosen Inca women, as its 20th Century European discoverer, Bingham, suggested.

Our pace is painfully slow as we wind our way to the Temple of the Sun. I am discovering that an adventurous two year old and Machu Picchu do not make a good combination. Perhaps it was as well that the sun virgins took a vow of chastity, as bringing up young children here in Machu Picchu would be no easy task. Eoin runs through the labyrinth of ruins and escapes for a moment out of eye-sight. My heart leaps in fear and I am assailed by the image of him falling down

the Andes, bumping as he goes, terrace by terrace. We alert the security guards and they communicate loudly in walky-talkies. We find him again in minutes, nestled like a sacred idol in an Inca alcove.

We climb up to the Temple of the Sun, its curving semi-circle wall calling out its distinction among this ruin of straight lines and right angles. In the dark shade beneath the Temple of the Sun lies the Temple of Pachamama, mother earth, strewn now with sweets and coca-leaf offerings. The profile of the three angular steps of the Andean cross, the *chakana* are etched into stone at the entrance. These two Temples are two temples in one. They are made out of the same natural block of stone and yet they sing to me of *yanatin*, the ubiquitous duality of the Incas — the male sun and the female earth, the light and the dark, the round and the straight. For the Incas, there is no contradiction. To be whole and harmonious, two complementary and opposite truths must co-exist in one.

I place the boys, one by one, to sit on a stone wall in front of the Temple of the Sun to take a photo. The sun is rising in the east above the mountain behind them. In my line of vision, I see first my three sons, then the temple of the sun and finally the rising solstice sun behind them. Further still, nearly 3000 km away, my home on the island of Florianópolis is in direct alignment with the rising sun.

With Tahmid by my side, I urge the boys to sit still, look at the camera and for God's sake, keep their eyes open. For a tiny instant, they sit perfectly poised and I click the button on the camera. I savour this moment. It strikes me that all is in perfect alignment — my three boys, the sacred sun temple, the rising solstice sun and my everyday world of Florianópolis.

As I stand there, this ideal of a seamless alignment between my spiritual path and my material everyday life blossoms within me. The Guarani have the spiritual at the very centre of their way of life. The spiritual practice is not a time-out from their daily responsibilities. The way they spend their day, work, celebrate and worship is suffused with spirituality. Their pilgrimages along the Caminho de Peabiru often include whole families from children to grandparents. I sense an inner commitment gain sway within me to cultivate more spiritual awareness in my every day life, gradually turning my whole life including minding my children, the dogs, the house — each moment — into a prayer.

## NAZCA — EMBRACING THE WHOLE

The winding death road from the Sacred Valley towards the Pacific takes us three days in our rental car. We intersperse white-knuckle driving with swims in abandoned thermal baths and dusty evening walks around roadside town squares. We swerve to avoid the remnants of rockfalls and hold our breath as swaying tourists buses pass us out on sharp downward bends. Three-wheel indian-style cars put-put up impossible slopes before free-wheeling downhill before us. Long-necked llamas watch us, ears-erect, as we pass. Bent old women with their colourful loads slung over their bent backs, ignore us. Nimble vicuñas rush out of sight as we approach. All the time, the white tips of the Andes drop slowly away in the rear-view mirror. Vast yellow-green pampas stretch out all around us now. Cows and sheep dot the fields of lower lands. The ceramic bulls on the roofs of Andean houses are exchanged for elaborate metal wind-vanes, while political propoganda painted on white washed walls change names from town to town. Like us, sulking dark brown rivers cut through plunging valleys in a frenzied rush to get to the Pacific ocean. Cacti rise up now in clumps, struggling to display their flowers as the air dries out.

We arrive in the parched desert of Nazca, less than 80 kilometres from the Pacific ocean, where incongruous green fertile fields dot the jaundiced landscape, signalling invisible underground water sources. The Guarani recount a myth called the Rebellion of Objects that is painted on the pottery of the Nazca culture. Could it be that these two cultures met during the Guarani's earliest expeditions westward in sometime around the 6th Century? This hint of the Caminho de Peabiru leads me to this spiritual oasis and in the direction of the Pacific ocean, the end of the Guarani world, where the sun hides itself each day.

The 80 kilometre long expanses of reddened desert between Nazca and Palpa are known as the fields of creation. Almost two thousand years ago, the Nazca culture started to carefully move aside the reddish pebbled sand to expose the grayish-white sand beneath, thus creating hundreds of shallow straight lines that stretch for kilometres, like the sacred ceques or energy lines from Coricancha made visible. We go to the top of a hill of sand to see the lines for ourselves. It is early afternoon and three small whirlwinds can be seen on the horizon. The lines are swept clean daily by the wind and the lack of rain has preserved these sacred

geoglyphs over millenia. I shelter from the wind, against Tahmid's back, to play the tin whistle.

Many Nazcan lines lead like ritual labyrinths to hill tops or to geometric figures including a plethora of spirals. Throughout this Caminho de Peabiru, from the Saint's Road in southwest Ireland to here in the southwest of Peru, the sun symbol of the spiral and concentric circle has accompanied me faithfully.

Many of the 70 ancient Nazcan geoglyphs can only be seen from the air and they were only discovered in modern times when the first airplanes started to fly over the area eighty years ago. Perhaps like the sun symbol at the top of Samaipata in Bolivia, they were created for the sun god to see as he passes daily overhead. Even the engineering experts building the Panamerican Highway with their 20th Century technology failed to notice the huge lizard geoglyph beneath their feet and unwittingly cut it in half.

We take a small 6-man plane from Nazca airport, which shudders and shakes as it takes off and soars across the Nazca desert. I press my face against the small round window of the plane and point out the huge symbols to Liam. Liam gasps in delight as he makes out the form of a huge dog standing straight-legged in the vast, empty desert. Now, we can see a giant nine-fingered monkey with a swirling tail and we shudder playfully at the sight of a 50 metre-long spider crawling across the sand. On the side of a low brown-red hill, a human figure thirty metres high faces south, his hand held up for millennia waiting to wave at us. Liam waves back, laughing. Trapezoids stretch out for more than a kilometre, like prehistoric airplane or UFO landing fields as some suggest. Perhaps the lines are ritual offerings used to coax rain from the heavens to quench the deathly thirst of this parched desert. Ironically, as weather patterns change in our frenzied pollution of the planet, more rain is falling on the Nazca desert, endangering the very lines that perhaps beseeched it to fall.

The etched landscape below us is like a giant blackboard, carefully lined and decorated with endless conundrums. The last figure we see on our flight is the one I have been waiting for — my companion all along the Caminho de Peabiru from Brazil — the hummingbird. We fly above the hummingbird geoglyph, the six curves of its wings spread out as if in mid-flight, its stretched beak sucking the nectar from a row of lines aligned to the rising sun at the summer solstice.



While we watched the sun rise over the Temple of the Sun in Machu Picchu, just a week ago, it was rising in alignment with these lines also. It delights me that this tiny flitting bird is represented by a geoglyph almost 100 metres long, hinting at its importance for the cultures of the Nazca, the Inca, the Guarani and also for me. For the Guarani, it was one of the first manifestations of the divine, created before the earth. It is an agile messenger from the god Tupã providing spiritual orientation, protection and calls to action. In the Andean world, the hummingbird represents the upper world, the Hanaq Pacha and a living symbol of the spirit of the sun. It carries messages from the mountain spirits, the Apus. As we fly overhead, I offer the hummingbird thanks for its companionship along the Caminho de Peabiru.

That afternoon, in the desert oasis of our hotel, live hummingbirds flit again around its verdant plants. As night falls, I look up on the clear summer sky and bask under the constellations. One of these is known to the Guarani as the hummingbird constellation, living within the milky way, the home of their gods. A dark spot of the milky way close to the hummingbird constellation is called Nanderu, the sumpreme Guarani god. For the Inca, this dark spot represents the puma, the symbol of wisdom. The Guarani and the Inca cultures are the only cultures among the indigenous American people who gave meaning to both dark and light matter within the Milky Way, using them as well as the stars and planets to create their constellations.

As above, so below. This Caminho de Peabiru is enabling me to open up more to the dark and light matter that make up the whole. I have clung to life and run from death but I realise that they are two sides of the one coin. If I want life, I need to accept death and I can only come to wholeness by turning towards death and the feelings of fear and suffering it evokes. Like a shooting star in the starlight, the thought passes through the sky of my mind that this gentle, gradual turning towards won't kill me as the mind threatens. No, it will not kill me but rather it will lead me towards renewed, expansive life.

#### NAZCA —A PLACE OF HEALING

The full moon is framed by the rising slopes of two dark mountains, creating the perfect backdrop to a Nazcan shaman. Two condor feathers stand erect in his headdress atop his shoulder-length head of pitch-black hair and yellow clothes

decorated with appliques of the sun and the condor. A ceremonial cloth is laid out before him on the sand. A pile of coca-leaves and palo santo strips, together with a pack of open cigarettes are placed carefully on the cloth, next to his musical instruments — a wooden flute, a conch and maracas.

We are sitting inside a circle clearing among the clutter of stones at the energetic centre of Orcona, on the outskirts of Nazca. Tomorrow is New Year's eve and we are celebrating the end of the year and the imminent end of the Caminho de Peabiru. The dusk air is thick with mosquitos and we lather on the repellent, as the shaman prepares the ceremony. Now, he stands up and calls the gaggle of by-standers to join us. He invites us all to close our eyes and I hold tight to Eoin and Liam's hands. I sense the air entering my crown chakra and I breathe through each chakra, one by one and relax into the gentle evening. A loud sound makes me jump, as the shaman blows on the conch. As the sound blends into the night air, he begins the ceremony.

'I call to the Apus, the spirits of the mountain, I call to Viracocha, our creator god, I call to Pachamama, mother earth.' 'Pachamama,' Eoin repeats loudly in a gurgle and the group laughs gently.

The shaman continues. 'In your own heart, give thanks for everything in your life. Ask to take away the negative, the things you no longer need or want.' We stand in silence for a moment, before he picks up some coca leaves and blows them in the four cardinal directions. He walks out of the circle, kneels down and digs a hole in the sand with his hands. 'Take some coca leaves and a cigarette and drop it into the hole, covering it with sand. As you do it, make a request,' he says to us. On cue, Liam takes the coca-leaves and Tom takes the packet of cigarettes and they hand them out to everyone in the small group. We each in turn drop our offerings into the sand, cover it up and say our silent requests. I bury my cigarette and coca leaves. The only prayer or request that comes to me is 'thy will be done.' We stand in a circle around the hole and hold hands — one hand giving energy and the other receiving. Meanwhile the shaman plays his wooden flute. The atmosphere is informal and relaxed, a silent intimacy and well-wishing palpible among this small group of strangers. As we stand there, making our silent prayers, the shaman takes the camera that is hanging from my wrist and snaps several pictures before handing the camera back to me.

Following the shaman's direction, we end the ceremony, holding our arms in the air and shouting out *kaia-kaia-kaia* in good humoured whoops, to the beat of the shaman's maracás. I hug the boys to me and we make our way back to the car together. Despite the full moon, the Orion constellation burns brightly above us, part of the Guarani's Old Man constellation. Orion is a hero from Sumerian mythology, looking over us. His belt was called the *chakana*, the Inca cross, by their astronomers. This constellation was often visible on cold, clear winter nights over my home in Ireland during my childhood, but I never knew its name. I used to look up at the three stars of Orion's belt and the angular curve down to Orion's nebula and see an upside down question-mark — as if God was looking down on us on earth and seeing one giant mystery.

When we get to the car, I sit into the back with the children, while our shaman sits in the front with Tahmid. Tom takes my digital camera from me and flicks through the photos. 'What are these circles?' he asks, holding the camera out to me. On some of the photos that the shaman has taken, there is a glut of white and yellow circles over the group during the ceremony, as if snowflakes had been falling or someone was blowing a huge quantity of bubbles over us during our little ceremony. There was not one drop of rain or snow on this mild evening and certainly no bubble blowing. I hand the camera to the shaman perplexed. He laughs gently. 'I took the photos so you would see for yourselves,' he says matter-of-fact, handing the camera back to me, 'those are the positive spirits that were present in this sacred place as we called upon them for guidance.' I certainly have no scientific explanation for these circular orbs around the group. I sink back into the seat in silence as we drive back to Nazca, with Eoin falling asleep on my lap. My father's oft-repeated Shakespeare recitation comes to mind 'There are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio, than were dreamt of in your philosophies.' It strikes me that my childhood interpretation of the Orion constellation was as accurate as any other: life is one big upside-down question mark. It is indeed a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved.

#### THE END OF THE GUARANI WORLD

We meet up with the Nazcan shaman the next day, early in the afternoon on New Year's eve. We visit his museum just outside Nazca, where he exhibits his personal collection of whale bones and fossils, mummified parrots and condors

crouched in foetal position. The boys look in wonder at the elongated skulls from pre-Inca sacrifice, their eyes and tongue gouged out. 'Aliens?' Tom asks, wide-eyed. 'They elongated the skull with bandages from a young age, when the head's shape could be changed,' I respond. Seeing his look of disappointment, I add, 'but maybe it was done to look like aliens. Who knows?'

Our shaman gives us a private tour around his museum, explaining the artifacts as we go. 'Nazca was a place of healing with its elaborate pyramids at nearby Cahuachi,' our shaman tells us, as he walks us around the museum, 'the word Nazca is associated with the Quechua word for painful, *nanasqa*. People would come from as far as the Amazon jungle to be healed by the shamans here. Did you see the exhibits of the mummified parrots and monkey? The Nasca lines also show the figures of the monkey and the parrot, but neither is native to this climate. They were brought as offerings and payment from the Amazon.' I listen intrigued. Maybe that is how the Guarani myth coincides with stories told on Nazca ceramics. Maybe the Guarani, whose origins are traced back to the Amazon, came in search of healing.

'We still use traditional methods of spiritual healing here,' he tells us, 'have you heard of Wachuma, the San Pedro cactus?' I nod my head, smiling at him. 'I have one of them growing outside, if you would like to see it. It is used to make a traditional shamanic brew, which can cleanse and heal you and give you spiritual visions. It is called San Pedro, St. Peter, because it is seen as the key to heaven. The Nazcans drank it when they were creating the figures on the pebbled fields of creation here.'

As Tahmid wanders off to the next exhibit with the children, he beckons me out of the museum and into a little courtyard, where a solitary cactus plant stands tall, dotted with several red bulbous shoots. The shaman and I stand there side by side, admiring the cactus. 'This cactus is central to our spirituality. It needs to be tended. Our doctrine is alive. New experiences are available at every moment.' He touches the cactus with reverence for a moment before adding, 'I have some San Pedro cooked if you would like to try some.' He goes into an adjacent house and comes back to join me with a jug and a glass in his hands. 'I will give you just a little bit, to cleanse you.' He pours us both a glass and I drink mine down in one bitter gulp.

We return to our little group in the museum, where Eoin has picked up a reddish-orange shell and is examining it in his hand. It looks like a large scallop shell, though thicker and with spikes along its surface. ‘That is a spondylous shell,’ our shaman explains us, ‘it is called the food of the gods. It was a sacred Inca and pre-Inca shell. It is found mostly to the north along the Pacific Ocean. The shell is used to make beautiful jewellery.’ Eoin hands the shell to me and I turn it over in my hand and smile at it contentedly. ‘Well done Eoin,’ I smile at him, ‘you have found our Peabiru shell. In Spain on the Camino de Santiago, they use the symbol of the Scallop Shell to show that the pilgrim has arrived at the ocean, at Finisterre, the end of the world and has come to the end of the pilgrimage. This is our Peabiru version.’

‘Ah,’ the shaman says with shining eyes, ‘so is this the end of your pilgrimage?’

I shake my head. ‘It ends at the Pacific ocean, the end of the Guarani world to the West. They arrived at the ocean some time around the 6th Century,’ I explain, ‘we hoped to get there before the end of the year, but our pace has slowed down with the three children in tow. We should make our way there in the next couple of days.’

‘You know,’ he says, calmly watching everything fall into place, ‘I need to get to the seaside village of Lomas to my daughter’s house this evening to celebrate the New Year with my grandchildren. It is only about an hour and a half’s drive away. Seeing as you have a rented car, how about you drive me there and you can see the Pacific ocean before your year ends.’

I smile in delight. ‘We would love to,’ I say to the shaman, ‘that would be just perfect.’

We bundle the children into the car and I sit into the back with them. We drive through the scorched and arid Nazcan desert, the sand splitting into a dance of ambers, auburns and ochre. The desert is on fire. The children babble nonstop, moving from laughter to irate shouting and back to laughter again without catching their breath. I sit among the children, internally silent. Their belicose chatter seem as unperturbing and pleasant as birdsong.

Suddenly a police siren hushes the children into an uneasy silence. Tahmid

curses under his breath and stops the car. A policeman saunters towards us, peering in the window at this car of gringos, driving through the desert late in the afternoon on New Year's eve, with an indigenous man in full shamanic dress in the passenger seat. He looks at us for what seems like an eternity, making up his mind. I smile at him, carefully watching his movements. A doubt begins to surface in my mind — maybe we were too ambitious to try and reach the Pacific before the year's end. I let the thought blow unfettered through me and return my focus to the divine breath blowing through me, chakra by chakra.

'You have no lights on,' the policeman says finally to Tahmid, 'in Peru, when you are outside of a city, even in the daylight, you always need to have your lights on.' 'Sorry officer,' Tahmid replies effusively, dutifully turning on the lights. Everyone waits with bated breath for the policeman's response. He peers once more in at us and I smile widely at him. He straightens up and hits the base of the window. 'Keep your lights on from now on,' he says, signalling for us to drive on, 'and have a good New Year.' Tahmid carefully indicates and pulls away from the curb. The whole car heaves a communal sigh of relief. The shaman smiles, settles deeper into his seat, closes his eyes and sleeps all the way to the coast.

The sun is just beginning to set on New Year's Eve, when we drop the shaman off at his daughter's house. We hug goodbye tightly, savouring the sense of intimacy between us, that belies our short time together. Then, we rush down to the beach, to greet the Pacific ocean. The air is deliciously warm and caressing against the skin. The sand is soft and inviting as we kick off our sandals. As one, we jump in the air and land on the sand with a hoo, the Guarani ritual of arriving at our destination — the end of their Guarani world.

The sky is unleashing an orchestra of colour around us, as we wade ankle-deep into the Pacific ocean. I imagine Viracocha walking on the water of the Pacific and disappearing into the unknown before us, just as Sumé arrived from the unknown, walking on the water in the Atlantic to the east. Before us, rows of white-edged waves gather themselves before crashing with a thump and hiss along the shore — the foam of the sea — from which Viracocha got his name. I have managed to follow in the footsteps of this mysterious and revered figure from almost 10,000 kilometres away in Ireland, where another possible Sumé, St. Brendan launched his simple rowboat boat into the wild Atlantic ocean.



The sun radiates out in an ardent golden orb, framed by layers of red and pink that fall into the sea, expanding along its surface in a kaleidoscope of colours. The light dances on us too, embracing us in its ecstasy. A glut of perfectly-formed polished shells litter the shoreline and the boys dart out from the water with whoops of delight, gathering them up. Our bare feet sink into the cooling sand as I ignite sparklers for the boys that they wave about energetically amid peels of laughter. They draw spirals in the air that hang suspended for a moment, before melting back into the fading light.



Rachi, Peru, December 2012.



Cusco, Peru, December 2012.



Machu Picchu, Peru, December de 2012.



Sun Temple, Ollantaytambo, Peru, December 2012.



Sun Temple, Ollantaytambo, Peru, December 2012.





Nazca, Peru, December 2012.



Nazca, Peru, December 2012.



Lomas, Peru, 31 de December 2012. Arrival at the Pacific Ocean.





## AFTERWORD

### THE GOLDEN TRIBE

It took eight months, on and off, to follow in the footsteps of an Irish, Guarani and Andean Sumé along the Caminho de Peabiru. In all, I travelled 10,000 kms beginning in the southwest of Ireland and crossing South America from the Atlantic to the Pacific ocean on a journey by foot, car, bus, train and plane. It has taken many years for the Caminho de Peabiru to make the much greater distance from my head to my heart and finally into this finished book.

Soon after arriving on the Pacific Coast, we took a plane home, soaring above the Caminho de Peabiru in the correct direction for a Guarani spiritual pilgrimage, from west to east.

In December 2019, I find myself on the Brazilian coast in the seaside town of Itapema, where Sumé or São Tomé's footprint slowly erodes into oblivion on a rock at the edge of the Atlantic ocean. I am doing a workshop in Family Constellation, a therapeutic approach developed by the German therapist Bert Hellinger. Through this approach, representatives of any system – family, organizational, political – enter into a morphological camp of energy and follow their impulses, expressing unconscious feelings and motives through their movements and words. It is an approach that I have found transformative and illuminating.

Our trainer, M, is a modern-day shaman as well as a facilitator of family constellations and we have talked on and off about my experience along the Caminho de Peabiru. She has been doing constellations of towns in other parts of Brazil. She, like myself, has recognized the volcano of unaddressed atrocities upon which modern Brazil has been built.

We are in a sitting room in a small house near the ocean at Itapema. The day is hot and the low hum of an airconditioner brings some relief to the group of 9 people that sit on sofas and comfortable chairs around an open space in the middle of the room.

I am surprised when M invites me to sit in a chair by her side and to help her to constellate this Peabiru town of Itapema. I sit in the chair next to her in front of the group of Brazilians, slightly ill at ease. 'I am the last one to arrive,' I insist, 'the newest Brazilian resident among the group.' 'Yes,' M agrees, 'but you know more about the history of this coastline than any of the rest of us. Even those of us who were born here.' She invites me to tell the group what I know about Itapema and this coast in general. I breathe deeply and begin my tale.

I tell them about the indigenous Guarani that lived here before the Azorian Portuguese and who gave this place its name Itapema.

I tell them about Sumé, the spiritual guide of the Guarani, whose footprint adorns a rock at the edge of the sea here and who is revered to this day by the Guarani for opening up the Caminho de Peabiru and teaching them to plant their sacred crops like the erva maté or caá. One of the participants F is passing around a chimarrao as I speak, which is filled with a perfect mound of maté and a sprig of mint. I point to the chimarrão. 'This ritual of sharing the chimarrão is also a Guarani tradition,' I tell them. F gasps, 'I have been drinking chimarrão all my life and I never knew that.'

I tell them how Sumé was equated with St. Thomas by the first Christians that arrived in the 16th Century and even for many today. I tell them about the mysterious milenial rock art and lithic workshops that dot the 140 kms from here down to Ibiraquera to the south.

I tell them how so much of the Guarani culture has been integrated into the Azorian way of life here on the coast, with their tarrafá fishing nets, their canoes made from the garapuvu tree, the traditional basket weaving and the cultivation of the mandioc root. The Azorians are even called 'the natives' here. I tell them about the Guarani and the Right Whales and how they were attacked and massacred and how both Guarani and the Whales are slowly, with difficulty, returning to their ancestral landscapes.

‘Who do we need to represent in the constellation?’ M asks as I finish speaking. One by one, I call out groups that need to be represented and M points to members in the group to step into the constellation. ‘The Guarani,’ I begin, and F is chosen to enter. ‘Let’s include the Kaingang too,’ M says, ‘the other main indigenous people of the South of Brazil.’ ‘Yes,’ I reply, ‘they are the tribe that were indigenous to the Iguacu Falls, where the Caminho de Peabiru passes.’ Another woman enters to represent the Kaingang. ‘Sumé, Azorians, the Jesuits, the Bandeirantes,’ I list off and M points to representatives who join the constellation. ‘Anyone else?’ M asks. ‘Nhandecy, the earth,’ I add and the final member of the group enters the constellation.

For a moment, all of the representatives stand in the middle of the room, eyes open, centring themselves. M gives them a moment and then invites them to follow their impulses.

The representative for the Kaingang immediately falls to her knees and scurries away in hiding. The representative for the Guarani falls to her knees too and begins to wail uncontrollably. She falls near the chair where I am sitting and I begin to sob deeply, feeling all of the pain I experienced for the Guarani along the Caminho de Peabiru. Sumé stands near the Guarani, arms outstretched, protective. The representative for the Azorians kneels by the side of the Guarani, stroking the representatives back, visibly moved and identified with her pain.

The representative for the Bandeirantes is a tall, strong man and his eyes fill with anger and aggression. He grabs the foot of the Guarani and tries to chase the representative of the Kaingang. He tries to grab onto the representative for Nhandecy and to push her down to the ground. Nhandecy stands tall and erect, warding off his advances calmly. The representative for the Jesuits tries to gain space and then starts to try and control and connect the disparate parts, by grabbing at the others’ wrists and ankles. At times she links with the Bandeirantes representative and at times she tries to restrain him. The Bandeirante representative shakes her off. The Bandeirantes and the Guarani wailing on the floor are the points of greatest emotion and energy in the constellation.

M pulls me out from my seat and out of the energetic pull of the Guarani’s pain and I take a more distant stance. For several minutes, we watch the struggle that unfolds. The Bandeirantes take centre-stage, grabbing at the wailing Guarani

and chasing the petrified Kaingang. The Azorians stay close to the Guarani, frightened, unsure of what to do. The Jesuits try in vain to control and restrain the force of the Bandeirantes and to connect everyone. Sumé, arms outheld, grabs a cup of water and sprinkles water from a cup on the others, trying to pacify, anoint and heal. Nhandecy stands on the periphery, exuding inner calm amidst the chaos.

Slowly, very slowly, the Guarani and Kaingang approach Nhandecy and find shelter and protection. The Bandeirante now falls to the floor and writhes in an angry despair. The representative for Sumé takes a large necklace with a turquoise stone from her neck and offers it to the now gently sobbing Guarani, who is standing supported by Nhandecy. The Azorians look on at the periphery, lost. The Jesuit representative too seems lost as her efforts to connect the others appear to be in vain.

M now asks me to enter the constellation as a representative for Brazil. As I enter, I find myself still drawn to the pain of the indigenous, but I quickly realize that all of these disparate parts are my children. The Guarani and Kaingang are my children, beaten, oppressed and massacred. The Jesuits are my children, seeking their own space, seeking to control and to appease. The Azorians are my children, lost, identified with the Guarani pain. The representative for the Bandeirantes, lying prostrate and weeping on the floor now, is also my child. Deep within me, the truth resounds that Tom, Liam, Eoin and I, the newest wave of European colonialism, also have our rightful place and home in this modern Brazil. I kneel down and I caress the Bandeirante representative's hair. I feel towards him as I would towards a child who has been naughty and can't seem to help himself. It strikes me that in one way, his lot is the worse as the aggressor in the story. There is so much inner turmoil, so much buried self-hatred, so much anger. He too is but a child, obeying some inner unconscious script. I realize clearly that the Bandeirantes continue in their rage even today and returned in 2019 to an overt position of power in Brazilian politics. I realize that for me, Brazil, to achieve some semblance of peace, all of my children need to be included and united.

I look towards Nhandecy and bow to her. Nhandecy exudes serenity. I slowly gather all of Brazil's children together. I bring the Jesuits to join with Nhandecy and the indigenous. I bring Sumé and the Azorians too into the fold. In the middle of the forming circle, the representative for the Bandeirantes lies, writhing still but

quieter now. With the help of the Azorian representative, I eventually raise the Bandeirante representative to his feet. He can't seem to find a place in the circle. The Guarani silently offers out her hand. The bandeirante representative lets out a wail and takes her hand, standing next to her. All of us now are united in the circle.

After several minutes united as a complete circle, M invites the other representatives to bow in reverence to me, Brazil, and she puts the national anthem to play on the speaker. The energy within the group vibrates palpably.

As the constellation comes to an end, we hug together tightly, all of us exhausted, allowing the energy to slowly soften into the midday air.

Stepping out of our representations, we begin to share our experience of the constellation. 'I had so much pain to release,' says the representative for the Guarani, her voice still slightly breathless.

'Yes,' I nodded and the other representatives nodded in unison, 'I felt it; searing, seemingly boundless pain. What helped you overcome it?'

She exhales audibly, 'expressing it helped and having it witnessed soothed me. I got strength by the Azorians and all around bearing my suffering with me, not solving it but somehow feeling some of my pain and I was helped by coming closer to Nhandecy, to the earth, nestling in Nhandecy's arms.' She nestles in under Nhandecy's arm again as she talks. 'Sumé gave me this and that strengthened me too.' She opens her hand and lets the necklace with its turquoise stone dangle in the middle of the group. The Bandeirante representative chimes in - 'that turquoise stone moved something deeply in me,' he began, 'for most of the time, I felt so much rage and hatred. I had to consciously restrain myself, as I wanted to rip the Guarani, the Kaingang, the Jesuits, everyone apart. I wanted to shove Nhandecy down into submission.' As he speaks, his body shakes slightly. 'Then came a remorse, a wailing and I dropped to the floor. I thought I would never stand and enter the circle.' 'What made you move?' M asks. 'It was a mixture of the Guarani's outstretched hand and that stone she held. That stone made me think of the earth. As if some day we can unite together to protect the earth.'

I am seaped in emotion as they speak. In this hour-long constellation, I have relived the story of the Guarani that was at the core of my experience as a Walking Flute along the Caminho de Peabiru. Standing huddled still in the group, a Guarani myth comes strongly to mind and I share it with them.

‘The first man and woman, Tupã-mirim and Mavutzinim, had two sons who ruled the first tribe. The younger brother wanted to see the other side of the world, so he crossed the river with half of the tribe and disappeared in the forest. The older brother stayed where he was, living in the traditional way until one day he dreamed that his younger brother would return. When his younger brother came back, he didn’t recognise his tribe of origin. His older brother welcomed him with open arms, but the younger brother didn’t know who he was him and killed him. The younger brother then ruled the tribe, rife with conflict until an old woman had a dream. She dreamt that when the younger brother crossed the river, his group seperated into three tribes, the white, the black and the yellow. The red tribe stayed behind with the older brother. These are the four colours on the Guarani cross, the four directions that I followed on my Caminho de Peabiru, the four breaths of Nhandecy, the great mother. At the zenith is Nhandecy herself. When the four tribes met again, there was at first conflict and despair for a time, but afterwards, a new peaceful tribe is prophesized to emerge, a golden tribe.’

We stand there in the centre of the room, a tiny handful of the golden tribe, exhausted and elated, swaying gently and holding eachother close.

After a few moments pass, the representative for Nhandecy speaks in a calm, centred voice. ‘From the perspective of Nhandecy,’ the representative begins, ‘I felt the violence of the bandeirantes as they tried to subdue me, the Jesuit efforts to control me, the Guarani and Kaingang as they sought shelter in me. I did not ignore what was happening, I did not close my eyes to it or turn from it. I responded to each demand naturally, resolutely. I witnessed the past, present and future of this story of violence against the indigenous, then the remorse of the Bandeirantes and then eventually their redemption and how the group finally came together as a united, transformed Brazil. All the time, though, all the time, I felt an unshakeable sense of calm and a deep, unflinching love for all around me. The whole saga seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. It all unfolded as it must. Each element acting out its own portion of the collective destiny. I felt totally at peace with everything and moved little and always from this place of great peace and love.’

Nhandecy’s words find a place deep within me.

Following the Caminho de Peabiru in the footsteps of an Irish, Guarani and



Andean Sumé, I awoke to the beauty of the Guaraní and of Nhandecy that I had been largely blind to as I sleepwalked through my busy life. Brazil's history and continuing story of oppression of the indigenous and its destruction of its land broke my mortal heart as I moved deeper into the heart of the continent.

It broke my heart on a collective level, as the sudden death of my husband Alastair broke my heart on a personal level, leaving me tender, vulnerable, desperate. The Caminho de Peabiru led me towards Potosí, where deep in a mine, I came face to face with Satay and stared death and my fears squarely in the face. I found that moving beyond my fears and deep feelings of suffering comes from facing them, not from denying or escaping them. Thus began a deeper level of healing within me. In the same way, we modern Brazilians need to face the atrocities that we are part of through our actions and our choice of government. We need to awaken from our blind stupor and ignorance, finally see the beauty of the indigenous within and around us and the ongoing struggle for justice. Only then can we begin to move in the direction of redemption.

All the while as I followed the Caminho de Peabiru, Nhandecy looked on, eternally Present, responding naturally to all about her while accepting everything - totally centred and calm. Even though nothing about her was ok, everything was ok. Again and again along the pilgrimage, I nestled in Nhandecy's embrace; by the sea, next to engraved rocks, around fires, at waterfalls, on mountaintops, in caves, by lakes, in the rays of the sun, surrounded by stars and basking in the moonlight. These moments brought me into Nhandecy's perspective, into the unshakeable peace of wild things, the unbeatable lightness of being - aguyje.

The Guaraní perspective is so much closer to Nhandecy's perspective than that of my European conditioning. The Caminho de Peabiru strengthened this Nhandecy perspective in me – a less judgmental, more inclusive of the light and dark, a more accepting way of looking at the continually changing and transient events of outer life. Nhandecy inspires a more patient, expanded relationship with time and a more unified relationship with all around me.

## AN OUTSTRETCHED HAND

After the constellation on the Caminho de Peabiru, I to back to the tekoá in M'Biguaçu, but this time at night. I go simply to spend some time with the Guarani in their opy. Regularly the members of this community come together for the jeroky, the dance around the fire, singing their sacred songs, their Pora Hei. Once a month they welcome us Juruá to join them. During much of the five hundred years of colonialism, they kept their spiritual rituals secret but recently they are opening their sacred spaces to the Juruá and have begun to share their most precious treasure, their spirituality, with others. Tahmid and I arrive when it is already nightfall and we go straight to the large, circular mud and wattle opy. There is a crowd there, gathered around the fire. We walk past the women, huddled to one side of the opy, eyes to the floor. They appear so small and meek as I pass. The Guarani men are more forthcoming and help us find a place for our blankets and we soon settle down.

Wherá Tupã leads the rituals with the petangua, blowing smoke on those who need a cure. The men sing their Pora Hei, their sacred songs and dance their Jeroky. They say that the seven notes of each body, each walking flute, are liberated by the movement of the dance and all the while the earth too is blessed, revitalised. I can't understand the songs but I know that some of them are full of reference to Peabiru and to their paradise, Yvy Marã Ey. Several Guarani children sing along, learning and living the songs and myths of their ancestors. I am so grateful to be getting this glimpse into the Guarani ñande reko, their way of life, their constant pilgrimage to gain lightness or aguyje, a state of grace.

At the darkest, quietest point of the night, most people are asleep and the women are called up to dance and sing. I am the only juruá woman to stand up and move towards the group. I am a head taller than all the Guarani women, each of whom has a long, bamboo rhythmstick in her hand. I stand behind them, at a slight distance, unsure. The Guarani men begin to sing in low voices to the beat of their mbaraka-miri rattles and the steady beat of a drum. The women's bamboo rhythm sticks keep perfect time. Just then, one woman reaches out her hand and I step forward into the circle. Her gesture makes my heart explode with humility and gratitude and I begin to softly cry. Slowly my juruá body starts to fall into rhythm with their movements and we dance together, moving as one from foot

to foot, vitalising the dirt floor beneath us and opening the silent space within. Suddenly, all the women begin to sing through the musty air. The sound jolts me to full alertness. They assert their strong, trilling voices in a razorsharp harmony onto the men's steady low-tone beat. The visceral strength in their voices calls to me. There is nothing meek about these women whatsoever. I try to vocalize the sounds, hesitant and now more confident, until the strong, rasping sounds sing in me, sing through me as well.

INDIGENOUS TERMS

- Juruá – Non-indigenous person or people  
Oguatá Porã – Have a good walk/pilgrimage  
Petangua – pipe  
Tekoá – place to practice the Guaraní way of living  
Ñande Reko – Guaraní way of living  
Yvy Marã Ey – Land without Evil  
Pajé – indigenous shaman or priest  
Kurusu – cross  
Tapejara – a walking people  
Popyguá – amulet/protection for a journey  
Tembetá – stick stuck through the lower lip as part of the ritual of becoming a Guaraní man  
Aguyje – lightness of being  
Aguyjevete – thank you or literally may everyone and everything be enlightened  
Ayahuasca – chord of the spirit, a natural hallucogenic used in spiritual ritual  
Maté – a herb for tea, a quéchua word used in Brazil  
Ca'á – maté tea  
Opy – a prayer house  
Jeroky – sacred dance of the Guaraní  
Pora Hei – sacred songs of the Guaraní

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