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Feeling for Stones
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Meeting Pablo Neruda

In early January 2002, I was attending a business strategy meeting in Buenos Aires to discuss the future of Latin America for the next 20 years. Everyone attending had been asked to bring an object that expressed his or her hunch about the long term future of the region. Unfortunately, in the rush of my departure I forgot to pack the object I wanted to share: two dolls I had bought in Chiapas, Mexico, just before the Zapatista uprising of 1994. The dolls are Zapatista rebels dressed in homespun black wool with black balaclava hoods over their faces. Both dolls carry small wooden machine guns, but the man has a rucksack on his back and the woman is carrying a baby. When I bought them, I was told they represented the leader of the rebellion, Subcommandante Marcos, and his wife, Ramona. They were, and are, a playful reminder of the persistent political pressure coming out of Chiapas where the indigenous people of that region are demanding a new set of rules.

But I had forgotten to bring the dolls to Buenos Aires and explored the downtown streets of the city wondering what I could possibly share the next day. At the end of the afternoon, more than a little footsore and tired, I found myself walking near the river where a number of old warehouses had been recently converted to expensive flats, restaurants and offices. As I turned to walk back to the hotel, I noticed a small stag-horned beetle crossing the pavement in front of me. I had never seen one before, although I had read of their decline in London. I pulled a clean paper handkerchief out of my pocket and scooped up the beetle which promptly resisted arrest by chewing his way through the tissue. I hurried to a nearby rubbish bin where I found two white plastic cups, still sticky with a sweet drink of some kind. I put the beetle and his handkerchief inside one cup and covered the opening with the other. As I walked back to the hotel, I gave the beetle a name, Godfrey the Decomposer, a vital force in the survival of the world.

Once in the hotel I sprinkled the paper handkerchief with water, taped the two cups together with some bandaging I had in my bag, and put the whole confection in the bathroom for the night. Each time I woke, I could hear this small creature scratching to get out of his

white plastic cage, but he was not released until the next evening, after he had appeared as the first object in a lecture on ecology and change.

The lecture came at the end of a long afternoon of reports covering other business in the company. Throughout the afternoon, Godfrey's cage stood in front of me on the table, but he was worryingly quiet inside the two misshapen cups covered with bandaging tape. As I began my short lecture, I feared he had died of his captivity. "This is my object," I said, "but I do not know if it is still alive." As I peeled off the bandage, layer by layer, and pulled the two cups apart I found that the whole white paper handkerchief in which Godfrey had been captured had become a filigree of soft paper fragments: a perfect model of decomposition. As I lifted out the filigree on which the stag beetle was crawling, I introduced my guest: "This," I said, "is Godfrey, the Decomposer." I quoted a basic ecology textbook which describes a number of ecological principles, one of which says that all life can be categorised as producers, consumers or decomposers. "Godfrey is a Decomposer," I announced. "Without Godfrey and his kind, we might all remain in our own waste forever. The world needs Godfreys. But Godfrey has no economic value. There is no price signal to ensure Godfrey will survive."

In fact, there was more to Godfrey than his role as a decomposer. He also symbolized the fact that Latin America has some of the greatest biodiversity in the world. However, much of what is known to mankind about this biological variety is carried in the marginalised cultures and languages of conquered non-industrialised peoples whose habits, vocabularies and syntax reflect the natural world around them and their use of it. But just as there is no price signal to ensure Godfrey's survival, there are few social, political or economic rules that ensure the survival of these communities with their localised knowledge. Instead, most of today's rules conspire to reduce variety, to assimilate and transform. At worst, they exclude or destroy any group that is too different to slip easily into the modern world. Which is why the rhetoric of the Chiapas rebels is not one of inclusion, but a demand for respect and the right to govern their lives and territories in their own way. "The purpose of the organisation is not to seize power ... rather it is to create a space in which people can define their own power."

Such voices are tiny. They seem naive and insignificant, irrelevant at a time when the rules and institutions of today's world have a great modernizing project in mind. But are they really irrelevant? Can we afford to accelerate the destruction of peoples and places that are different? Is it wise to destroy those who may understand the life of complex ecosystems

which the rest of us have never known or long since forgotten? Can we risk the loss of anyone's working knowledge of ecological principles that are as immutable as the laws of physics, but precariously unpredictable in their timing? Do we really believe that economic institutions first designed to help Europeans escape the shortages of their own lands can meet the environmental challenges we face today? I doubt it. But if we need to accept that the knowledge of the marginal peoples of Chiapas and elsewhere in the world has a usefulness not understood before, how will their voices be raised? And how might the larger world learn to listen to these powerless inhabitants of a vanishing world?

The meeting in Buenos Aires was the continuation of a process begun the previous year in Santiago de Chile when the same company's country chairmen had met to talk about emerging issues in the region. Before joining that meeting, I spent a week travelling south from Santiago hoping to restore my Spanish and to see what lay beyond the capital city. I was also looking for any evidence of indigenous knowledge that respected the demands of local ecosystems more sustainably than our own industrial assumptions. If such knowledge existed, where was it? Did it survive in isolation or might I find signs of a new neighbourliness where different worldviews were jointly creating a modern society that supported, rather than controlled, the natural world?

With these questions in mind, I took a bus to Temuco, described in the guidebook as the "metropolis of indigenous Chile". The town had first grown up after 1881 when the local Mapuche people signed a treaty with the Chilean government that ended two centuries of Mapuche resistance and opened the southern lands to Chilean settlers. With only a week to wander, it was an easy place to begin.

My bus ride to Temuco did not go well. I had eaten something the day before and was repeatedly sick, with an intense and unrelenting headache. I watched as much as I could, closed my eyes when I needed to, and emptied my belly at every bus station, or at the back of the bus when the microbes would not wait any longer. I arrived in town feeling pale and shaky, taking a taxi straight to the Hotel Continental where I had booked a room. The hotel was clean and freshly painted, but had not substantially changed since the first half of the 20th century. My room on the ground floor had a long tall window with wooden shutters. It was a wooden room – the narrow panels on the walls, the floorboards and the comfortable old-fashioned furniture were all made of wood. Spanish in its proportions and design, more than anything else the hotel reminded me of an old Adirondack mountain resort to the north of New York City. I put my bags down and went out to the chemist for some medicine, then

returned to go to bed. As I laid out my books on the dresser in front of the window I thought how easy it would be for someone to break a window pane and steal my things. As I prefer to sleep with the shutters open, I moved my bags out of sight and then went to bed, exhausted.

I slept the convalescent sleep of someone throwing off an infection: sometimes deep, sometimes half-delirious and intermittently wakeful. A few hours before dawn, in one of those moments of surfacing from the narcosis of sleep, I heard a scratching at the window. Through the net curtains I could see, myopically, the form of a small man testing the window to see if it would open. "It is some poor Indian," I thought. I remembered the hungry Indians I had seen in Chiapas in 1994 and wondered whether the indigenous peoples of Temuco were treated with the same violent scorn I had heard from my hotel landlady in San Cristobal de las Casas. More than anything else, however, every cell in my body wanted to go back to sleep, to deny this trouble in hopes it would leave me alone.

I listened to the continued scratching for a few minutes more, then rose, walked over to the window and tapped firmly on the pane. The man ran off and I went back to bed, thinking that he would now try another window and that I should tell the management what was happening. My door was close to the reception, but as I listened the halls outside were soundless with the amnesias of night and I did not want to stir up the hatred I had encountered in the Chiapas mountains. As sleep and argument competed in my brain, I heard a window smash somewhere behind me, three or four rooms along from mine. I woke up again, then drifted back to sleep, deciding that I would first test the temper of the town before saying anything about what had occurred.

The next morning, I left the hotel to walk around, partly looking for any clues to how the European and indigenous populations lived together in this part of the world. The centre of town was a simple European place: squares, cafes and shops selling clothes, tapes and CDs. I found a travel agent, several pharmacies and cafes, as well as two or three shops for photo processing. There was all the ephemera of modern material life without the hypermarkets and malls. I also came across la Casa de la Mujer Mapuche, including a shop selling crafts made by Mapuche women: beautiful soft shawls, pots and other small items. At the far edge of town was an open farmers' market: here were Mapuche men and women selling cheese, honey, vegetables and spices, leather goods and other odds and ends of rural production. Taking all sides of town together, however, it seemed as if I were in a country with two economies, side by side: one modern and European, one indigenous and rural. Their relationship was not particularly hostile, but remote and mutually invisible.

Near the university – after much enquiring – I also found and visited the small offices of the World Wildlife Fund. On the previous day, coming down on the bus through central Chile, I had been dismayed to see a landscape that looked little different from any other industrialised landscape I have known. Chile is a long thin country, cut into ribbons of valleys by short mountain ranges rising in broken outcrops parallel to the Andes and the sea. Over millions of years, the many prismatic sides of these ranges have become innumerable micro-environments with an exceptional diversity of life. And yet, as I rolled down the central plain from Santiago to Temuco, modernity's curse was plain to see: the landscape was a factory, covered with rich vineyards, grazing lands and plantations. It was producing the predictable industrialised wealth modern men prefer, but had ignored or destroyed much of the chaotic biological bounty of the hills and valleys. In the WWF offices, David Telkin showed me two maps comparing the valley forests of the early 20th century to the forest cover of the late 1990s: only a fraction remained. In a short 50-100 years whole landscapes had been carted away.

Curious to witness this forest history, the next day I followed David Telkin's advice and took a bus to Lonquimay, travelling through hillsides that had been logged and refashioned into the managed landscapes of modern times. Lonquimay is a small agricultural town high in the mountains. It would like to become a tourist resort, but for the time being it is a sleepy little place in a wide rich valley of the Andes. The town itself is North American in style, with streets of small wooden houses lined up in a grid on one side of the river. In the centre, by the bus stop, is a large open green. One house on a back street has become a Mapuche restaurant and rest house, cooperatively run. But this was the exception: Lonquimay is a European settlers' town, similar to small towns I had seen in Wyoming. I had an early and solitary lunch at the Mapuche cooperative, then took a walk along an upper road following the contour of the river. On either side of the road were barbed wire fences, marking off large sections of the valley bottom where a few cattle grazed. I turned back after walking some distance, looking for the road that would take me higher into the mountains. As I left the valley, I found another landscape, and another agricultural style. These were the Indian lands. The soils here were less rich and the landscape more open, a place of footpaths, not fences.

That night I slept in a private house. There was one other guest, a young man from Temuco, a jazz musician with a young family and a job in the provincial government inspecting houses built for Indian families on Indian lands. I joined him the next day,

crossing the country to Icalma where I caught the bus again back to Temuco. Each time we stopped, the young inspector photographed the new and very modest houses, while I looked around and occasionally asked questions of the people we met. This landscape was wilder than the fields and commercial forests I had previously seen, as we passed in and out of national parks and reserves which seemed only partially protected. In many places, the protected araucaria – or monkey puzzle trees – had survived, but their ancient neighbours were gone, leaving the araucarias to stand like the giant shells of empty houses after a war. What impressed me most, however, was the desire of the remote Indian farmers to imitate the smooth productivity of the European landscape from inside a tradition that was visibly very different. The result I saw was a hybrid – a land that was managed by two systems, neither of which seemed wholly viable.

By the time I got back to Temuco, it was late and I returned to the hotel where I had again reserved a room. The night before leaving for Lonquimay I had told the women at the desk about the face at the window. “Ah,” they had said, tolerantly, “these things sometimes happen.” They had asked if I wanted another room upstairs before travelling to Lonquimay, but I declined, saying simply that I would close the shutters this time. As I checked in after my trip to the mountains, they said they were giving me a room on the upper floor. Tired and dusty, I thanked them and took my bags upstairs.

It was a bigger, lighter room, with the same warm wood found downstairs. I put my things down and looked around. On one wall was an amateur oil painting of the sea. I went up to look at it more closely. There was the name of the painter and a date: 1949, the year I was born. I looked around for other paintings and on the opposite wall saw a very stylised text. I went over to read it. This, it said, was the room Pablo Neruda always occupied when he came to stay in Temuco. I was in Pablo Neruda’s room.

I had travelled in Spain in the mid-1970s and began reading Pablo Neruda’s poems at that time. He had grown up in Temuco after his family moved there from central Chile. It was 1906, just twenty-five years since the Mapuche had signed their treaty with the Chilean government. Temuco was still a frontier town in a landscape of rich forests and heavy rains. In his memoirs, Neruda wrote: “On this frontier, my country’s Wild West, I first opened my eyes to life, the land, poetry, and the rain.” The book is prefaced by a lyrical description of the old forest. “... *I pass through a forest of ferns much taller than I am: from their cold green eyes sixty tears splash down on my face and, behind me, their fans go on quivering for*

a long time ... a decaying tree trunk: what a treasure! Anyone who hasn't been in the Chilean forest doesn't know this planet."

Many think of Neruda as a political poet, a member of the Chilean Communist Party and Salvador Allende's Ambassador to Paris, a man committed to the vital political struggles of his day. In a poem called *I Come from the South* Neruda describes himself as someone who goes through America "lighting fuses and lamps". His poems, he says, can evade tyrants: "if they bolt the doors against me/I come, like light, through the windows,/if they ignite the territories against me/I enter by rivers flowing with water,/my poetry reaches into prisons/to converse with him who looks for me,/with the fugitive I count the stars ..."

As I sat in Pablo Neruda's room in Temuco, it was not the politics of his life and poetry that I remembered. Rather, it was his language of animals, birds, weather, sea, soils and stars, as if each molecule from the forests of his childhood was permanently ready to vibrate on his tongue. But had this great naturalist of a poet ever written about the sick empty nakedness of the modern landscape? Had he mourned the passing of his childhood's natural world? Had he left us anything that could guide us now? In a second-hand copy of *Selected Poems*, translated by Nathaniel Tarn, I found one poem:

Oh Earth, Wait for Me

Return me, oh sun,
to my wild destiny,
rain of the ancient wood,
bring me back the aroma and the swords
that fall from the sky,
the solitary peace of pasture and rock,
the damp at the river-margins,
the smell of the larch tree,
the wind alive like a heart
beating in the crowded restlessness
of the towering araucaria.

Earth, give me back your pure gifts,
the towers of silence which rose
from the solemnity of their roots.
I want to go back to being what I have not been,
and learn to go back from such deeps
that amongst all natural things
I could live or not live; it does not matter
to be one stone more, the dark stone,
the pure stone which the river bears away.

In 1949, Neruda was forced to go into political exile for three years, leaving Chile on horseback through a smugglers' pass in the Andes somewhere above Temuco. On that

journey, Neruda and his party spent a few nights on a timber estate. A lumber company was felling old trees to create railway ties for Sweden and Denmark, provoking one of Neruda's few descriptions of the destruction of the forests: "The saws cutting the huge logs ground out their shrill lament all day long. First you heard the deep underground thud of the felled tree. Every five or ten minutes the ground shuddered like a drum in the dark at the hard impact of crashing rauli, mañiu, and larch trees, giant works of nature, seeded there by the wind a thousand years before. Then the saw sectioning the bodies of these giants struck up its whine. ... The forest was dying. I heard its lamentations with a heavy heart, as if I had come there to listen to the oldest voices anyone had ever heard."

Now, some fifty years later, I was sleeping in Pablo Neruda's wooden hotel room in Temuco, where he used to stay in the 1950s. I had travelled to Temuco in hopes of seeing the biological wealth of the Chilean valleys. When I went up to the mountains around Lonquimay I looked for some remnant of the forests Pablo Neruda had travelled through in 1949. But the patches of old forests I saw were disturbed and uneven, neither modern nor ancient. Their integrity had been undermined by the careless demands of a prosperity that has only become more gluttonous with each passing year.

The next morning, before leaving town to push further south, I went to the offices of a Mapuche organisation, Liwen. I had been there before travelling up to Lonquimay and was picking up a photocopied article written by Victor Toledo Llancaqueo in 1997. It was titled "Todas las Aguas" – "All the Waters: notes on the protection of indigenous rights over natural resources". Another paper, published in 1998, concerned Mapuche protests against hydroelectric dams in the river Bio-Bio, which had once marked the frontier between the Chilean and Mapuche territories. A third paper, published in 2000, had a long interview with the Chilean senator for the Araucania region around Temuco, Deputy Francisco Huenchumilla. He was describing a political project to agree a new constitutional relationship between the Mapuche community and the Chilean state. Perhaps, I thought, such a project could also change everyone's relationship to the land and with that change begin to restore some of the lost diversity of life Neruda had heard falling in 1949.

I spoke briefly to the man who gave the papers to me. He was calm and very clear about the Mapuche cause. "But you are," I said, "so invisible. It is as if you do not exist at all. No one seems to know you are here." He nodded sadly and agreed. Neruda had described the Mapuche people as conquered and forgotten, but went on to daydream that

“Some day we’ll see Araucanian universities, books printed in Araucanian, and we’ll realize how much we have lost with their clarity, their purity and volcanic energy.”

I walked back to the hotel, put the papers from Liwen in my bag, and went out to the bus station for my last long drive down the Pan American highway. Against the vast expanse of the modernised landscape and the happy easy paraphernalia of the modernised town, these three slim papers in my book bag did not add up to very much. It was still a long way from a Mapuche University of Araucania or the creative dialogue and experiment I had hoped to find. Instead, in the half-forested mountains, in the fenced-off village of Lonquimay, and the streets and squares of Temuco I had sensed only a superficial and unimaginative co-existence. Only the three slim papers from Liwen broke the pattern of this mutual indifference as they politely, but stubbornly expressed a different philosophy of land and wealth.

What matters, I suppose, is that I had found these voices. I found them because I was looking for them and because I wanted to believe they could change the rules. But I also found the office of Liwen because it was there. It had been started by a once-defeated people who were now asking for a new constitutional agreement between the conquerors and the conquered. For that reason, these three slender papers, still tucked in my files today, are still magical. They were written by people who were willing to test the dominant European ideas and to experiment proudly with another style of managing their own affairs. Large movements often begin in just such small and insignificant ways. I know that these individuals may find their arguments and rebellions remain invisible and ignored. I also know that my own small faith in their efforts may count for little if history truncates the span of their dreams. I also fear we are living in a time that has no room for such alternatives so that both my hopes and theirs will need not decades but centuries to be realised.

If that is true, then Pablo Neruda’s late prayer will need to be whispered for all of us:
Oh Earth, Wait for Me.

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