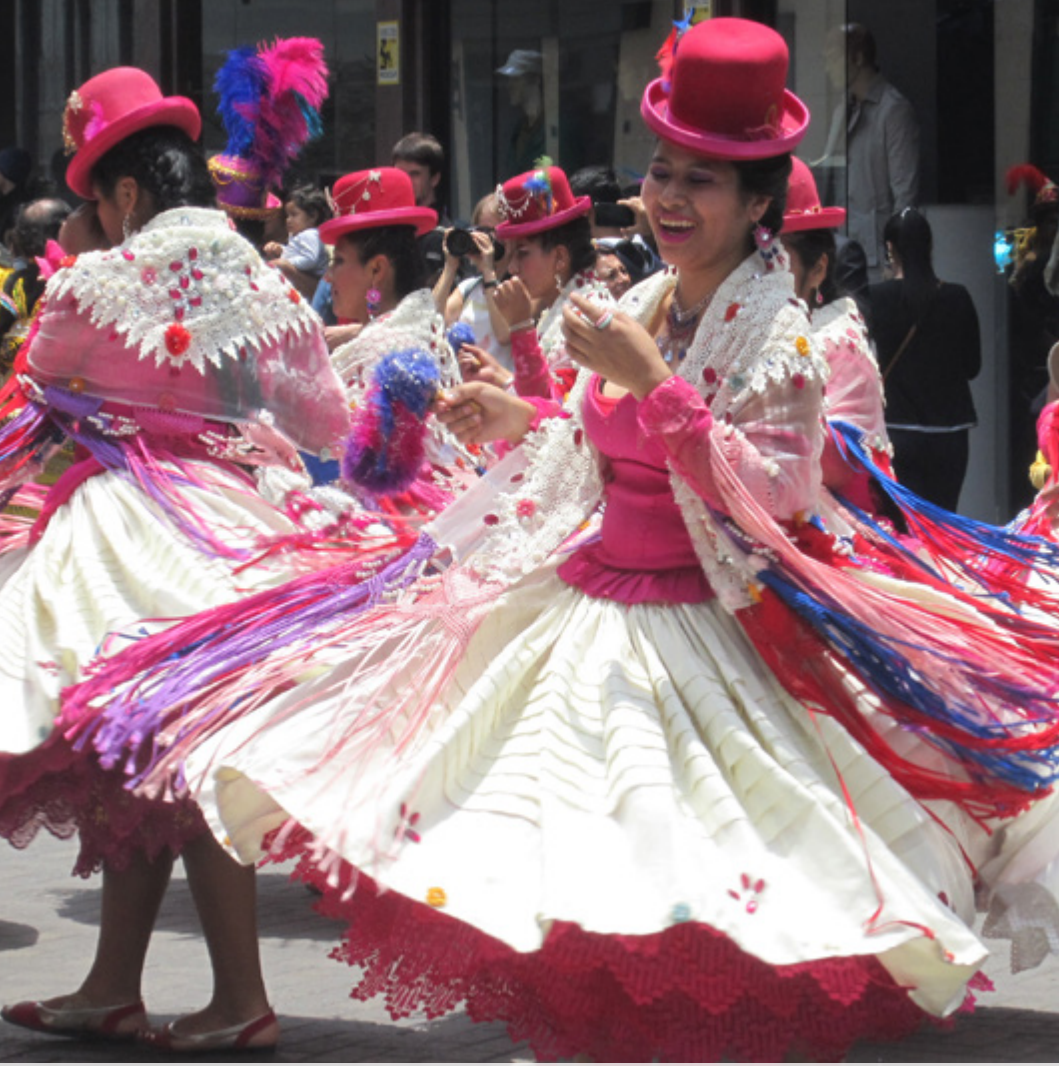


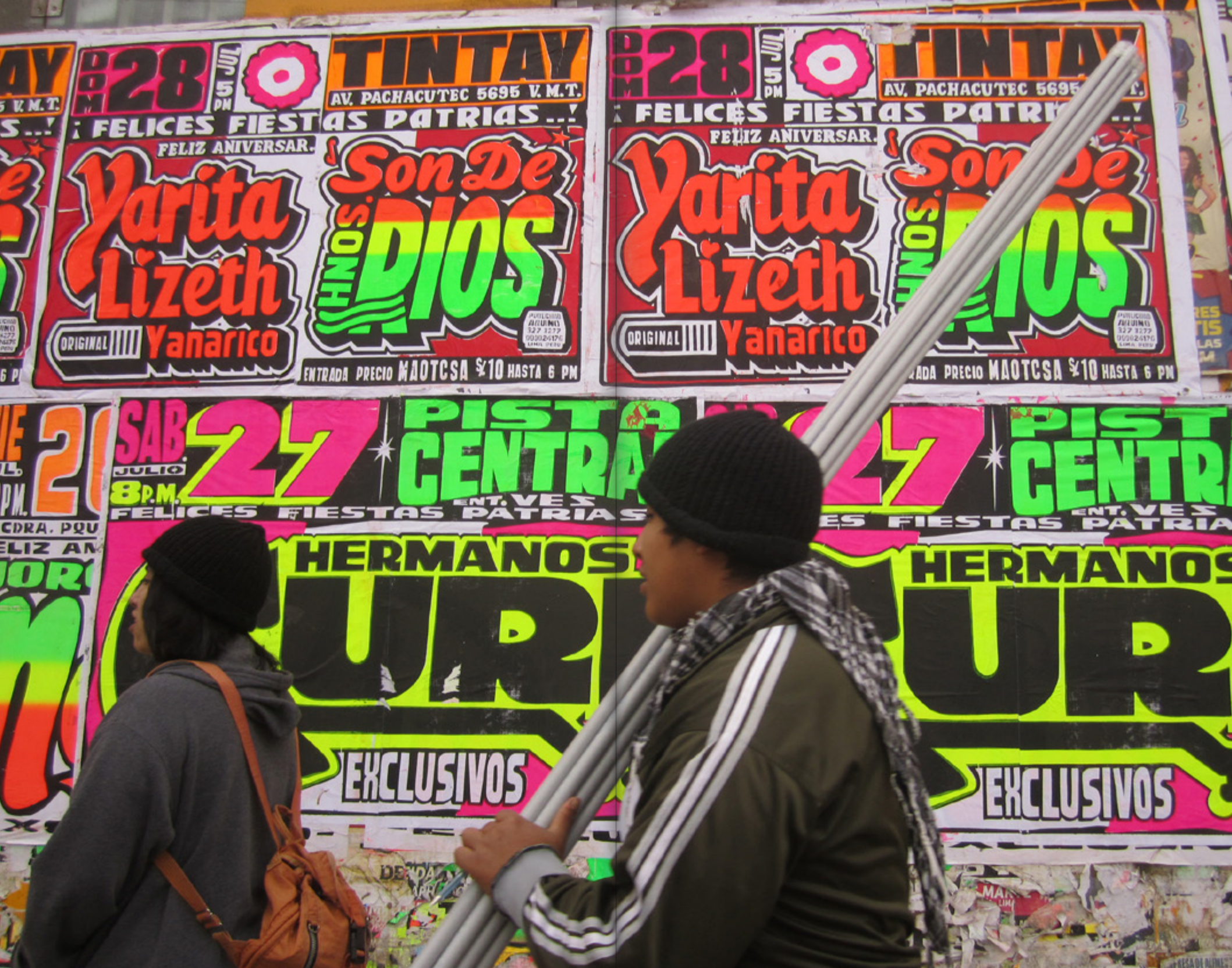
Peru After Chamba

CHRONICLES

by

JUDITH RAVIN

• ENGLISH EDITION •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Based in Lima on assignment for the U.S. Department of State as Public Affairs Counselor from 2017 to 2020, **Judith Ravin** began her diplomatic career in 2003, after many years living and working abroad as an editor, translator, and journalist. She currently serves as Consul General at U.S. Consulate General Chennai, India. In addition to Peru and India, she has worked in the Office of the Haiti Special Coordinator in Washington DC, Pakistan, Dominican Republic, Sudan, Cameroon, and Mexico. Prior to becoming a Foreign Service Officer for the Department of State, she lived in Tokyo, where she was a Spanish-English translator for the Embassy of Peru, freelance editor for Kodansha International, and news rewriter for Fuji TV. Between extended stays in Tokyo and Buenos Aires, Ravin worked for

(continued on the inside back cover)

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Photo by Lisa Libman on page 4. Portrait of the author in Lima's Historic Center.

The views expressed by author Judith Ravin are her own and not necessarily those of the U.S. Department of State, the employee's agency, or the U.S. Government.

Peru After Chamba

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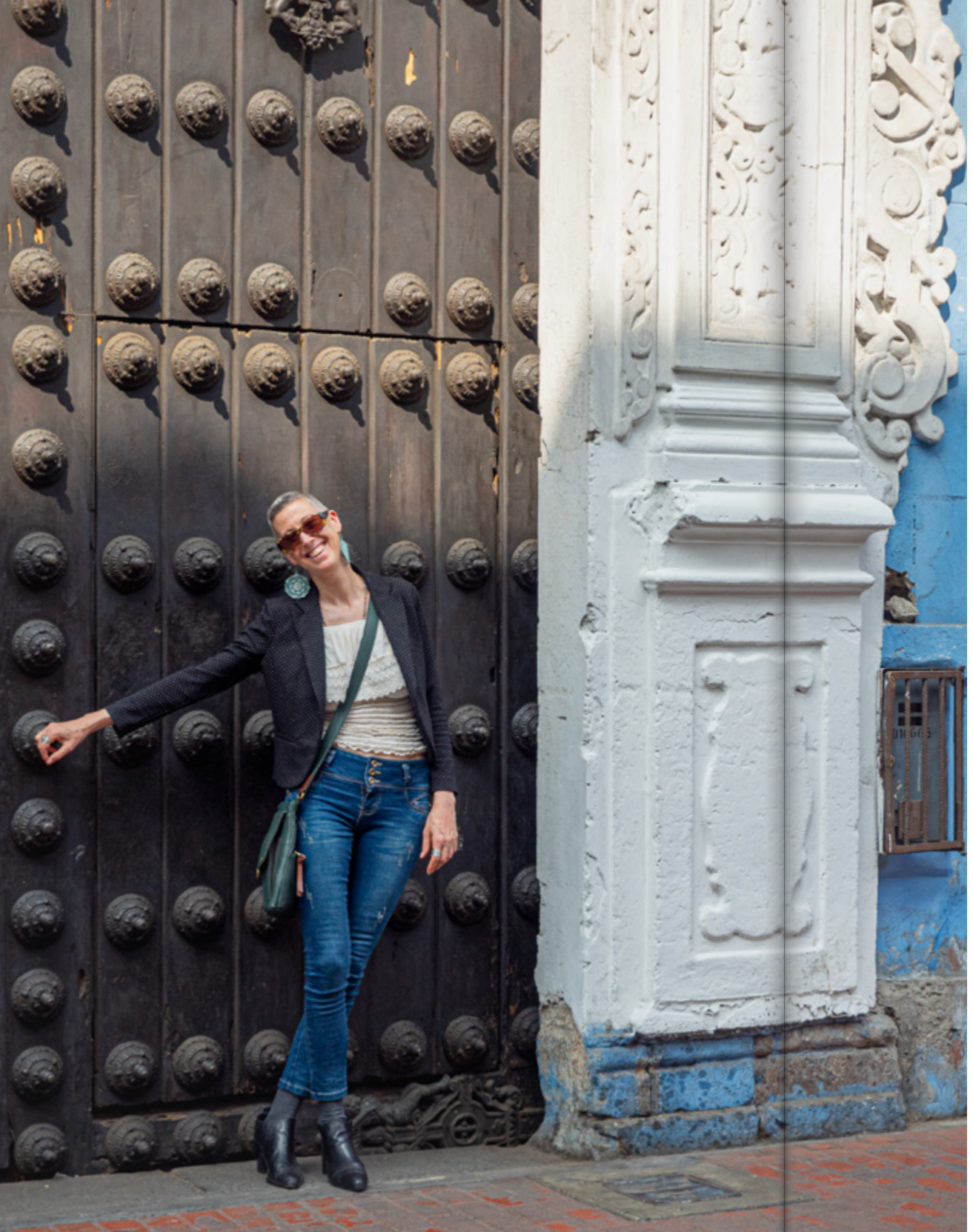

DEDICATION

Dedicated to Peru and conceived in its Bicentennial year, this collection pays tribute to the people of Peru whose diverse landscapes fueled my imagination and shaped the course of my travels. I remain ever grateful for the many conversations shared, populating whole worlds of new referents to enrich the aperture of my perspective.

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... a grayness washes over the lower slopes and coats Lima's coastal desert plain until all city blocks west of the foothills do a dead-end at the Pacific Ocean.

Fall and Spring in Suspended Transition

Fall threatens and spring beckons, yet neither comes to pass. Winter in Lima is a cross between the two seasons with an air of transition on either side – a constant tease. Backed up against stark, bald, dusty hills and a winter mist that turns to drizzle intermittently, a grayness washes over the lower slopes and coats Lima's coastal desert plain until all city blocks west of the foothills do a dead-end at the Pacific Ocean. Depending on the haze, one may hear the ocean without seeing it or be dazzled when the sun breaks through the clouds to reveal pixilated surfers and waves that break all the way north as far as the eye can see. Lima's winter keeps me in a constant sense of anticipation and excitement. The season exudes transition.

I have met so many people my head is spinning. At night I fall asleep at the keyboard, where I intend but fail to sort out the week's sensory overload. I recall a taxi ride headed across town. Three young men position themselves between parallel lanes of oncoming traffic stuck in a jam. The most kinetic of the three picks up speed and does a back flip over the shoulders of the other two. No mat. No spotter. If he misses, he smashes onto the asphalt or into the cars to his left and right. I hand to the taxi driver a couple of *soles* to extend to this accomplished informal sector acrobat.

At a gallery opening, a young-at-heart yet into-his-years artist demonstrates how he shakes the camera to generate out-of-focus photographs that border on abstract paintings. When his collection is complete, he plans to title it “fictional realities.” My mind wanders off, as usual, into the many applications the concept has. Slumped over my laptop keyboard I, too, dabble in fictional realities.

The week comes in lessons of three, from ceremonial use of stone, gold, and silver for the Incas; to patterns of pre-Columbian textiles that draw from feline, bird, and snake motifs; and the distinct coast, jungle, and mountain topography of Peru.

Almost to the minute, twelve hours of lightness and darkness separate sunrise from sunset. The humid air of winter is reminiscent of Buenos Aires. As the sun sets into the grayness of the city, the same bone-chill returns. I cannot bypass my nostalgia.

A rumbling interrupts my thoughts. I am in the kitchen, watching and feeling the ground shake as the house groans and I try to remember everything I forgot about what to do in the case of an earthquake. No one knows what the following minutes will bring in time or space. To me, the tremor seems long. To others, it is light, barely perceptible. Text messages fly in all directions establishing the intensity and epicenter of the quake.

I finish consulting several online sites in English and in Spanish about earthquake readiness. The knowledge refresh is late but comforts me nonetheless. I will be better prepared next time. A new message enters: “Historically, July and August are months for this sort of seismic activity.” Winter in Lima is reaffirmed as a season of suspense and transition. How prescient, the artist with the shaky camera.

"I am native speaker," he insisted, endeavoring to highlight his fluency in the language but exposing his flawed proficiency in so doing.

Native Speaker

The taxi pickup point should have made my national origin apparent to the driver. Opposite the U.S. Embassy's secondary yet more frequently transited entrance, I waited for him to arrive after receiving notification from the central dispatch online. It was dark and late. I should have left the office hours earlier, and I should have been home already.

As the driver pulled up, I crosschecked the details I had committed to memory when the ride was confirmed: the car's license plate number, make, model, and driver's name. The driver greeted me by name upon arrival. I asked for his name although I knew it. Taxi drivers in Lima always think this strange. They assume greeting me by my first name is sufficient proof of legitimacy. I ignore the odd looks and restate the question regardless. Such precaution requires minimal effort on my part compared to a Peruvian friend whose security protocol, immediately upon entering the cab, is to send a screenshot of the cab's vitals to his children so they know how to trace his route and undo his disappearance should the ride go sideways.

The name exchange was above board. I slipped into the backseat and welcomed the moving refuge from the chilly night.

As we pulled away from the curb, the driver made a comment about the U.S. Embassy. He made no association between the imposing building and me, nor considered the possibility that the edifice could be my workplace. The link was all about him. For some reason, the American flag unfurled on the flagpole reminded him of his past life and times.

"I speak English," he said, out of the blue.

"I am native speaker," he insisted, endeavoring to highlight his fluency in the language but exposing his flawed proficiency in so doing.

I did not want to discourage him so early in our conversation but quickly identified his English as left of standard.

"You don't sound native," I suggested timidly. "How did you learn your 'native' English?"

"I am a graduate of a well-known U.S. academic institution," he answered in Spanish, shattering my developing theories and impressing me with the prominence of the institution.

Why he was behind the wheel as an Uber® driver instead of being catapulted into the upper echelons of his chosen career upon return to Peru was the new question I pondered.

I dug in. Silence was not an option. He had been to my country and connected deeply to what he experienced there. He remained in contact with his classmates – a tight-knit group – and had received visits to Peru by the few in his class who rounded out the thin roster from Latin America at a prestigious U.S. university where he earned a degree in civil engineering but, alas, Peru in the end had disappointed him. He did not find he could move up or out into the world following the first large step the opportunity represented. Maybe it was the suffocating effect of top-down centralization in Peru. When he warmed up to me, he confided his true origins were in the Amazon rainforest, which he missed greatly in the grayness of the country's capital.

His commitment and sense of purpose were returning of late, after a cooling period in which he was neither here nor there, neither productive nor decisive, too inert to lament, too uncertain to change course. As he began to verbalize his state, renewed stirrings of change were apparent.

In Peru's outlying regions, a cadre of officers represents the central government in so-called *Direcciones Desconcentradas de Cultura*. Language can be fickle. The terminology, intended to convey decentralization of authority, can also be understood as "unfocused." The purpose is to empower civil servants outside Lima to assume a greater role in charting the destiny of their communities within State policy directives. My driver was certainly a prime example of unfocused direction

in culture. A non-native “native speaker” who lives in Lima, dreams of the jungle, rides around a desert city of 8.4 million people in a taxi, and wishes he were back among an elite group of buddies in the United States at an institution of leadership excellence to pursue a road less traveled, far from the one he was presently tracking on his GPS.

A ride home to remember.

Gray

A man and four dogs on separate leashes greet me in the mist that gathers at the base of a quarter flight of polished black cement stairs. The dogs are attentive to my arrival. The man is aloof. My concentration is on each shiny landing to avoid that the thin coat of humidity causes my feet to slip. Half a block further in my route, a lawn mower scatters short blades of grass in all directions but mostly spews the green toward the calves of a man operating the trimming machine. He cuts the engine on the blades to let me pass. A coat of grass bits glistens against his legs, a by-product of the diminished height of the lawn. As I turn the corner, I allow space for a third man with a large belly in a dark blue workman’s uniform who is polishing off a hard-boiled egg that he moves from a pudgy hand into his gullet. Down goes breakfast in two successive gulps.

They say Lima is gray like the color of a donkey’s belly, and it is true in winter months despite the bougainvillea that scream color over the high walls of privileged neighborhoods or the many palms and small parks that dot the city. Although overcast for six months of winter, there are still days when the undefined haze through cloud cover is so bright, it causes one to squint as if against a blazing sun. I continue to walk through the drizzle and dew, determined to find a solution

to shower curtains for an extra bathroom I am in no mood to outfit.

For days, I crammed the work of weeks into a nonstop effort to organize my new apartment. Just when a breather from such concerns was within reach, the young woman helping me keep order in the apartment and the dust at bay informed me she must take a fresh shower upon completion of her workday, before rejoining the after-*chamba* masses. The shower stall she eyed while expressing this need to me had no curtain, causing my household task list to self-populate once again.

Near a sector with a grouping of hardware stores about a ten-minute walk from my house, the lady selling curtains out of her home has left the light on in her shop and the iron grating open. The center entrance is bolted, however, and she is nowhere to be found. I ask the vendor at a kiosk nearby what local bus route might take me to a major roundabout, thinking to set out from there for a larger commercial area where shower curtains may be commonplace.

A texting skate-boarder rolls past, no eyes on the road, his focal point bearing down on the rectangular mobile device in his cupped hand. The woman in the kiosk tells me to take the bus that is green. “Green as an avocado,” she clarifies, as if green alone were insufficient to spot the only item of that color in the grayness of the day.

Before I reach the bus stop – an unmarked corner where I suspect the vehicle may stop – I see a roll of transparent plastic sheeting tilted vertically against the outer edge of the next hardware store down the row. The clerk catches on to my plan immediately. In five minutes, we have improvised a shower curtain with a meter of transparent plastic, a hole-puncher, and nine plastic hooks placed at eight-centimeter intervals across the top of the curtain. He reaffirms my belief in hardware stores as sustainable community-oriented enterprises. I feel fortunate to live on the perimeters of their aura.

I head back to my apartment, comforted by the simplicity of the solution. Another skateboarder-texter rolls by, miraculously without hitting a pole between ascending and descending sidewalk ramps. A mother on a bicycle peddles her child mounted in the toddler seat at the back while she balances a chocolate cake on top of the basket in the front. Both of these individuals surpass me in multitasking performance aptitude.

The desert rain of Lima has ceased. Tasks to organize my home life finally taper off. In the steady gray of the donkey’s belly, warm and cold air make contact in the mixing zone.

Outside the elevator to my floor, blocking the path to my next step is a musical instrument I recognize, though it is completely out of context in Peru.

"Tabla," I say to the teenager who appears to be the one to have left the small drum in the way of elevator access.

"How did you know?"

"Pakistan," I answer, realizing afterward how incomplete that thought must be to anyone outside my head. Yet he smiles, sensing a shared passion that lights up my path.

The grayness and climate of Lima are indeed subject to individualized interpretation.

Incan-Mandingo Bloodlines

The man eating a bright red sliver of watermelon while riding a motorcycle passed me twice as I leisurely strolled around the town of El Carmen. I could not get enough of the sun-drenched morning, a depravation borne of back-to-back months of winter. The community health drive that had begun off the main square had not yet roused Saturday sleepers, and the emptiness of the streets was a welcome change from Lima.

On a street parallel to Our Lady of Carmen church, a large photographic signboard distinguished one house from all others. It said "Malemba Zapateo" and gave the address of a town one stop further north. But I knew this was where the master artist must live because, through the doorway, I saw a bald-headed man crossing the living room who looked exactly like the man in the sign playing the violin. An urge to watch tap dance by violin was kindled. Poking my head into the living room through the wide-open door, I looked for the furtive figure but saw no one.

I made a mental note of where the house-workshop was and completed the walk back to my point of origin, where I squared the town square, keeping to the periphery. Though I tried to collaborate toward the local economy by buying something from the vendors

selling trinkets, I found the human figurines for sale to be exaggerated and vulgar, stereotypes of themselves. One vendor had even created a *faux* life-size music scene to attract pay-for-click selfies. Three large dolls straddled a *cajón* each and modeled as musicians, waiting particularly for kids who wanted to play along with the three silent Afro-Peruvian percussion stars. The charcoal limbs and blackface on the dolls made the ensemble offensive to me, yet who am I to question how pride of heritage plays out in a town less traveled.

The guy selling photo opportunities with the stuffed musicians handed me a flyer whose promotion I recognized from the signboard above the front patio to the street-level house into which I had peeped.

"When is Guillermo Marcos Santa Cruz performing?" I asked without missing a beat.

"Now," he said confidently, and pointed to the start time on the flyer, though the pace of the household I cased briefly made this possibility preposterous.

Hopeful that my assumption was wrong, I headed back to Malemba Zapateo. Traditional home-grown fancy footwork on a Saturday morning would be a miracle I was too humble to request but too eager to risk missing.

Self-taught violinist and one-time tap dancer Guillermo Marcos Santa Cruz, the force behind Malemba Zapateo, was shirtless at the breakfast table when I reached his

porch. His toddler was rolling around the floor. Two other young children took turns squealing with delight over discoveries neither he nor I could make out. He invited me in.

I asked Guillermo if it was true his performance was about to begin, though the breakfast in progress was a sufficient indication there was no immediacy of purpose. He used the time instead to recount aspects of his life that caused me to sit across from him on one of the benches and lean into our dialogue. Tap dancing, he said, was an act of faith, and dance troupes were messengers who glorified Jesus of Bethlehem through their art form.

As to why his troupe was named after Malemba, it was the result of an arbitrary search on the map of Africa. He wanted an African name to honor his ancestry but did not want it to be a name he had heard before. He no longer remembered where on the map he spotted Malemba. Researching the name in *Encyclopedia Britannica* much after our encounter, I found Malemba is the name of an Atlantic port in present-day Angola that, in the early 1700s, had been a "major center for the export slave trade." I hoped Guillermo did not know this, as he said tap dance had emerged in the Afro-Peruvian community upon emancipation. Twenty-four of the dances were "entirely African," he claimed.

Guillermo is the second Peruvian I know with a commemorative name chosen pin-the-tail-on-the-

donkey style, with the map of Africa in mind. A woman artist, whose meticulous paper creations result in mandalas of the cosmos, had also told me she took on an African name to honor her origins. “God is gracious” is the meaning of the word that became her name in a language she no longer recalled from a country she knew not where. The name was coherent with her birth name in Spanish, whose translation means “miracles.”

An hour into my discussion with Guillermo, a towering bus of primary school students from the provinces plus their teacher and female-parent chaperones parked at the curb. The school trip of some forty passengers was from Huancayo, in the central highlands of Peru. They were en route from the Andes to world-famous Pisco and Nazca, to the south.

Suddenly the performance I had hoped for was more than misleading advertising on a flyer. Guillermo threw on a shirt and went outside to bargain with the bus driver and chaperones to accord a group discount that would even out to a modest per-person fee. The group piled into Guillermo’s small living room while he pulled plastic chairs from any place he could find them and pushed rickety benches against the wall. Some kids settled into their mother’s laps or squished into shared white plastic chairs.

Guillermo gained time recounting over four hundred years of slave history so that his friends and neighbors could scramble to find the actual tap dancers who would

carry out the performance he had now committed to and charged everyone for. Chaperones dozed and the kids squirmed. I had already heard Guillermo cover the centuries. For the school children, though, he left no detail out. As with me, he quoted the unnamed “historian,” as if there were one version alone of history. He made sure the group from the Andes left with a rich understanding of the full horrors of slavery as an institution. Despite their tender ages, he explained how women slaves were priced higher than men because they could reproduce, as if they were animals. It was no less awful when I heard him say it the second time.

Finally, those improvising behind the scenes lined up a nephew and one of Guillermo’s sons to tap dance while Guillermo played the acoustic violin, as was his style. He sought out my glance quickly and told me I had brought him good luck. I was glowing. At least he did not find our long exchange to have been a burden.

Guillermo drove the tap dancers’ feet with his bow. The exquisite counterpoint was of duo and dare. As the two dancers challenged each other, the violin challenged them both.

There is a saying among Peruvians. “Whomever has no Incan blood has blood of the Mandingo.” In Guillermo’s cozy and crowded living room, the improvised performance brought both races together in a rhythmic exchange of Afro-Andean descent.

Repentance gave artist LU.CU.MA. (Luis Cueva Manchego) a second chance on life. At some point, in or out of prison, he found art and God and saved his soul.

From Dagger to Brush

"Symphony of the Sea"

I know it is for once
It is unpredictable
It is too short.

But it is mine
And
I have to go through it.

Therefore
I will welcome it like
Forests, fresh air
Symphony of the sea
Smile of a mother
Generosity of a father.

—Majid Saeed Khan

I stand next to a man – his shoulder practically touching mine – who served a thirty-three-year sentence in prison for aggravated homicide. I know this because he included the fact in a large canvas work whose fluorescent colors infuse life into the drab redundancy of routine behind bars. As I formulate questions I will never ask him, I also know his personal history no longer begins at the beginning but rather in the middle, when an irreversible restart forced a redefinition of referents.

He is burly, with a bulging stomach and stringy, long gray hair. His knee-length shorts and sleeveless undershirt are carelessly thrown together, but the layers of Amazonian seed-bead necklaces against his copper-tone, tattooed chest are deliberate and give him the air of a shaman.

I am near the backdoor of the main hallway in Fugaz (Fleeting) art gallery, a stylized exhibition space of Callao Monumental that was once the early twentieth-century home of Mr. Guillermo Ronald. Beyond this door, a daisy chain of graffiti zigzags from the irregular surfaces of the city's historic buildings and onto structures in precarious states of decay. The sanctioned street art in the area turns citizen security inside out, giving residents a chance to "speak" their issues in bold strokes, on their own terms and on their own turf.

The gallery features the formal end of that expression, a controlled space for Callao's artists, with the exception of the canvased prison series leaning against whatever wall space the artist could claim from fire extinguishers and utility nooks near the exit. A reflex? Always have an escape route. Given the master's unique résumé and former connection to the underworld, maybe negotiating exceptional use of the building's walls was a deal the administrators found difficult to refuse. For me, this is a culminating stop after letting my instinct drive an irregular pattern through the streets.

I study his use of bright colors and overpopulated canvases. Everywhere people are depicted taking action among heavy symbolism and supporting text. In *The Last Supper,* the artist officiates at a dinner for "thieves with ties" – six recent Peruvian presidents who, as they await service, are devoured by snakes for their acts of corruption. I turn back to the piece that commemorates the June 1986 prison riot at El Frontón, noting it reflects the prison's overcrowded conditions and circumscribed autonomy within a single notorious cellblock of infamous inmates.

He shares his story. Repentance gave artist LU.CU.MA. (Luis Cueva Manchego) a second chance on life. At some point, in or out of prison, he found art and God and saved his soul. LU.CU.MA., his *nom de plume* in addition to *pinceau* ("brush"), alludes to the lucuma tree's fruit, a super-food rich in healing properties known to the Incas of centuries past. Repentance does not mean LU.CU.MA. forgot what he was able to forgive. The El Frontón massacre of June 19 is among memories etched in his present and requires no prompting to unleash a passionate discourse.

LU.CU.MA. tells an extravagant insider's tale of what happened in 1986 following the coordinated prison riots at three different prison locations, the hostage-taking, and government response at El Frontón prison, in particular.

According to LU.CU.MA., an inmate in the operation paid off another inmate to die in his place. I assume inmate #2 faced a life sentence, so death would have been a viable alternative through the most informal of informal economies – trading lives. This would also mean money for the family of inmate #2. LU.CU.MA. reels off the plan: inmate #1 pays inmate #2; inmate #1 then flees the country, escapes culpability for his actions, gets plastic surgery, and lives out the rest of his life under an assumed identity.

"Everyone knows that is what happened," says LU.CU.MA. Everyone on the inside, that is.

LU.CU.MA. is in a rush. Having hit the high notes, he is ready to hit the road. His version of history and that of the authorities may always clash in a conflict of optics. He collects his paintings, not interested in the sentimentality of saying good-bye. LU.CU.MA. is a survivor, healed on two fronts by the ability to express the effects of having spent one-third to one-half of his life in confinement.

A new year begins. For some, it is a simple flip of the page to January. For others, hope or despair is a forward arrow earned daily through much ambiguity.

Outside the gallery an itinerant street vendor holds forth in my direction trinkets of golden dagger-like Incan figures. "*Para toda la* family," she says in

approximate English among the New Year throngs. For her, it is just another day of sales.

In his biased but scholarly appreciation for the management of cultural patrimony in the country, my guide placed authorities in two categories: "*los incas y los incapaces*" (the Incas and the **inca**pable).

Machu Picchu NextGen

The Incas considered Machu Picchu the belly button of the world though, in fact, the earth's navel positions at the Equator – zero degrees latitude and thirteen degrees further north. This and other embellishments make the recounting of Peru's history a journey among facts and theories that local guides draw from in crafting a repertoire of memorized narratives to explain the origin of all things Peruvian to travelers from the region and farther afield.

The topic of Inca Prince-Conqueror Túpac Yupanqui arose as my guide to Ollantaytambo, at the start of the Inca trail, looked to explain Peru's bizarre connection to Oceania. Over five hundred years ago, twenty-something-year-old Túpac Inca Yupanqui reached islands in present-day Chilean Polynesia in a large fleet of over one hundred boats that set out from the Incan Empire. Currents and winds guided their adventure decades before Christopher Columbus would bring cross and sword to bear upon the Americas. Still today, locals in this watery space to the east of the International Date Line celebrate the Dance of King Túpac, and a bay thereabouts carries his name.

The connection to Peru's prestigious past is even more palpable in Ollantaytambo itself, on the northern flank of the Sacred Valley. The well-informed guide who

led me through the archeological ruins and stepped terraces there described the families of nearby hill communities as direct descendants of the Incas. That is why "Ollanta," as valley residents call it, is considered the only *living* Inca town. They and the Incan military, religious, and agricultural sites in town are part of indigenous World Heritage.

In his biased but scholarly appreciation for the management of cultural patrimony in the country, my guide placed authorities in two categories: "*los incas y los incapaces*" (the Incas and the **inca**pable). In his view, while some experts and oversight managers were meticulous in their work, others slapped together approximations of material history giving precedence to convenience over authenticity. A guide of guides to the site of sites was my next stop toward evening: Machu Picchu.

I arrived in Aguas Calientes, or Machu Picchu town, at night via a late train from Ollantaytambo. The train pulled into the station in total darkness. The indefinite forms of steep mountains pressed down upon the town and enshrouded it in total mist. The gush of churning water in the river made all other sounds inaudible. My first thought was of the *apus,* mountain spirits that dwell within crevices of the Andes, and I understood why people throughout the highlands sought to appease them. Even in shadows of darkness, I felt power emanating from the mountains.

Before sunrise the next day, I began the ascent to the pinnacle of this imposing landscape, the World Heritage Site of Machu Picchu, at over 2,400 meters above sea level. While waiting for the bus, the white-capped rush of the Vilcanota River created a sound wall dividing life on two sides of the town. A serpentine paved road led the busload of sleep-deprived tourists, including myself, and local guides up to the site's entrance.

The visitation circuit of Machu Picchu moves clockwise by mandate. During my first round through it, I shared the experience in the company of a Spanish- and Quechua-speaking guide who referred to the inhabitants of the site as her ancestors. In my group were four Argentine students from the city of Rosario who all wore shorts despite the chilly temperatures, a Brazilian couple who spoke no Spanish but could intuit it for the most part, and a Brazilian gal on the cusp of entering the job market who spoke fluent Spanish thanks to a one-year student-exchange program in Mexico. We delved into history from our separate angles. One of the quick-witted Argentines noted how the early morning curtain of mist parted to reveal a classic image of Machu Picchu just as the guide gesticulated dramatically in that direction.

After the guided tour, I made a second round, in part with the Brazilian university graduate and in part alone. The strict rules at the site allow only one extra visit on the main circuit, and for the first portion of that she and I had similar discovery goals. Up and around

we climbed, exploring the narrow excursion pass to the Inca Bridge together, then parting ways before a second descent within the main site.

As I entered a slender stone passageway, I moved sideways past a middle-aged man in a yellow T-shirt that said "Monmouth and Ocean Counties, New Jersey." I might expect to see such a T-shirt in latitudes far from this misplaced belly button but certainly not within this high-altitude sacred space. I could not let the coincidence pass and asked the stranger in English if he was from either Monmouth or Ocean County. My personal history crosses both. Incredulity was guaranteed either way.

"*No. No inglés*" (No. No English), was all he could respond. I restated the question for him in fluent Spanish.

His answer made apparent he had no idea where New Jersey was or that it had administrative units called counties. He was clearly not a living New Jerseyite, and his ties to the United States of America were an arbitrarily acquired T-shirt plus the one-off interaction with me. He could not appreciate how unusual it was for me to see a reference to "my ancestors" roaming arm-in-arm with those of the Quechua-speaking tour guide and three-to-four thousand others who visited the heritage site that day in January.

During its busiest season that year, Machu Picchu received up to seven thousand visitors a day. The Ministry of Culture through its "Decentralized" (*desconcentrado*, literally, means "someone who pays no attention to what he/she is doing") Bureau of Culture of Cusco controls entry to the Machu Picchu site. In his bright yellow shirt claiming stake to a tiny dot on the northeastern seaboard of the USA, this lost-found visitor in the middle of a high tropical rainforest had no sense of the scale of inattentive localization his New Jersey reference represented. I could have asked him to join me in a selfie, as excellent mobile broadband coverage is among amenities of the world-renown site, but could not bring myself to violate the sanctity of a place where serpents, pumas, condors, and someone else's ancestors once roamed.

Columns of compressed greenery rose into the mist line. I kept fear at bay but recalled newspaper accounts of foreigners perishing in their folly to go it alone in Peru's vast nature...

Tired Stones

The girls were more specific. Even when I forgot to ask whether my visit to the town of Chinchero coincided with market day, the young girl helping her mother sell hard-boiled quail eggs and other snacks off a cart on the street called after me once I had left the stand. She had given me directions on how to reach the main square from the bus stop and where to turn off toward the town's archaeological complex and 500-year-old rest station for Inca Túpac Yupanqui.

"*Amiga!* There is no market on Mondays in Chinchero!" she called after me, as if reading my mind and the question I meant to pose but neglected to utter.

The day was dreary, dripping rain on and off. When I reached "People's Square," the sun hinted at an appearance, and market women were spreading their hand-woven textiles over every available surface free of grass. Colorful cloth livened the indecisive grayness.

The fresh smell of eucalyptus and crisp morning air left me exhilarated and restless. I was disinclined to stop or shop and, after visiting an exquisite stone church from the early 1600s on the site, ventured toward a ledge in the terrain above an irregular downhill path. I stopped short of a group of ten foreign tourists and

their Peruvian guide. They were lined up for a photo on the grassy edge in front of the downhill drop.

"Is that the Inca Trail ahead? Because if it is, I can boast about it back home," asked unabashedly an older woman with an American accent.

The clouds hovered close and low again. The drizzle recommenced. The rocks on the path were slippery, and the mud even more so. I did not catch a response to the woman's question, and hers was the last human voice in conversation I would hear for the next three hours.

I overtook the group, emboldened by their presence, with half an eye to the possibility they might follow down the muddy steps and rocks onto the trail. That would mean security before setting out solo. I cast a backward glance for good measure. The group was heading uphill toward the market and a life's supply of textile souvenirs. No one was behind me.

As if pulled into a magnetic field, I continued downward, asking directions about returning to point A from a groundskeeper grooming the ancient terraced steps. His swooping gesture traced an imaginary path along the outer rim of the large archaeological site – down then up – eventually leading back to the main plaza at the top. He said I would pass by a *huaca* (sacred site) below. Or I could climb back up the way I came, he reminded me.

"*Despacito. Unos veinte minutos,*" he assured me of the first option. An easy walk of some twenty minutes.

At the time, I forgot rural references are rarely literal, and that "near" and "far" are relative. Lifted as if by an invisible force, regardless, my heels propelled me forward onto the legendary trail, through nature, in silence, where messengers of a former empire long ago had roamed. Fifteen minutes further into the wet forest, large signage from the Ministry of Culture of Peru confirmed the woman's conjecture. *CAMINO DEL INCA* (Inca Trail), it read. Down a precipice, through tangle, came the sound of rushing water in the thicket.

From time to time it crossed my mind that I was unwise. More than an hour into the descent, I knew the path would never lead uphill. My muscles had warmed to the semi-rugged rhythm, and retracing steps over the same wet rock was less attractive than plunging further into the unknown.

I took periodic photos to document my last moments, should the hike through this majestic scenery of intersecting valleys come to a dramatic end for me. Columns of compressed greenery rose into the mist line. I kept fear at bay but recalled newspaper accounts of foreigners perishing in their folly to go it alone in Peru's vast nature and considered the odds of encountering an off-centered human on the wilds of the trail. My mind vacillated between self-recrimination and indulgence as I stopped periodically to take in the

breathtaking beauty this passage into the unknown had made possible.

The trail grew more sinuous. I rounded a single-file curve off a jutting rock, with dual folds of mountains opening onto a distant valley. Green on green, it was unmistakable proof my fate was not to perish forgotten on the ancient Incan courier trek. I refocused my senses on noting any signs of civilization.

The trail flattened into a wide path through a forest of eucalyptus trees where a family was working together at the edge of a mountain-fed irrigation canal. Using a long branch from one of the trees, they sought to dislodge an obstruction in the canal while their fat sheep had their fill munching on leaves. The family confirmed to me the town was not far. Their presence in itself was reassuring and all I needed for the next "not far" hour and a half, as sheep, donkeys, roosters, and cats gave way to telephone wires and poles.

The rain became heavy at a tiny mountain town of a few farmhouses. I endeavored to pass under narrow eaves that some of the houses afforded. The rush and gurgle of fast-moving water over stones was audible here, too, and now guided me at various crossroads in the unmarked dirt roads that would lead to a world of minivans and collective transport. A boy I tapped for information could only offer a vague "down below" as orientation, but a little girl was more helpful.

"Follow the water," she said, and was spot on.

Among the Andean towns that form the so-called Sacred Valley chain of historic Incan ruins in the Cusco region, locals call the huge slabs of rock that never made it to placement at the top "tired stones." Left en route by Incan laborers of yore who carried the pieces uphill by transport methods of the time, they never completed their journey.

Though my original plan for Chinchero was to explore the remains of pre-Columbian structures, I had similarly missed intended placement. Map-less, I walked from Chinchero to Urquillos, entering and exiting through the aromatic embrace of eucalyptus fields, while the orientation of two helpful girls facilitated my meet-up with footsteps of ancestral *chasqui* runners and a historic trail that led to a hanging bridge over ferocious rapids, beyond which lay civilization as I had last left it, on the safer side of the Sacred Valley.

The protective wall of the old city was about two-feet thick, black, and heavily textured. It continued uninterrupted for the equivalent of a block. Then, as if bitten into, the wall broke off.

Pixelated Lives

LIM – AMS – NBO – HAH
Moroni, Comoros

My left foot was already smarting when I decided I could not resist making the trip to Itsandra, a fishing village that rests on a hillside of the north-south road along the western edge of Grande Comore, Comoros. What caught my attention on each of the four times I had passed by it was a lookout point adjacent to the town's cove, an ideal location from which to watch the sun set over the Indian Ocean.

On the island of Anjouan the day before, a fresh downpour left its capital city of Mutsamudu in periodic puddles, requiring jumping over and around them along the broken surfaces of wet alleyways. This helped me avoid soaking my sandals while moving in the tight spaces between residences within the walls of the old city. During one of those movements or a combination thereof, I managed to strain the exterior wall of my own foot, slowing me down considerably by nightfall.

I calculated a morning at Itsandra would cost me a stationary afternoon of recovery, with foot immobilized and elevated for the rest of the day. I would have to put up with the pain through the morning – my last

opportunity to explore before the next day's early departure on an international flight. I first paid a visit to the national museum for perspective on governance by sultanate, shuffled slowly from floor to floor, then took a collective taxi to the former sultanate of Itsandra.

The first person I met while walking up a hill toward the town's old protective walls was a retired gentleman. No sooner had he introduced himself formally, he told me everyone called him Mr. English anyway. Mr. English played an educator's role in the original U.S. government partnership involving the Peace Corps that had brought English instruction to the Comoros during the eighties. The program returned again to the country some two decades later to continue its good works. During my ten days of travel on the islands, Comorians of different stripes commented positively on encounters with the Peace Corps and its contribution to their communities. Always, they expressed appreciation for the volunteers' efforts to communicate in the local language.

A group of elementary school girls formed my greeting party upon entering the narrow streets of the old quarter. Between French and broken Comorian Swahili, I asked them where the walled city and old city gates were. Mr. English had taught me how to ask the fully articulated question in Comorian but, as my foot throbbed with pain and time lapsed, I could remember only key words of the sentence. These I used with the girls who, between peals of laughter and

curiosity about my foreign appearance in general, were set on following me around their village whether or not they possessed the information I sought. When I came upon a low-covered area with two ablution pools, stone benches smoothed by centuries of usage, and two conch shell oil lamps hanging from a stone ceiling, I knew I was on the right course for the old city gate. On display in the national museum that morning I saw similar traditional lighting fixtures.

From the washing area and old mosque, the rest was intuitive. The intimate public square and gray stone-chiseled gates were another thirty steps up and off to the left. Three senior women were chatting quietly in a shaded corner. The young girls lost interest. I was left alone to ogle and try out a *bangwe* bench as the citizenry had been doing for two centuries.

Continuing my wandering down a different slope of the town, a grandmotherly looking woman asked me where I was headed. As her French was quite limited, I uttered the phrase in Swahili for *walled city*. She conscripted on the spot a young man to assist me. Before I gave myself over to the assigned guide, I asked him why he was not in school.

"They're on strike."

"Who's on strike?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean? People go on strike precisely to make known their demands. Who's behind the strike?"

"The teachers. They're demanding to be paid."

"Ah. That's logical. How will you know when the strike is over?"

"They'll announce it on radio and TV."

I had seen often the antennae of State-run *Office de Radio et Télévision des Comores* (ORTC) throughout the island and was confident he was right about that.

"Will the strike last days or weeks?" I asked.

He did not know.

"Got it. Let's go see the walls," I told him. As it turned out, the day I returned to Peru the strike ended. It had lasted two weeks.

The protective wall of the old city was about two-feet thick, black, and heavily textured. It continued uninterrupted for the equivalent of a block. Then, as if bitten into, the wall broke off. The young man showed me different pieces of the wall in the village, including a segment where neighbors had turned the surface into a fortified clothesline. He also joined me when I went to rest my foot at a shady overhang looking onto a launching area for small fishing boats. When two

elders installed themselves in the rest spot, he acted as an interpreter so we could catch up on items of the day. First off, the older man to my left wanted to know if I was single or married.

"Yes," I answered ambiguously.

"Which?" he pressed. "Single or married?"

"I'm divorced. I don't know if that makes me single or married. You choose."

I was not sure how that answer came out in translation. In Peru they tell me, once a *señora,* there is no going back. I did not know the Comorian viewpoint on the issue.

This got the elder onto the subject of the skinny, even more elderly gentleman, sitting to my right. The man on the left kept gesturing with his two hands about how the man on the right worked hard, gave it his all. I indicated I did the same and repeated the hand gesture.

Finally, the university student came to the rescue of our catastrophic misunderstanding of a conversation. He clarified that the skinny older man, who spoke little and smiled a lot, had dedicated his long life to pursuing the many women who populated it.

I ceased mimicking the hand gesture, muffled my way through corrective visible embarrassment, switched

the topic, and exited the conversation. In the French the student and I both thoroughly understood, he informed me Ntsoudjini, the next town over, also had an old city worth visiting.

Back on the main north-south road, I flagged down a passing taxi while my student friend provided to the driver instructions in Comorian about where to take me. Several more passengers entered the cab on the way. Halfway up a steep hill, the taxi driver pulled into the Ntsoudjini Police Station and signaled to me to get out. I may not know how to locate hidden ramparts, but I do know a *medina* when I see one. The wide entrance and parking lot to the prefecture was neither an ancient city nor the beginnings of a gated ancient quarter.

An official approached the taxi and demanded to know our intended business there. The driver spoke to him in Comorian after which the official assured me in French I would find plenty of plans of Ngazidja's walled cities here to continue my research. Once again, language as a vehicle failed me. I thanked both the official and driver, smiled at the passengers waiting for an explanation about why we traveled this far for me to remain inside the taxi, and arranged to cover the fare back to the island's capital city of Moroni. One walled city and a morning spent in slanted conversations with its residents would have to be enough on a day of limited mobility and limitless mistranslation.

Sometimes the best we can do is to sail or wade through life with inexactness. After all, we receive no documented layout of what awaits us, and it is only when we are decades deep into our commitments that we may be able to gander what the road ahead could look like. It is ultimately our lot to live pixelated lives.

Stepping back, however, the close-up jumble makes sense. My visit to Itsandra provided high definition of the predicament of Comorian youth seeking to secure today their adulthood of tomorrow. Of the random messages I saw trumpeted on imported second-hand T-shirts, my favorite was the one a pre-teen wore proudly. "I am your future president," it said. The future of modern history in Comoros indeed begins with generation Z.

I tried to think what I would be doing four months and ten days after losing the love of my life. Our lesson and the day her entire life would change forever merged.

Patience

LIM – MAD – DOH – DAR
Zanzibar, Tanzania

The tears were hers to shed, not mine. After all, it was her loss. But as we passed from noun cases, to questions a foreigner should anticipate, to rituals of mourning in Swahili culture, the unexpected wrap around my teacher's private life forced my Swahili lesson into a hard turn toward reality somewhere between the whiteboard and my notebook on the largely empty State University of Zanzibar campus early that Saturday morning.

The teacher was listing on the marker-stained "white" board key vocabulary words for sample questions I would be (and had been) asked by locals many times over. Although invasive on the surface, she assured me these questions were true to the authentic level of daily exchange within the archipelago.

After a week of grammar, the teacher was finally allowing her structured lesson to blossom into the practicalities of everyday human interaction, trading in stilted sample sentences about lions and monkeys for high-utility phrases that would assist me in taking on local curiosity, particularly with responses I would need as a woman: Are you married? Do you have children? How many? (children, not husbands) Where

are you from? What hotel are you staying at? Do you want company?

"How do you say, 'I am divorced'?" I interrupted, soliciting terminology in keeping with an answer I would definitely need to produce in Swahili.

"It depends," she said in English, due to the complexity of what she was about to outline.

"The term for 'divorced' and 'widowed' are related but applicable at different periods of time. If a man's wife dies in the morning, he can remarry that same afternoon. He is divorced." There was a tinge of resentment in her voice as she described the privileges of manhood and inequalities under customary Islamic law in Zanzibar.

"A woman has to wait four months and ten days. Only then does her status change from widow to divorcee. I am divorced, for example. But when my husband first died, I was a widow," she said, moving out of the third person.

She was too close to the prime of her life to be receiving my condolences for a husband eternally gone from her side, but her intimate story touched me deeply. "I am so sorry," was all I could get out, in an effort to mask an emerging deeper emotion. "How long has it been since you are divorced?"

"The period of four months and ten days ended today. I still have the last message my husband sent me in my cell phone."

Tears welled in my eyes. I tried to think what I would be doing four months and ten days after losing the love of my life. Our lesson and the day her entire life would change forever merged. I dissimulated my emotion with a handkerchief, holding it against my face, as if the sweltering heat rather than the tears were the cause.

In this semi-worn classroom, I was the only student. Sitting in the first row at one of the six desks covered in traditional Tanzanian *tanga* fabric under a glass top, our lesson had been assigned to this space last minute. An unscheduled meeting was in progress in the room she had reserved for us the day before. No one had bothered to clean the classroom since its last use, which embarrassed my professor visibly. She filled the board with sentences and grammatical explanations in three colors, then waited for me to photograph each "page" before erasing the board and refilling the space with more schematic explanations in black, red, and green – the colors of the Kenyan flag, one neighboring country north.

Suddenly, she left the colored markers and whiteboard behind and approached my desk, while she searched her cell phone to locate the husband's last message. She had viewed it a million times, incredulous, and had the text committed to memory. As she showed the

message to me, she spoke the words aloud, bringing back the voice of a life extinguished. "*Tienes que tener paciencia. Vengo ahora*," she recited with a Castilian accent. (You have to be patient. I am coming now.)

Although husband and wife were both native speakers of Swahili, they had the habit of using their polyglot affinities to switch between languages and appeal to different emotions. On that fatal night, the husband had chosen Spanish to quiet his wife's concerns about his delayed return home.

Cell coverage had always been spotty in the neighborhood where my teacher had her home. The husband's message did not come through the night he sent it. Nor did he return home. The next day, in addition to the message from her husband, she saw many missed calls, including from the head of the university foreign language department, where she was a professor and which was odd on a Saturday morning. The call from the department head was the first one she returned. It was he who had asked if she had heard from her husband, then suggested she contact her in-laws. Although he knew of the late-night fatal car accident, he did not want to be the one to break the news.

Four months and ten days earlier, before the mourning period would morph into a societally blessed form of divorce-hood by way of death, my teacher learned from her sister-in-law what everyone else already knew by that time – that she would need a form of

patience beyond what her husband imagined when he messaged her thinking he was but a long drive away from returning home.

The husband, who worked in tourism and constantly mingled with people from all variety of cultural backgrounds, had a zest for life. As a result, she was forever entertaining houseguests as well as his clients when they passed through Zanzibar. He electrified the company around him.

A week after her husband's death, a friend of his from abroad posted a fun photo of the husband on Facebook. The friend asked my teacher if he should remove the photo.

"No," she said. "Keep it there."

No ritual cleansing could erode the pain or her desperation to remember her husband as he was during the brief years they shared together: lively, smiling, captivating those around him.

In the four months and ten days that had passed, my teacher had begun to master a new feeling toward her young son – beautiful yet bittersweet. Born to her late in life, she now saw in him the image of her husband, a parting gift from this, her second marriage, and a reminder of a terribly understated text message, presage of a sea-change.

Through the brush, I see a bungalow and realize the bus driver must have thought I said “room” not “ruins,”...

Room by the Sea

LIM – JFK – DOH – ZNZ
Zanzibar, Tanzania

“I wish if I were God. Then I would have to give you a planet.”

The message from abroad floats into my evening as a charm. In fact, I *have* a planet. It is the one we share and may be ruining collectively. When traveling, I seek out its holdings in former civilizations on the uneven sphere that permits the imagination to reconstruct parceled patrimony, traces of our humanity, and puzzled pieces about who and how we came to be.

Taking out a map provided to me for free at a branch office of the Zanzibar Commission for Tourism, I study a tiny triangle of piled rocks, the symbol for ruins, near Unguja Ukuu, the ancient Zanzibari capital on Kiwani Bay, in the southwest. I decide I want to go there and set out with the day wide open.

A few blocks from the university, on the outer limit of Darajani Market, packed minivans and small buses stake out passengers in the shade before departing for different points on the island of Unguja. These are not romantic honeymoon getaway travelers on package tours. They are normal folk getting to and from work, family, on commissions and errands, or transiting to

the next switch-off stop on to other parts of the island. Mine, however, is an open-ended journey.

Cognizant the other passengers may not have an abundance of patience for my questions, I go directly to the driver still waiting in the shade to fill spare seats in his van and ask if he will be traveling in the direction of the Unguja Ukuu ruins. I point to the corresponding symbol on the glossy but rudimentary map. I do not know how to say “ruins” in Swahili and have no roaming internet coverage to look up the word on the go.

Innocently, I figure a map distributed by the municipality implies universal understanding of its symbols among the local population. Just in case, I pronounce “ROO-ins” very slowly and carefully in English, while holding my finger to the symbol on the map. The driver nods and points to the open door of the minibus, indicating I should hop in.

I choose the shady side of the bus, calculating it will remain so for the duration of the trip as we head south. It is still early morning. The sun is not yet merciless.

An hour into the trip, we come upon an arch to a large market on the opposite side of the road and an evolving transport hub. The street is filled with people moving in counter directions from all angles. Some carry large bundles from the market toward the loading minibuses. Others cross between oncoming traffic to

enter the market. Three improvised “lanes” of walkers squeeze between parked minibuses and shared taxis. The sun moves higher in the sky. Its strength brings out the colors of goods and clothing against the sandy dirt of the thin road’s shoulder.

Most of my bus empties out as the driver signals vaguely toward a direction ahead of me, where I should continue the second leg of my journey. I find the small bus whose destination sign matches what I thought the previous driver had enunciated and, before I take a seat, ask if this goes to the Unguja Unkuu ruins. The driver’s confident smile and arm movement are almost simultaneous as he ushers me in, eager to clock in my fare and move closer to a departure time.

When the bus is almost filled, the driver leaves the hub behind. I stare out of the window to take in scenes of country life. The road is narrow: tourism in passing.

We turn off the main road and pass through sandy underbrush that ends in nothingness and more sand. The driver stops, catches my eye in his rearview mirror, opens the door, and points for me to get out. I follow his instructions but note the emptiness – not promising for an excursion that was to lead to historic ruins. One would expect, at the very least, signage.

The driver has the needs of other passengers to consider. I am but a stop on the way. He restarts the engine and drives away down the sandy, unpaved road.

I have no idea where to go so walk along the sand, now bright and irradiating both heat and blinding reflection.

Out of nowhere, a middle-aged gentleman in a disheveled mismatch of pants and shirt walks briskly toward me and asks if I want a room. Through the brush, I see a bungalow and realize the bus driver must have thought I said "room" not "ruins," which is why he drove off the main road to the only room he knew in this otherwise non-tourist location.

"No room. Thank you." I walk in the opposite direction of the unwanted room offered. The sandy path brings me to a bar and drinkers … at ten in the morning.

"How about a drink?"

"A little early to begin the night's rounds, no?" I say, convinced no one understands my English or sarcasm.

"Not at all," answers the woman, confidently.

In this Muslim-majority culture, the local woman with a half-finished glass of beer in front of her as well as the scene itself are terribly out of place, particularly at that hour.

With four men, one woman, lots of beer, and not too much movement, I gather they have been at it for a while. It is a setting I wish to step out of as quickly

as I stepped into it. Though I have no baggage, maybe the guy eager to offer me a room thinks I, too, can be of service to the menfolk. I move away from the bar toward the dunes.

With the bar left behind, the scene before me is beautiful, as if painted. At low tide, the water line is at least a mile out. Men and women with buckets on their heads are colorful points moving out toward the sea to gather shellfish before the tide comes in. The fishing community forms a line of bright colors in the day's haze.

I walk back and forth along the shore, staring at the far-off activity. In the small fishing village, my presence as an outsider is immediately remarked. I approach a group of men repairing their fishing nets in the shade and ask if I can sit along the edge of the empty open-sided fish market. I trade in ruins for the sea-watch and do not feel short-changed.

I have nothing to give the villagers but conversation, yet feel obliged to contribute to their economy. When the fruit-seller opens his stand, I buy bananas in quantity and bring them to my spot on the concrete side wall under the overhang of the fish market thatching. The man who offered me the room comes by and sits next to me. He has time on his hands, no clients, and the status quo I altered. He is respectful as I pull from every page of the Swahili notebook in my head to maintain a conversation in that vein. I share the bananas with

him and the other villagers who saunter by and hang around for a little shade and novelty-gawk at the foreign woman with the buzz cut. The man buys oranges from the fruit stand and reciprocates by offering me one.

Time passes in listlessness. I could stare at the sea for hours more, until the fishermen and women come back by one o'clock and the next shift goes out in the boats now grounded on the waterless sand of low tide. But it is not my village, and I sense I could create an expectation of intimacy I do not harbor given the cultural differences. I rise, sad to leave behind a missed opportunity to watch the launch of small fishing boats en masse.

The man again offers me a drink at the bar. I refuse politely and, noticing his solicitousness, thank him for his shared conversation and make it clear my stay in his village has ended.

"Come! I want to show you the room."

Now more than ever, that room is not on my itinerary in this village.

"Quickly, I will show you the room."

"No way. No room," I say again, not caring if he gets the full import of my message. I am certain I understand the proposition implicit in his.

A room with no ruins has provided a beautiful find for the day, which he will not ruin by way of an unwanted encounter in his room.

Nothing on the airwaves will divert my attention from the road nor anything this guy decides to do on it.

No Kidnappings Tonight

A guy with thick unruly hair and face hanging out of the window pulls up in a battered white van that looks more like a shady delivery truck than a passenger transport vehicle. His two-minute arrival time, according to the real-time tracker, has taken over ten minutes while he stops to fill the tank with gasoline, dispatches several text messages, and keeps me waiting in the chilly after-midnight air along the Pacific coastline of Lima. One of the text messages, to me, notes he is imminently on the way.

The disheveled driver in the disarranged vehicle sets out on a roundabout coastal route that is desolate and, at that hour of the night, not particularly safe. Any of the empty inland streets would facilitate a quick arrival at my destination, prompting me to wonder about his choice. According to Forbes 2019 Traffic Index, Lima ranks number three following Mumbai in first place and Bogotá in second, for worst traffic in the world. However, the traffic index is not conducted at 2 a.m., when a greater risk are the cars ignoring speed limits, basking in the unaccustomed free-for-all of no traffic.

“Why the big van?” I ask him, as I regret having entered it and imagine unseen “passengers” emerging from the row behind to block me in place.

"You pay for the service not the vehicle," the driver with the big round face answers, keeping his window wide open for the draft to reach my neck.

"Why the Costa Verde?" I ask. He senses my discomfort on the dark, empty circuit that hugs the coast and, every so often, receives fallen rocks or a collapsed chunk of coastline onto its course.

"No kidnappings tonight," he answers.

"Tomorrow, yes?" I quip.

"No. Monday through Thursday."

I grab on to the extension of my seat from the right as the centrifugal force of the ramp turn just taken practically lifts my seat off the floorboard. The van on the inside matches the first impression I had from the outside.

The driver asks if I want any particular station or music on the radio. Usually I request news, but this time I do not care. Nothing on the airwaves will divert my attention from the road nor anything this guy decides to do on it.

Why a transportation network company driver thinks it smart to joke about kidnapping prospects with a woman he never met before who is alone in the cab at two in the morning is beyond fundamental elements of logic.

"No preference," I answer laconically.

Mediocre romance music fills the car in sharp contrast to the Saturday night hot salsa a different driver blasted on the ride toward my destination earlier in the evening. The mood music does no justice to the genre and is a pleasure to tune out.

I am careful to position myself in the middle of the full length of the seat cushion, neither directly behind him nor against any of the two doors. I want him to know I have a full view of the road ahead and am focused on registering his every move and decision about the route. I consider feigning a call to clock in with an imaginary friend the time and current location.

When the driver does not signal for a right turn, where he must shift over to the far right lane in order to take a right turn up a hill off the coastal highway, I practically order him to do so.

"You'll turn right here and go up the hill," I tell him, letting him know I am taking back-seat control of his route from here on in and disinterested in what his GPS navigation software may tell him. My plan is to arrive home as soon as possible, alive, and dump this creepy driver in a ghost-mobile with a dislocated sense of humor.

As he pulls onto the desolation of my street, its emptiness at that hour has never felt more welcoming.

That got Lenin thinking about a passenger he once had by the name of Hitler. He was shocked when the name popped up on his screen as someone for whom he was to render a service.

Weight of Our Namesakes

I memorized the last three digits of the incoming Uber® license plate, car make and model, and name of the driver. With the cell phone returned to my purse, I thought about the driver's name: Lenin. Lots of kids may be named after Lenin in more-or-less predictable locations around the globe, but in Peru this was a novel run-in with a tribute to Vladimir Iliych Ulyanov, founder of the Russian Communist Party and first leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Lenin showed up in a Toyota Yaris, or equivalent, and let me into his toasty cab. I was feeling chatty and commented he was the first Peruvian Lenin I had ever met. This opened the door wide for a comeback response. Angling for a backstory, I was overjoyed he took the bait.

The Peruvian Lenin – my driver – grew up in a desert shantytown north of Lima. The family occupied land to which they had no right, in a settlement with folks doing the same. Lenin's father was a fervent humanitarian and would give away earnings the family needed desperately if he deemed a cause to be of a higher calling. Several times the family lost its savings to the father's philanthropic-socialist whims. When Lenin was very young, his father abandoned the family.

Lenin remembered vividly the day his father sat him down with his other two siblings to lay out the limits of his love and expanse of his moral principles. His aim was to teach them the line between good and bad – a line he could not cross.

"I love you all to an extent you cannot imagine," he began. "But if one day you do something really bad, like steal, I'll turn you into the authorities. I cannot bear the thought of such behavior in our family."

Lenin admired this quality in his father – righteous with no exceptions. When someone in the community, known as unscrupulous and a trafficker in fake land titles, ripped off an unsuspecting member of the makeshift outpost, the father donated all of his savings to protect the victim from further extortion and the untenable commitment he had made. He covered in full the victim's fine. In doing so, he sent a clear message to the land trafficker that the community was on to his tricks and would stand in solidarity against him, whatever the sacrifice. His wish was that no one else fall victim to this type of brazen dishonesty.

I asked Lenin if he had met others with names pulled out of history and mentioned the appearance of Hitler in Peru's national identity records. It astounded me that adults would make the decision to retain the name regardless of the ripples it caused.

That got Lenin thinking about a passenger he once had by the name of Hitler. He was shocked when the name popped up on his screen as someone for whom he was to render a service.

Only in this century can two figures of such notoriety and historic proportions meet up comfortably in a ride-hail service. In real life, the death of one and the birth of the other barely crossed paths in the same decade. It would have been impossible for them to be contemporaries as adults. Lenin and I were in stitches working this phenomenon through our minds.

The concept took root and helped Lenin mine deeper connections. That morning he had picked up a passenger by the name of Fyodor – no doubt, we decided, named to honor Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. Lenin and Dostoevsky, at the very least, had overlapped briefly during a small portion of the nineteenth century before one of the two lives extinguished. The back seat of the cab was filling up quickly with history.

Naming cults thrust historic personalities into new contexts. But for those living out the weight of their namesake's deeds, or misdeeds, the tradition can hang heavy on the bar of irony.

"I do not come to you empty-handed, and I won't take up much of your time. I would not be doing this if I did not have to."

Clock Ticking Backward

Steady and deliberate, he walks us back to the circumstances that changed the course of his childhood and his family's life from Europe to South America. He begins his story as a single-digit kid at the time of the move. At ninety-three, he still remembers every detail. Trauma cuts a wide groove.

When the Nazis closed in on his world, breaking the glass of shop windows and property owned by German-Jewish merchants on Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass), in November 1938, he and his family fled, then hid. They transited through France and eventually departed by boat for the Americas. They brought with them their language and culture plus the will to survive, a skill common to populations forced to be on the move.

As the speaker describes his journey to the family's final destination of Peru, he fills the imaginary bags we carry for him with the minutia of the everyday challenges he had to overcome in his quest to assimilate. At school, he learns to become Peruvian. At home, he is free to observe deeper connections of identity.

Some sixty of us sit entranced and in silence, reliving his journey. It is perhaps the first time he is given a microphone, a full audience, and permission to unwind the story from the beginning of how he got from there to here. For two hours, his is the only voice leading us

out of that small living room through nearly a century of personalized history.

Though we cannot hear the testimonies of the others around the world, they do join us on this day set aside to keep alive the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The hope of the original organizers is for future generations to remember these lessons learned from history to prevent future acts of genocide.

Our presenter speaks for over an hour before stopping, staring out from his past, and taking a tiny sip of water from a glass that has been waiting for him on a side table since he began. At another pause he searches his mind for the precise word in the language of the Old Country and is unable to retrieve it, but mostly he is incredibly lucid for his years.

He brings the tale to closure, noting the recent loss of his wife of many years. She shares his Jewish heritage and undertook a similar journey to this new land. He shows us an antique nutcracker and waffle iron, family heirlooms carried across two oceans. We learn that his sister had long ago moved far away to the United States. His solitude weighs heavily on me.

After two hours of concentrated listening, I am transported to a parallel testimony from a few weeks back by a young man from Venezuela who boarded a bus and began telling his story, whether or not the passengers were listening. I almost recorded it for the

familiar preface it embodied but took discreet notes instead.

“I do not come to you empty-handed, and I won’t take up much of your time. I would not be doing this if I did not have to. I am trying to put something on the table tonight for my family. I am not accustomed to this work. In Venezuela I had an office job working in administration. But life brings with it changes….”

He describes his modest goods to the passengers on the bus. After a list of sweets and candies, he mentions an incongruous pizza-flavored item. He moves from the front of the bus to the back, tilting a small brightly colored plastic bucket toward each of us with his stock. As he walks toward me, I prepare to wish him luck, not interested in buying or consuming the candies, sweet biscuits, or pizza-flavored whatever. He intuits this and that I am a foreigner. He winks at me with a smile. In that moment we are the same, and it lightens his load to know that.

In the public space, cautiously curious Peruvians often comment to me: “you’re not from here, are you?” Yet in that flash of unspoken exchange between the Venezuelan vendor and myself, his comment translated to: “we’re not from here, are we?” He, like I, like the ninety-three-year-old survivor from a night of terror have long since understood such observations need not be internalized. They are the comments of those a tad behind in assimilation.

In a recorded interview from the past, projected onto the screen to close the concert, the honored visual artist shares his life-long "battle" to capture a dream on canvas.

How So?

"Last call," announces the voice of God over the sound system, as lights dim then envelope in darkness an unevenly scattered audience barely rounding out a third of available seating in the grand municipal theater. Floodlights bathe the young men and women dressed in black seated according to instrument family – string, woodwind, brass, and percussion.

The fanned-out orchestra on stage forms a backdrop to introductory remarks about the evening's conceptualization. The concert will honor the memory of a distinguished creator in the visual arts who passed at 92 along with his 96-year-old wife in a domestic "accident." For over seven decades, he toiled in pursuit of the perfect painting in deep, rich abstractions with fireballs of light. I am there to pay him homage.

In October two years prior, the unexpected eclipse of the artist set in motion shockwaves of print. For the son about to address the audience I imagine this occasion is heavy with dual loss, though the spotlight is focused on his deceased father.

The son speaks timidly of his father, lacking the progenitor's gift of shaded nuance and perhaps overwhelmed by the magnificence of the works

projected five times their actual size onto the screen behind the orchestra, giving life to the legacy of mood and color.

The master of ceremonies reviews the program, including the musical compositions to be presented that evening. I hear the MC say something that sends my thoughts on a trajectory elsewhere. I am not sure if I misunderstood and fiddle in discomfort until I can resist no longer. Placing the program inside my purse and shining a light from my cell onto the text within the leather walls, I discreetly reread the program in full until I find the phrase in bolded text I hoped I did not hear.

Overture of "The Happy Slaves" is the closing piece the orchestra will perform. I am appalled. How so? I ask myself. Exactly how are the slaves happy?

I want to depart. My mind has left the concert hall anyway. However, I decide it is wiser to seek an opportunity to enlighten the organizers in private, when I can also register more formally my protest against this slip of judgment in programming.

The so-called Basque Mozart and composer of *The Happy Slaves*, Juan Crisóstomo de Arriaga, died of tuberculosis ten days short of his twentieth birthday in the early 1800s, though not before turning his extraordinary talent yet misguided mindset to setting

a tempo to the life of slaves: Allegro con brio, Andante, Scherzo, and Finale.

In a recorded interview from the past, projected onto the screen to close the concert, the honored visual artist shares his life-long "battle" to capture a dream on canvas. Unlike Crisóstomo de Arriaga, who died a product of his time years before slavery was abolished in Peru in 1854, the aging audience at the memorial concert has had more than a century and a half of exposure to slavery's evils as an institution. Why does this audience permit this other battle to rage in silence? Why the willingness to uphold an abhorrent fiction of measured beats by which tempo the oppressed happily carry out the enchained existence of their lives?

The second the lights switch on, I am out of my seat. With my head ringing from outrage, I depart the theater.

The girl on the vendor's hip suddenly reached out and covered her father's mouth with her little hand, interrupting his pathetic presentation. He removed her hand gently. The two looked accustomed to the drudgery.

Last Stop

"*Señorita, tu dinero.*" (Miss, your money.)

The kind soul on the early morning bus ride toward the metro pointed to a small folded bill of one hundred *soles* sticking out of the top of my sock, where I had tucked it into the right ankle boot. I thanked him and flashed a smile of appreciative complicity. He could have said nothing, waited until the bill slipped out of my sock entirely, and earned himself one hundred *soles* – the equivalent of about thirty U.S. dollars. His generosity was an auspicious beginning to a Saturday, particularly given the alternative.

At my final stop, after the bus and the metro, the commercial center where I intended to shop was boarded up and had the appearance of an unstated public violation. I wandered across the bridge to a large hangar where I have an intermittent customer relationship with a few women who specialize in skirts.

The first vendor whose stall I approached explained her stockpiling system. She flattened a hand on each vertical pile and described the order of her collection.

"This pile has long skirts. This pile has skirts that end at the knee. And these are all short skirts."

As to sizes, the groupings were not organized based on that principle. I began going through the pile with short skirts, lifting each to inspect colors and pattern. Nothing suited my fancy. I crossed the aisle to see what another vendor had in stock.

Vendor number two provided a similar orientation to the arrangement of her merchandise. I rummaged through the pile containing short skirts, again reviewing colors and patterns of the cloth before checking for sizes or actual design. Only a couple of items qualified for a second round of inspection. I tried the skirts on over my shorts. It was easier than any other option and, in fact, there were no other options: no dressing room, mirror, or improvised curtain.

“It’s perfect,” commented the vendor to a layered, frilly skirt with tiny mauve flowers that would cut a distinctive figure into the workday.

“Yes, but it’s quite short,” I countered, not eager to give up on the item but aware its current length would pose a problem for the office.

The vendor drew an imaginary horizontal line against my thigh, midway up, looked me in the eye, and said: “It’s way longer than the shorts you’re wearing.”

How motherly, and direct! Yet she was right. My shorts advanced no further than the highest part of my thighs. Nevertheless, I was at play not work.

Another potential customer arrived at the stall. She planted herself next to me and pulled out of the pile a black-on-black miniskirt with feathery inlaid black-cloth strips.

“You should try it on. I bet it’ll look great on you,” I encouraged her.

It matched her dramatic looks and coloring. She had strong, attractive facial features. If I had her hips, no one could have talked me out of buying that skirt.

“I really like it,” I told her once she pulled it over her tight jeans. “You look like an ostrich.”

“It’s true!” she said. But, of course, we both knew we meant a very attractive ostrich.

I paid for my frilly skirt that was too short and spent a good portion of the bus ride back thinking how I would lengthen it so I could use it for work. I preferred taking buses home over the metro to observe the movement of people going about their daily business.

A man balancing a young girl on his hip boarded the bus. In his free hand, he carried a rack of recycled bottle tops fashioned into key chains. As he gave his sales pitch for the unbreakable bottle-top key chains, he cracked the whole rack against a side window to prove their resistance. I thought the bus driver at that moment might regret having allowed the hawker and

his carry-on child onto the bus, if that was the price he had to pay to "collaborate" toward alleviation of economic hardship. The driver, however, was oblivious, absorbed in the soundtrack of trap and traffic.

The girl clung to the man's hip while he set out his despair to whomever might listen. She was fixated on another girl about her same age, sitting on her mother's lap in the first line of seats of the bus. The seated girl in pigtails was experiencing a different version of the bus ride and had the luxury of fidgeting. The girl on the vendor's hip suddenly reached out and covered her father's mouth with her little hand, interrupting his pathetic presentation. He removed her hand gently. The two looked accustomed to the drudgery. She kissed her father's neck and continued staring at the little girl passenger in the front row.

The man finished his speech, walked the length of the bus with his hand out for coins, and stepped off the bus with the girl still in his arms. Had I been at a window seat on the passenger drop-off side of the bus, I would have followed him to see if he deposited the girl on the pavement or retained her in his arms. Children can be borrowed as props for exploitation. The true relationship becomes apparent when the public eye is off the adult.

A skinny young man boarded the bus next and placed his half-eaten Styrofoam® container of French fries on an empty seat near the front. The woman seated

one row behind the platter turned away in disgust. The man was disheveled, head to toe, and sung a forgettable tune entirely off key. He then asked passengers to collaborate. No one did. He scooped up his fries and descended the bus in a cloud of his own filth. It was obvious he was not in full possession of his senses. The rest of the ride was without itinerant vendors. Intense sunlight filled the aisles.

A while later I got off the bus. Before taking the last bus homeward, I asked the fare collector hanging out of the door if his transport went as far as my desired stop.

"Yes. Get in," was his quick reply.

I dropped a couple of coins in his hand and took a seat. As we approached the neighborhood of my stop, I reminded him I would need to get off ahead.

"We don't go that far."

"Then why did you let me on the bus? You could see I was carrying packages."

"I confused you with the woman back there," was his response as he fingered an empty seat at the rear where no one sat.

The woman next to me pointed to my long legs – made more apparent by my short shorts – and said cheerily it looked like I could easily cover the extra blocks

walking. She was beyond my years and half my height. She had a lovely clipped accent from the highlands of Peru when she spoke Spanish.

"Exercise is not the point. Honesty is," I responded loudly so the fare collector could hear.

"You're right," she said. "You were quite clear before you got on the bus about where you wanted to go. I heard you."

As with the passenger on the bus ride in, who called attention to the bill peeping out of a hiding place in my sock, the older woman's solidarity as a total stranger provided a soft landing place for my emotions. Though reminders of others' pain surfaced viscerally along the way, the goodness of humanity overall prevailed by the time of the last step off the last bus before its last stop.

Public Life and Conversation

He mounts the bus and begins hawking others' stories. For only one *sol* (*un solcito*), selling biscuit packs is his mission to do good. Passenger by passenger, with the funds he gathers he can take his Bible to the hospital to read aloud biblical passages from it to bedridden patients. This is his lot in life, he tells the passengers. One *sol* can fund his next do-good hospital visit.

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At a neighborhood fruit stand, where I am an irregular regular, a guy cuts in line in front of me, his outstretched hand holds forth three peaches to be weighed. I let him go first as my purchase is a little complicated and includes questions. When my turn resumes, I run through the shopping list – pomegranate, bananas, papaya – followed by what I am not sure I want.

"What's that?"

"*Granadilla*."

"Which is the crunchier apple, the Israeli or the Golden?"

"The Israeli. But it's Peruvian not Israeli."

"I'll take three *granadillas* and one kilo of Peruvian Israeli apples."

I like other varieties of sweet passion fruit, so I want to give the *granadilla* a try. If mangoes were back in season, I would not be seeking additional fruit items.

I complete my purchase but feel a man shadowing me – not necessarily with the intention of cutting my turn short but a persistent presence making it known he is there waiting impatiently. He lets me clear the area instead of stepping forward directly. I move away to pack my canvas tote carefully with the fruit I bought, perceiving his discomfort. He waits again for me to move further afield, but I do not move too far. I finish reorganizing the bag to avoid crushing the fruit with potatoes, cabbage, carrots, squash, and the rest of my near complete shopping list.

The man, now close to the high, narrow countertop that separates him from the vendor, believes he is also separate from the rest of the world. I overhear his inquiry.

"Do you have anything to cure a hangover?" he asks the fruit vendor, as if he were a doctor or a pharmacist.

"Yeah, another beer," advises the vendor, casting me a wide grin as he notices my secret amusement, staring in disbelief at the back of the head of this next-customer-up usurper.

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I enjoy a delicious, simple meal on an open park bench with a new-found friend. We are sharing an Amazon river fish cooked in *bijao* leaf, with salt as the only seasoning, and a grilled whole plantain each – both from Belén Market, in the teeming Amazonian city of Iquitos. An older man rolls by slowly with his cart of unripe coconuts. We end up in conversation while ordering two cups of fresh coconut water. My friend and I normally reside in Lima, though she is currently setting up a new life in Iquitos for a year-long work-related stay. The vendor indicates he knows Lima neighborhoods well from having worked the streets there for twelve years as an itinerant vendor. I finish off the refreshing drink and carve out for my friend the coconut meat, freeing it from the sides of the one-seeded drupe. As the vendor waits for me to finish and return the green coconut shell, he begins to educate us about the unsung virtues of the fruit, including its properties as a laxative, about which neither one of us inquired.

"It comes out brown, black, blue, green, purple until you are squeaky clean," details the vendor.

I wondered if he would provide this level of graphic detail had he arrived three minutes earlier, when my friend and I were still licking our fingers clean from the fresh-water fish. The elderly gentleman vendor does not apparently realize the value of table manners even when the table itself is lacking.

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In a single frame of the park that snakes along the entirety of metropolitan Lima's Pacific coastline, an infant suckles on his mother's breast, and a girl in pigtails and bright pink inline skates climbs an incline of the polished concrete with her legs spread wide to brace for the inevitable fall. On the grass, a party of teenagers chants "open it, open it," as a post-pubescent girl pulls a white furry stuffed animal out of wrapping paper and hugs it against her cheek, posing for a snapshot. Every surprise gift of this sunset picnic is documented with a pose and a click.

Little pooches on generous leashes frolic with their owners close at hand, and two hairless dogs decked out in Peruvian red-and-white soccer jerseys carry the flag, as it were. But the boldest self-portrait of the day occurs in a quiet spot, away from the birthday picnic and exercise trails, with back set against the traffic and forehead facing out to the sea.

There, on a park bench, a man works out the logistics of an orchestrated selfie. The man sits with his miniature poodle spread across his lap endeavoring to get his faithful companion to look directly into the lens of the cell phone camera at an angle that will achieve proper aesthetics of composition. Over five minutes into the project, the young man squares away a portrait of the twosome – man and man's best friend – before the sun sinks into the Pacific, putting down another day of public life and conversation.

Oscar's Scented Forest

Oscar tends to his collector's garden of empty bottles – rum, whisky, gin, tequila, and the darkened green stems of wine. Atop each glistening vessel, an elongated wooden face joins the spirit to the sacred, hijacking the pedestrians' attention toward the irregular truncated-figurine forms. I move closer to the faces, the literal expression of Oscar's labor, and discover there is no way to engage Oscar's art without engaging Oscar.

I come to his stand in search of a unique gift. The objects on display are shaping up to look like a solution. The precise functionality of the gaunt bodiless figurines is still a mystery.

"What are these?" I ask bluntly, focusing in on the essence of my personal bottleneck.

"Smell this!"

Oscar pulls out a thin wood sliver of a face and places it under my nose without addressing my question yet successfully drawing me away from practical thought. The wood is fresh. The aroma lingers in the air even as he recuperates the object and pops it back into the bottle. He tells me the exact name of the wood, which I promptly forget, though that is directly opposite my

intention. There is so much visual stimulation I am distracted and begin lifting each face out of its bottle for fuller inspection. At this point I conclude the bottles are not just an artsy display rack but individualized wooden bottle stoppers.

I am before a post-modern innovator who is revolutionizing an art form of wooden plugs dating back thousands of years from wine jugs of the Mediterranean and ancient Egypt. Doing away with earlier prototypes – the eighteenth-century corkscrew and the subsequent natural cork stopper perfected by French monk Dom Perignon – Oscar has sealed, as it were, the fate of wooden plugs by fashioning them into his own fantastical forms.

He sees I am fully intrigued by the wooden stoppers and moves in to assure they become my container closure of choice, adding an additional sculpted face to the two others cupped in my hand for further examining.

"Take three."

"But I only need one," I remind him.

He closes my hand around the three facial stoppers.

"Three," he tells me, as if he were me, the shopper.

I smile. Thinking he is giving me a generous gift of two more, I ask the price, just in case. The price has now

tripled, and I understand – smooth and artistic as his entire persona is – Oscar wants me to pay for all three.

Oscar asks my given name, after having long revealed his. He tells me more of his story. He intends to sell off the entire collection of facial figurine bottle closures. It is four in the afternoon. I am his first customer of the day. Not an auspicious start, although I make no assumptions about his start time on the gig or how long it takes him to set up shop on the outer circle of the trendy John F. Kennedy Park, in Lima's Miraflores district.

He points an accusatory finger at his elbow.

"*No es por nada*" (It's not for nothing), he tells me and says it must be a sign. He suffers pain in that joint.

Oscar's mother was a baker. Arthritis. She stopped baking. Seems to run in the family – artisanry and arthritis.

He stuffs the two extra old men bottle stoppers back into the bottles. They are bearded, like Oscar, and carry a sacred scent. As he grabs them in his hand, I note a sharp X-Acto® knife blade protruding out of the base of one of them.

"Careful!" is all I have time to say, trying to stem unwanted tragedy.

My alarm does not match his. Two thoughts occur simultaneously. Had I taken him up on three for the price of three, I may have sliced open the palm of my hand accepting his offer. Having kindly refused, the sliced palm could have been his. Oscar evidently navigates the risk of handling carving and cutting knives on a daily basis, and is not shocked by the misplaced blade sticking out of his work of art nor concerned by the risk it poses.

Oscar wears beautiful fat rings on his muscled fingers. Big semi-precious hand-carved stones in odd shapes top the silver bases of the rings, and a wide silver bracelet cuff shines off his dark brick-red wrist. The jewelry is audacious and earthy. I assume most pieces are amulets with decoration as an added function. Maybe that explains his lack of concern for the exposed triangle of a blade.

We seal the deal. I purchase the one-of-a-kind sculpted wooden bottle-stopper bust.

Weeks later, when I present the gift and cannot recall the proper name of the aromatic tree from which the wood comes, a closer than close guest present at the gift-giving informs me the name of the wood is *palo santo* (Lignum vitae).

A curative sacred wood used in aromatherapy to balance energy, in Peru *palo santo* is also known for its healing properties, which only manifest themselves

several years after the tree falls. The wood thus affords the shamans of the Andes a sustainable source material for cleansing and purification. No wonder Oscar was indifferent to the dangers posed by an exposed blade. He had created his own miniature forest of *palo santo*.

I dropped an invisible coin of an indeterminate amount into the cup of his hand at the tip of his outstretched arm. He was both tollbooth and collector. The deposit satisfied him.

Imaginary Coin

Up went the barrier as I attempted to follow the rim of the park to bring home my handcart tote brimming with vegetables and fruit. The little boy straddled the cement path and would not budge. He kept his arms out firm, parallel to the ground, like a frozen school-crossing guard blocking undisciplined crossers ready to advance despite a green light for the cars to pass.

“You have to give a coin,” said the diminutive figure whose crown of brown wispy hair reached my thigh.

“You shouldn’t charge people from the neighborhood. I live over there in that building. See?” I pointed to a seven-story building behind him, some twenty meters away. I wanted to show deference to authority since he was convinced he had some.

The boy did not let down his guard. Nor did he turn his head away from the line of duty. His playmates in the park chased each other through a labyrinth. He was onto larger issues of concern. Infrastructure. Roads. Income generation for the municipality.

“The coin,” he repeated. He stiffened his arms and remained planted in the middle of the path.

"OK, but I have to give you an imaginary coin," I acquiesced.

"Yes, the imaginary one!" he said, as if this were the most obvious solution in the world.

Imaginary was a big word for someone his age. It had as many syllables as he did years on earth. He pronounced the word perfectly.

I dropped an invisible coin of an indeterminate amount into the cup of his hand at the tip of his outstretched arm. He was both tollbooth and collector. The deposit satisfied him.

He swung open the gate immediately, dropping his left arm to the side with officialdom. He then ran over to his friends on the grassy green, without so much as an imaginary receipt or thank you.

The toll road returned to the common, snaking path I customarily use as a shortcut to reach the coastline, a green-canopied walkway to the nearest open market as well. Normally free of obstacles, it also serves as launch-pad getaway when my brain craves a change in air and an escape route with no fixed destination.

The boy's transition between make-believe and reality with no loss of intensity impressed me, as did his tryout engagement with the neighbors. From his impeccable pronunciation of advanced vocabulary, I suspect his

comfort level with the concept and the likelihood he is a frequent inhabitant of that parallel world. In fact, little conceptual difference separated his mind at play from mine at rest, once launch-pad becomes take-off to ideas in circulation free from their usual constraints.

Transactions are all in cash. Only kind, elderly vendors of fresh produce offer a scribbled scrap of paper containing the hand-written tally of fruit and vegetable items...

Full Tank

My favorite gas station in Lima is one right off Vía Expresa, a major highway where traffic blocks up in three directions and trolling taxi drivers make entrance into the station an exercise of self-control. I like it because the staff share their technical knowledge freely, and one of the gas pump attendants has human interaction down to a formula that reduces drive-by customer communication to a time-saving one- or two-word exchange.

"Full tank?" he asks as I pull up, heading off the chance I may prefer to purchase less.

I have not yet activated the lever to open the gas tank, nor has he unlatched the gas pump nozzle from the filling station pump.

"Receipt?" he inquires.

"Receipt," I confirm.

Peruvian authorities stipulate two forms of permissible sales tickets. A simple receipt, or sales slip – required for purchases and services over five *soles* – does not allow the customer to claim an expense for tax purposes except where stipulated by law. Sales tickets, following an ephemeral shelf life of utility, are destined for the

recycling bin. Alternatively, “natural or legal” persons, who have the right to use tax credit, may request an invoice to finalize the transaction.

A vendor more willing to engage in full dialogue would typically ask customers as they approach the register: “receipt or invoice?” Except for work-related hotel bills, my answer is basically “receipt.”

At informal markets where I do most of my shopping, no one asks if I want proof of purchase. Transactions are all in cash. Only kind, elderly vendors of fresh produce offer a scribbled scrap of paper containing the hand-written tally of fruit and vegetable items after they are weighed on the scale. A friend who has a startup company disapproves of this. He insists on a payment voucher from everyone. His logic: he pays taxes and so should they.

“Nine-five?” asks the non-verbose attendant at the pump. He could have said “ninety-five.” This would be one extra syllable and grammatically correct, but he has no time for that. He remembers I use this level of octane for my vehicle or maybe just notices I am nearest that pump.

“Ninety-five,” I confirm. It has been a twelve-hour workday but I have time for the extra syllable.

“Full tank,” I add, as the gasoline cocktail begins to fill the car’s fuel tank.

“Automatic?” He lines up the next decision point.

“Automatic,” I reaffirm. The automatic shut-off feature of the gas refill nozzle avoids the need to eyeball how much gasoline can fit into the tank for a manual top-off. I have experienced spillage as the attendant miscalculates remaining space in the tank, then charges me for the gasoline spillage regardless.

“Visa?” He remembers I prefer plastic over cash for fuel purchases.

“Visa,” I nod, smiling, because I am enthralled he can sustain this one-word exchange.

“American?”

I think he is talking about me when he asks this but see he is staring at my card.

“*Estaeeyt Depahrrtment,*” he says very carefully, pronouncing each of the words as if that will be the longest sentence he will construct this evening.

He stares me in the face as he makes this unanticipated foray into English.

I wonder how he knows I work for the State Department, forgetting the information is clearly noted on my credit card he his holding in his hand.

The automatic shut-off clicks. The gurgle ceases from the nozzle.

“Direct?”

“Direct,” I authorize him, so that payment from my card can be withdrawn in full rather than over time, in quotas.

He returns the hose to the pump, screws on the fuel tank cap, and approaches me to sign the credit authorization slip. I sign.

He is ready to humanize our encounter. What comes next takes me by surprise.

“*Sank yew,*” he says, doubling his syllable-per-sentence ratio for the second time that evening.

He chooses these words for me, his American State Department customer. He is generous tonight, with the extra syllables and foreign language effort. On that basis, I decide his thank you is the best part of the day.

“You are welcome!” I say, taking him out of league, adding four syllables to his lexicon of judicious verbal communication, and expanding his new-found version of the English language.

Flows Both Ways

Unable to motivate myself to change into eveningwear until dusk swallowed the early night, I had little time and made flamboyant choices, particularly the earrings. By any neutral assessment, they overtook my face.

Finding an available taxi during the weekend rush-hour traffic complicated an otherwise short ride to the art gallery. Back and forth, I paced the one-block radius where the taxi was to show up but did not. Finally I located the vehicle pulled over to the side, the driver’s head tilted down, eyes bearing into his cell phone. I shared with him an obvious insight: he would never find this passenger in the device. He needed to lift his gaze and comb the street. There he would have found the lone woman on the sidewalk searching oncoming cars for her marked carriage. I requested a rushed arrival at my destination to the extent safety concerns would permit. Late departure was my fault. Late arrival would be a shared responsibility.

At the art gallery, “late” was relative. Forty minutes into the start time according to the invitation, the inaugural space was half populated. Guests were overwhelmingly male and in their seventies. The few female guests sported glittery garments. My non-textured exterior and pixie haircut fell short of the primping norm. As I

rushed down the steps into the gallery, protocol kicked off. The master of ceremonies announced the first speaker.

All around the perimeter, easels splattered with worn paint supported newer artwork. The concept stressed the artistic process, blending the easel as a symbol of art in progress and the completed work it framed as what is released into the public eye.

The main speaker sought to connect through art the creative output of nations – his own and that of host country Peru. He mentioned the exhibit launched a month-long patriotic celebration, yet fumbled to recall key historical dates within that period. The remarks were long-winded despite the age average of attendants and the fact that, save for a scattering of VIP seats randomly placed up front, the rest of us were standing. When he wrapped up by saying he had only a handful of words to end on and then pronounced "long live the Republic of Peru!" I thought maybe he forgot the country he was representing, which he added as an afterthought.

The master of ceremonies picked up the tempo. It was her time to recognize the artists whose works graced the evening and who demonstrated creativity pays no heed to geographic boundaries. One by one she called them up to stand and face the audience, each extending the line out from the podium alongside the two other male speakers who endeavored to shape the event

concept. The MC then stepped back, away from the podium. All recognized artists were men. By the time two presiding local authorities were brought into the principal photo, there was a lineup of some nine men. I wondered whether there might not be a female artist somewhere in the huge expanse separating yet joining these two great countries through art. Apparently not.

Everyone had been standing for over twenty-five minutes when the champagne was passed out for a toast. At the limits of their patience, the guests began chattering with drinks in hand. It took many "Shhhh!" to silence everyone so we could hear the toast itself. It, too, was unmemorable, and passed.

The din rose again, and the MC had to fight for acoustic preeminence in order to announce she had forgotten to mention the art in the room of the exhibit ceremony had nothing to do with the featured exhibit itself. The art that honored a meeting point between the two countries aforementioned could be found in a distant hallway. Some of the more impatient guests immediately went looking for that since the exact location was neither articulated nor evident.

Half an hour after the official collective toast, a waiter approached me and asked if I wanted a glass of champagne, which I refused politely.

I sauntered into the distant hallways. The artwork labels had flags of both Peru and the guest country,

leaving the visitor guessing whether the piece was by a local or the foreign artist. Maybe that was the idea: art flows both ways.

A flamboyantly dressed man in his thirties or forties came up to me and announced abruptly, “I am from the third genre.”

“What genre is that?” I inquired.

“*El tercer género*,” he repeated, at which point I realized he meant the third “gender.”

Género is a homonym in Spanish that harbors the two meanings. It, too, flows both ways. Following up on the unprovoked conversation starter, I asked him what he meant – neither man nor woman, a woman who identified as being a man, a man who identified as being a woman, combined anatomy? The list had no assumed end in sight.

He told me everything he liked. Unsolicited, the faucet opened. It was hard to keep track because he bounced from music to art to a waterfall of disconnected associations. I asked if he liked the art behind him, the only bold black-and-white piece in the entire building as well as that room. Among the bold black lines against white were place names, including Lima, Miami, Boston, Peru, and China, among others. I identified with the state of mind it reflected in which places and their reference points coexist.

“Are you Chilean?” Another ex abrupto query interrupted my thoughts no sooner did I leave behind the faucet-flow.

“No, are you?

“Are you German?”

“No, are you?”

I asked him and the man accompanying him if I looked German. They assented.

“No, I am from the far north. The United States. What art era are we in?” I asked.

“Post-modern,” contested the man with the unidentified profession.

“No, more like post-truth,” corrected his partner.

One of the two turned out to be an artist. The other never answered my question regarding the circles he moved in. The artist had participated in a one-hundred-year anniversary of a known art institute in Lima the year before – an event I had wanted to attend but could not. He had a catalogue on him (coincidently?) and showed me the page with his artwork: two interlaced women in the nude from the waist up, in an Amazonian lush-life. I asked if he was from the Amazon.

He worked his way around an answer. No, but his kinfolk were.

Bursting yet again into incongruity, the master of ceremonies announced there were birthday boys among us. More men were honored. The mostly Spanish-speaking and *pueblo amigo* visitors broke into a festive English-language rendition of Happy Birthday to You, for the very elderly gentlemen who made it cake-side before the song ended.

After the cake presentation, I took my leave discreetly. As I exited, a woman followed me dreamily. She moved up close and asked me if I was an artist. She looked me up and down. I tried to see myself as she might: big earrings, uncommonly short hair, frilly border at the base of my dress – a system I invented with the help of a tailor to keep my short dress from splitting every time I took a long-legged step.

“No, I’m not an artist. But, yes, I am addicted to art.”

She was not convinced.

“You look so …. You look like an artist.” Her eye kept catching parts of me I could not keep up with.

She was not put together well, and it was not the occasion to get into what an artist might “look like” anyway. The interior of a person is so difficult to describe.

“There is art all around us,” I consoled her, trying to shift the focus away from myself.

She was disappointed and edged toward the stairs that led back down to the main event hall, where post-truth, third genres, mermaid-looking bare-breasted Amazonian women, and three very senior birthday boys managed to blow out candles on all three of the cakes paraded in front of them. Art flows in both directions.

I direct my thoughts elsewhere – out of the depths of the child's crushed self-esteem, far from imaginary flophouse attendants and prostitutes, and safe from scampering rodents from the ditches at night.

Six Million *Intis*

Incongruities line the twenty-minute walk on a main cross street from Villa María del Triunfo's Pan American Games sports complex down to the nearest stop on Metro Line 1. Gutted trenches await incoming piping, while mounds of dirt and uneven stonework suggest a path through what may have once been a sidewalk. Not all windows lining the buildings on both sides of the street have panes. The day is gray and chilly. Damp air likely collects in the rooms behind the plastic-covered windows within staring distance from the street.

A dog scrambles over a convex pile of dirt, open wound on his hide, and scampers around the obstacle course strewn along the dug-up road. Another canine, whose back leg is hacked off, walks on the other three legs with a rhythm of combined hopping and hobbling.

I up my speed behind a woman and a little girl who are keeping a safe distance from one another. The woman, in her thirties going on fifty, moves in close to a telephone pole whose base is plastered with public information of a private nature. The little girl, half her height, gets in the woman's way as she approaches the pole to read more about an employment opportunity posted there. She scolds the girl rudely at a volume even the disinterested can hear.

"What a f#*!cking bother you are!" (¡*Qué jodida eres!*), she blurts out to the lovely girl skipping along merrily until this public outburst causes her a miscarriage of joy. The child glances around quickly to see how she can disappear from the face of the earth. I wonder how many times a day her ego is pummeled thus and whether there is a chance for her to come up for air.

The woman takes out a cell phone and snaps a close-up image of the glued rectangular announcement on the poll.

"Employment opportunity. We are looking for *señoritas* ages 18 and over. Come with or without experience." The poster does not specify what kind of experience is needed / not needed, but this is not an issue for the woman. She is safely between the age of *señorita* and *señora* and finds the description of prerequisites sufficient to warrant followup. She is in her zone of comfort.

Although it is not for me to judge how others define opportunity, in the recesses of my mind I imagine no good will come of this notice. Human traffickers looking to ensnare sex slaves can recruit in the most insidious of ways, and this would be one of them.

I direct my thoughts elsewhere – out of the depths of the child's crushed self-esteem, far from imaginary flophouse attendants and prostitutes, and safe from scampering rodents from the ditches at night.

Relieved by the distraction, I remember I must buy for my apartment small plastic bags to line bathroom and bedroom wastebaskets. In a nearby market, vendors point me in the direction of a guy who sells everything known to plastic (*todo plástico*).

The vendor has the right size of plastic bags, in addition to four more sizes in three different colors, and asks me my address. I indicate vaguely where I live, sidestepping the level of specifics requested, then ask why he needs to know exactly where I live.

The *plastitodólogo* informs me he and his neighbors in the market are collecting signatures on a petition to protest the move of a funeral parlor to an empty building next to the market. It is incompatible with their image. They are categorically against the idea.

As a non-voting foreign resident in Peru, I explain I prefer not to engage in political activities whose direct impact would be on municipal voters. I leave out any mention of my diplomatic status in country and ask how much I owe him for the packet of plastic bags.

"Six *soles* … or six million *intis*," he says, making reference to a monetary unit in force in the mid-eighties during a volatile period of hyper stagflation (1987-1990) – price hikes, slow economic growth, and high unemployment.

"Six million *intis*," I repeat, astounded by the level of inflation and knowing the joke is a good-hearted jab at me. He has lived through enough periods of national history to know how important it is to hold authorities accountable and wants me to understand my political disengagement would not have resulted in immunity from the deflated monetary value of the *inti*.

I repeat my support for the initiative and bring into the conversation what any archaeologist knows to be true. Ultimately, I remind him, the dead are among the living here in Peru. The open trenches – though not those in Villa María del Triunfo – of five thousand years of history will continue to prove it so, funeral home relocation notwithstanding.

Onlooker at Gunpoint

I pull up my memory card from last night's attempted robbery, aware that next time the close call could be on the X itself. In a city with a population of over 8.4 million, citizen security remains an issue on Peru's capital city and national agenda demanding short-, mid-, and long-term attention.

Bombarded with images of violence in the form of toy guns, superheroes, film, and video games, when a real-life situation unfolds before me, I cannot avoid associating the scene with a comic-strip playbook, though humor is neither present nor suggested.

I reduce my speed to a crawl on a main road, usually fluid. I am hemmed in on all sides by traffic. It is an alternate route after the evening rush hour has subsided and should not be in gridlock. I apply the brakes for a full stop. In all directions, cars, vans, trucks, and buses are forced to do the same. My field of vision ends a few cars ahead. Beyond that I see metal reflecting neon and red taillights aglow but cannot make out the reason for the backed-up traffic at this hour. Only the delivery boys on motorbikes with yellow glow-in-the-dark Glovo-branded thermo packs on the back of their bikes manage to snake forward an advance.

A no-glow motorbike whizzes past me, braking suddenly at the tip of my car's left-front headlight. A short-legged passenger jumps off the back of the bike, with helmet on, and races to the right in front of my vehicle. The movements are jerky. The figure moves pumped up and nervous. Although the body contour "looks male," the helmeted individual resembles more a comic-strip antihero flash-sprinting, sexless and reckless.

What courses through my mind, given the insanity of rushing across five lanes of oncoming traffic in the darkness, is that motorcyclist and passenger must have decided a rush on foot to the faraway sidewalk by the passenger, despite the risk of physical harm in crossing, would be quicker than riding to the destination in stagnant traffic.

As the figure crosses my right front headlight, it pivots left. In an instant, both arms fully extend to hold firm a pistol against the window on the driver's side of the car ahead of me. At that range, the target cannot be missed. A cocked trigger finger, closed car window, and a hair's breadth separate threat from action.

My own adrenaline goes into overdrive parallel to my feeling of helplessness. I am an onlooker stuck in place. I have no way to stop the robbery, murder, or possibly both. Whatever move comes next, the consequences can affect any one of us in the immediate vicinity of the gun, and that includes me. The helmeted villain need

only turn ninety degrees to the right, and I am the next target of opportunity, through my front windshield.

The driver under threat pulls the car up unexpectedly, closing a three-feet gap between the front bumper and the car ahead. The change in positioning throws off the assailant, who springs back and, almost in the same movement, saddles back into position at the rear of the motorcycle, which wobbles briefly then achieves its getaway at top speed through a crevice between lanes of bumper-to-bumper traffic.

I breathe for what feels like the first time in several minutes and look around for assurance that what just happened was real, not just surreal. The passenger to my left is pointing against a closed window to the spot where the incident occurred. I assume he is narrating to his driver what happened. I cannot see the driver, and the driver had no line of sight to the incident. No one to my left or right cracks open a window. We are screaming in silence and collective isolation.

When traffic starts moving, very slowly at first, the vehicle previously under attack follows obediently. Maybe the driver is in shock under the terrorized notion of his or her brains splattering against the window should the helmeted antihero have chosen to react differently to the challenge of a tactical countermove. The car turns off the road suddenly, no blinker. Like myself, the driver may be evaluating the odds that the aggressors on the motorcycle may still be looking along

the same road to get the intended job done. Having come away empty-handed from the first try, the level of desperation built into the next attempt could result in a tragedy on either side of the barrel.

I drive home in a focused haze, eyes darting in all directions, hands steady on the ten and two o'clock positions of the wheel. Sobered by the scene I left behind, I consider one that may still lie ahead.

Bethlehem (Belén)

The children squirm and jerk in their mother's arms. Skinny legs of early adolescents wrap around the mom's bellies or, when the mothers themselves tire, hitch an off-the-hip perch suitable for overgrown toddlers. Tirelessly, the mothers look after the children's endless needs.

Zigzagging on and off the gravel-dirt floor, unable to focus for even an instant, a few little ones make invisible urgent tasks out of nothingness. Others, with severe mobility challenges, lie inert on mobile cots. Wheelchairs or walkers would help many, but only one bubble-gum colored wheelchair with a worn-out seat cushion and faded side pads is being used by a lucky boy in the community center's courtyard.

The mothers feel safe here. Once a week they carry their children up the hill and through the dust to receive guidance and support on parenting for disabilities. In small increments the subtle improvements are manifest as university volunteers stretch and massage limbs during free physical therapy sessions that would be otherwise unthinkable for family budgets. The husbands as breadwinners cannot justify the cost of educating children with special abilities, let alone apportion funds to accommodate changes that could make their sons or daughters more comfortable day to day.

A lone, brave male accompanies the mothers. He is a single-parent father determined to give his disabled daughter more than the shrug society assigns her. All smiles, he participates actively in the neighborhood parental support group. His presence reaffirms the mothers' hope that their spouses may one day follow his lead in unflinching advocacy for an educational experience blended into mainstream schooling.

In this open play space, as Lima's summer beats down onto the high hills, children of all ages and disabilities play together or coexist peacefully in their separate worlds. The mixed age groups are peers in implicit solidarity.

At work or at home, the husbands are absent, in protest and denial. They have not let go of expectations that did not come to pass. Many are on edge and irritated by the patience required for daily struggles in the household. Support sessions for the menfolk are separate and address the topic of violence in delicate conversations the coaches must cover to successfully work both sides of the equation.

Weighted by an unnamed taboo, and without having mourned the loss of what never came to be, the fathers do not accept the uniqueness of the delicate puzzle of their seed. Rather, they question why they should invest in schooling for children they think will not give back in future. Finances also exert a crushing limitation on

choice. They are parents detached from the dreams of their children.

I focus on the faces of two Deaf siblings in the back row sitting with their mother. They move in and out of connection in their separate worlds of silence. Though in their early teens, they have never received any formal education, the facilitator tells me. The sister smiles constantly. In addition to being Deaf, she has cerebral palsy and walks with an angled and unsteady step. Maybe she is just happy to be out of the house and with a lively bunch of kids, moms, balloons, and merriment. In the front row, a girl balances on her mother's knee. Half of her face is missing, and one eye is patched over by displaced skin.

Today the gathering celebrates the last session of 2018 plus Christmas, ten days too early. The wall of tension from home is absent. The children's physical and developmental needs are a challenge, not a burden. Each parent-child pair receives together the holiday-wrapped gift for the child. What is inside the wrapping paper is almost irrelevant.

An energetic teenager with Down syndrome sits next to me. She unwraps her gift. Overcome with joy, she removes every miniature item in the make-believe cosmetic case. She tries on a plastic ring ten times too small for her pudgy forefinger and holds out her hand for me to admire, as if sporting a diamond stud ring. I am contagiously stricken by her enthusiasm.

In the confusion of gift-giving and camera-clicking, mothers find a way to quickly move their children to where the packages are being handed out, despite enormous coordination issues for the children who cannot walk.

"Belén!" the announcer calls out.

Belén in Spanish means "Bethlehem," the land of sacred sites for Christian, Muslim, and Jewish faiths. It is an interesting name choice for a society chugging uphill on a steep learning curve to embrace diversity. At stake is the personal realization of all children and, by extension, the future of the country.

"Belén!" the organizer at the microphone calls out again.

The historical reference of the ancient hill country is not lost on the families. Like Bethlehem, this meeting place of faiths helps the mothers and the one father have the inner strength to make it through until the next week.

The little girl charges forth with her mother to receive the gift, claiming her right to be publicly celebrated, visibly unshamed, in the game, and earning her namesake.

Skirts Held Hostage

She looked like the morning caught her before the night had ended: false eyelashes, thick makeup, strawberry-yellow hair, and a tight dress whose hem gripped, then slipped from the top of her thigh. A tiny head and pale face peeped out from under the exaggerated drama of her layered appearance.

I was negotiating with Juan, the tailor, while I heard her voice on the phone with her mother – a conversation that commanded most of her attention and a large part of the acoustics in the narrow aisle of Surquillo public market #2.

I tried not to judge, but her likeness to the sisterhood of women (and men) ready to fulfill the supply-and-demand needs of genders in opposition had me wondering whether she might not be a service provider to Juan on his off hours. Equally possible, though an unlikely pairing, she could be Juan's girlfriend. Or, she could be just another client, like myself, seeking to have ready-made clothes fit a non-ready-made body.

Her height and mine were the same, as she stood and I sat on a low stool in front of Juan's sewing machine. Everyone along the aisle could hear the loud instructions she gave her mother about keeping the children in line and making sure they earned their keep. When

Juan and I reached an agreement on the mending requirements for each of my three skirts, I stood up to leave. The *petite* woman bid her mother good-bye and took my place alongside Juan's sewing machine table.

At our second encounter, I decided the woman was not Juan's girlfriend as I listened to her outline for the tailor the work she needed done to the garment she was leaving for repair. I waited for her to finish. Juan was amenable to providing quick tailoring assistance while I left his stall and picked up some fresh vegetables.

Juan does good work and is reasonably priced. His sartorial solutions are clever. The downside is his absenteeism on the day customers inevitably come by to pick up their mended items. This erratic dependability is a challenge offset by his more positive qualities and his dependability in the area of interesting small talk.

Through Juan, for instance, I learned that sweet potatoes have properties contributing to healthy hair. He also shared his dreams of visiting Italy one day, though he had no idea where he would go nor what he would see. He had curiosity about the world beyond Peru's borders. He wanted to know, for instance, exactly how many people died in the coordinated terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. He asked me what foods I missed from my home country and why I liked living in Peru. This was my level of engagement with Juan the tailor until the day he held my skirts hostage.

Juan had not shown up for two weeks beyond the date when alterations on my three skirts were due. I had stopped by his shop multiple times and now swung by after dark upon self-ejecting from a packed metro to check up on his availability yet again. The green grating on his stall-front was down and locked firmly at the bottom with a fat padlock. According to the seamstress next door, Señora Victoria, Juan had not come to work all day.

As the neighbor and Juan had a non-collaborative relationship and were generally not on speaking terms, I was careful to limit the information I gathered about Juan through her. I knew she would be keen to further smear his reputation. Juan had not shown up for weeks, she said. I could read the "I told you so" in her eyes.

Despite the rift, the neighbor was the only person who could tip me off, should Juan return to work. She suggested I come back the next day to check, and to do so before the authorities broke the lock to his stall and auctioned off at the central market whatever they found. Rumor had it Juan was nine-months behind in rent payments at his market stall.

Señora Victoria was a willing collaborator. She instructed me to copy off her sewing machine two cell numbers and gave me permission to call either one from time to time. The idea was I would rush over to the market to reclaim the skirts I left in Juan's care weeks prior, should she confirm he was present in the market.

Weeks passed, and Juan's stall remained shuttered. He had not come to work at all. I asked a security guard what my options were if the wait time became increasingly indefinite. He directed me to look for a municipal police officer on patrol, but there were none. I returned to Señora Victoria, Juan's neighbor.

"How do I break into his stall? I paid for the work in advance. What if Juan never returns, and what will the other clients do?" I asked her.

Señora Victoria watched social justice brew inside of me, sensed danger, and blurted out the name and location of the market administrator – a piece of information she had withheld until now.

The market administrator, despite her power, approached tenant issues with flexibility. In this downtrodden neighborhood, a day's intake is unpredictable at best. The administrator was non-committal about a resolution for the case. Kicking Juan out of the stall to face an un-rented space was not something she wished to entertain. Harmony amongst tenants and owners helped everyone weather the uncertainties of a free market.

She, too, mentioned breaking into Juan's stall, confiscating items of value, and bringing them to a central repository. I departed the market, calculating my gains and losses, including time and energy wasted plus needless fretting.

As I exited, I crossed the *petite* faux strawberry blonde. She was rushing into the market. Our worlds converged. She was talking on the phone to her mother (again).

"I'll call you right back, Mom," she said, and hung up to turn her full attention to me.

We bonded.

"He's not there," I said, with no need to define the subject. The tailor was our shared irritant.

"I wonder if something bad happened to him," she mused. I was embarrassed this thought had never occurred to me.

"You're right. This is the first time he hasn't shown up for so many weeks in a row," I confirmed.

With that she knew Juan was still missing in action. I saved her a wasted trip to the market's interior. She turned around and left. Although I assumed I would never again see my skirts and that my money was lost, her observation changed my approach. I would have to be patient. I did not return to the market for several weeks. Maybe Juan was hurt.

One Saturday, out of curiosity, I dialed the number I had copied off the neighboring seamstress' sewing machine.

"Señora Victoria. It's Judith, calling about the neighbor."

"Your jacket is ready," she said, without hesitation.

I thanked her then realized she mentioned a jacket.

"But I had left skirts with Juan, not a jacket."

"Yes, I know, but I can't say that," she whispered into the phone.

In a continued whisper, Señora Victoria explained she did not want her neighbor to know she was giving me a signal. The case of the three missing miniskirts had escalated into a secret operation requiring encoded conversation.

I dropped what I was doing and headed to the market. When Juan saw me approach his stall, he covered his face in shame. He was with a customer, so I lingered on the side to let him finish.

Juan was dressed all in black, with flecks of white lint on his black T-shirt. He is a stocky fellow and barely fits into his narrow stall under normal circumstances. He tried to raise himself to greet me but he had trouble standing straight. His leg was injured and his ribs, sore. While doing repairs, the roof of his home had collapsed on him, he said. I reminded him he could have called to let me know his circumstance.

"I have no cell phone," was all he offered, furthering my remorse for dwelling on three tiny skirts with problems as insurmountable and circular as his own. I could not bring myself to demand he return my money or articles of clothing.

Juan promised to complete the work Sunday and asked me to return that day at 3 p.m. He took down my cell number (though he had no phone). He looked confused, maybe due to the pain. He could not remember my name, which he usually enunciated with great pride as if it were a full sentence in English. Injured, no cell phone, and now barely a roof, the rumor in the market that Juan had not paid rent for nine months was about to come true, if not already so.

I returned Sunday, the next day, at 3 p.m. to face a shuttered stall. I was miserable – more for him than for me. I forgot about the skirts and left.

A couple of weeks later, in the evening when I should have left my desk at work but had not done so, I received a call from an unknown landline number. The person had a timid voice, identified himself by full name, and asked how I was. I had no idea with whom I was speaking but was embarrassed to admit this since the person spoke as if we were on familiar terms. When he told me to come by the next day to pick up my skirts, I realized this was Juan the tailor, with a new or borrowed number.

Juan was indeed in his market stall the next day. He had lost out on two months of work, was in pain with a bruised leg and sore ribcage, and he had bills to pay. A family member the night before had passed a warmed herbal concoction over the side of the body that received the blow. The natural remedy had brought about temporary relief but was starting to wear off.

As always, Juan did a great job. He picked up each skirt to explain his handiwork. Most skirts either turn circles around my waist or fall off at the hips. Thanks to Juan's alterations, I have put together a professional wardrobe.

"Bring me whatever you need fixed," Juan pleaded.

I had paid in full in advance out of respect for the end product. Though late, Juan had delivered. It was important for him to keep his word.

Contrary to what the seamstress snitch – and my ally – may have thought as she toiled on the other side of a shared wall, disorganization and dishonesty are not equivalents.

Used Coat

I do not sell my clothes. I give them away. It is a matter of principle. The lifecycle of a wardrobe is finite. When the time is right, the clothing items should move on to new ownership. Someone else's style and form will lend the clothing new vigor and shed its fade. Garments acquired. Garments retired. On another's skin, garments admired.

Among items I give away are purchases I come to regret shortly after leaving the store, cutting off the labels, and throwing away the receipt. Plagued by guilt for having bought something I cannot bring myself to wear, I self-impose forced deployment. If I continue to feel alien inside the article of clothing, I set it aside as a giveaway, doubly committed to making sure it ends up in more appreciative hands. Shopping under the influence of mood can lead to these miscalculations or the illusion that I can successfully adapt, outside my color wheel.

My misguided winter coat decision, nevertheless, was the result of size considerations, not color. To accommodate the many layers I wear in winter, both indoors and outside, and convinced of the extra room I would need, I chose a size L for the outermost layer: the coat.

In the huge hangar that functions as a shopping center where I bought the large, cream-colored, above-the-hips winter coat, hundreds of stalls line the long aisles, mirrors are luxury items, and dressing rooms are out of the question. From a borrowed shard of mirror found at a neighboring stall, between crouching and tiptoeing to seek angles of myself in the glass, I had a vague idea the coat was a brilliant, practical solution to contain the excessive layering I planned to wear throughout the next six months of winter.

When I reached home and looked into the full-length mirror, I saw a coat for a woman three times my size hanging off my bony shoulders and making a mockery of my slender figure. I had incurred in a gross error of judgment. For the remainder of my lifetime, there was no way I would fit into a coat this size. I would have to return it, although neither refunds, returns, store credit, or exchanges were standard policies of the informal sector.

I folded the coat into a cloth bag and put it aside, untouched as the day I purchased it. With my elevator pitch ready, I returned to the commercial hangar the following weekend and approached the original vendor. Seeking his sympathy, I summarized my purpose for returning. I had bought the coat a week ago, had never worn it, and never would.

Three hours into the workday, the vendor had not yet made a single sale. Kind but categorical, he explained

he was unable to take back the coat, not even for a cash return that represented a percentage of loss for me as the customer.

“It’s a beautiful coat. Try the used clothing market. Someone will buy it.” He smiled and directed me toward the outer aisles of the hangar.

I was depressed. My calculation had been faulty. I was determined not to suffer further loss on account of my own stupidity. I folded the coat again and placed it back into the cloth bag to keep it looking “new.”

Within the sprawling hangar, the used clothing aisles are few and crowded. There, a brisk business takes place and totally different rhythm of exchange. The vendors are skilled at flattering their clients and have a keen eye and sense for what individual clients want. Most of the vendors are women, and they work hard.

While looking for the used-coats area, I passed by stalls selling every specialty item possible – socks, skirts, jeans, sweaters, and undergarments. Standing on a raised platform in the middle of an eclectic collection of coats, blazers, and jackets, I found a dynamic woman, short in stature with broad shoulders. I laid out my cards quickly, taking advantage of the momentary absence of customers browsing through her stall.

“I have a beautiful coat in perfect condition. I bought it by mistake a week ago. I’ve never worn it. I’ll give you

a great price." Unfolding the coat, I held it up for her to see.

"How much do you want for it?" she asked me.

I slashed a percentage off the original sale price and gave her my offer. She slipped on the cream-colored short coat, buttoned it up neatly, and called across the aisle to borrow a rectangular mirror no more than a foot in height. With her jet-black hair falling over the shoulders of the coat, she looked beautiful. It fit every nuance of her figure.

I held up the mirror so she could view herself from the middle of the platform of orphaned clothes. Our natural roles had reversed. I was the vendor. She was the client.

"It looks stunning on you," I encouraged. "It's a perfect fit. If it had looked that way on me, I wouldn't be here trying to sell it."

Selling coats was her business. She knew a good-quality coat when she saw one. She kept smoothing out the front part of the coat against her chest, admiringly, and checking her backside in the mirror. The coat sat where it should, above the hips, and revealed a fuller figure. She stretched out her arms to make sure the sleeves were the right length.

"What do you think?" she asked her neighbor and competitor, who had lent us the mirror. From the stall across the narrow aisle, the neighbor nodded her head in approval.

"I'm telling you, it looks really good," I reaffirmed. I reduced the price further, embarrassed to be selling my clothes and eager to forget I had ever made such an error.

She continued to view herself in the tiny mirror. She had to move up and down to see bits and parts of herself. Through that composite mosaic in her mind, she would decide whether to make the purchase. Now she would know what the rest of us go through, I thought to myself.

"I don't have enough money," she said suddenly.

She began to share her story. She was a single mother and had difficult choices to make. The little money she made today had to cover her kids' basic necessities. I was touched by her earnestness. A moment of complicity bound us. In this outtake from her environment, she had become the customer opening up, searching for passing relief through retail therapy. Facing the oncoming traffic flow, she spread the coat over the other clothes on display, with one last look of regret that she did not have enough money to buy it.

Two women in succession scooped up the coat. The size was too large for one. The other woman commented on its elegance and moved on.

"Yes," the vendor said. "Warm but light. Very fashionable."

Both women continued down the increasingly packed aisle. I pretended to be interested in other items available at the vendor's stall so customers would not notice my lingering presence.

When the rush of clients subsided and no sales ensued, she said: "Come back next weekend, later in the day."

"Don't you have other clothes you can bring?" she added.

I realized she liked my style and could do good business with the novelty of imported goods in this very local market. Made in USA would give her stall cachet.

"I will try," I told her.

I meant I would try everything. I would try to come back. I would try to have patience. I would try not to be disappointed that I had to spend more time than I wished in this people-intensive garment gallery to compensate for my error. I would try to come back later in the day when she would have generated enough disposable income to buy my coat. I would try to find

the magic hour when she would have money and before the prostitutes of the district began filtering out onto street corners for the night's turnover. I would try to make it work for her and try to make it work for me because, this time only, I was not willing to absorb the cost of my miscalculation.

The weekend eventually I returned, with a few intervening weeks for good measure, the vendor had new items in stock. With the onset of winter in Lima, she had brought back from the highlands flannel pajamas. They were piled high on the front table of her stall. Coats were relegated to hanging off the vertical side panels, in a top-to-bottom cascade of clutter. Again I waited patiently while the hoards sifted through checkered and striped pajama sets so I could have a few minutes of quiet exchange to show her my goods.

In addition to the coat, now a few weeks older but still unworn, I brought articles of clothing I should have decommissioned long ago but could not for reasons of sentimentality. One by one, she admired the items and held them against her body dreamily to see how it would feel to wear them and whether the sizes were compatible. A rush of women clients approached. She quickly spread out over the pajama bottoms and tops the cream-colored winter coat and my Betsey Johnson designer swing raincoat with bright pink interior lining. She kept for herself, off to the side, the diagonally cut leopard-print shirt and low-cut bleached jeans.

Like magnets, every passing client picked up the two coats to examine them.

“How much for the short coat?”

The vendor upped my original offer by ten *soles* – her profit margin. With the public before us, she spoke as if the items were part of her stock.

“Something must be wrong with the coat. The price is too good,” commented a customer.

Unsure I should step in but not wanting the seller’s reputation in the market to suffer, I confessed: “It was my coat. It’s in excellent condition. There’s nothing wrong with it.” The client looked me up and down. Convinced of my foreignness and sincerity, she smirked and moved on.

Another woman carved out her place among the elbows and picked up the raincoat with the pink lining. She had a generous figure, but the tailored, indented back of the coat accentuated her waist, doing her an enormous favor. The fabric of the three-quarter sleeves stretched to make it around her thick upper arms, which a customer in passing took it upon herself to point out as if this were a matter that concerned her, or maybe just a free insult she could get off her chest to discharge the burden of her own frustrations.

The woman was not dissuaded. She loved the coat. It was coquetry defined. She and the vendor settled on a price, and it was gone. I remained off to the side, feigning disinterest. Until the winter coat was sold, my business was not over.

A mother and daughter approached the stand while the father hung back to let the women shop. The mother – the fashion decision-maker of the family – picked out the cream coat. She showed it to her daughter, who obediently tried it on. Unlike the vendor, who sported the coat with flirtatious sophistication, the coat merely accentuated the daughter’s insipidness. She seemed to have no volition of her own. She twirled in various directions for her mother’s assessment. Ready for final approval, the mother looked in the direction of her spouse, who assented with little more than a cursory inspection of his daughter from afar. Then something unusual happened.

In a low voice, the mother asked the vendor the price. In a lower voice, the mother asked the vendor to state the price differently out loud. With that second price, the wife approached her husband for funds.

Out of a deal, she carved another deal. The difference between the vendor’s first price and the woman-to-woman whispered second price would create a small personal reserve the wife could dip into for urgencies of the family or her own needs, much like the vendor

balancing priorities of the children and a rare treat for herself.

With the two coats sold, I was ready to head out. We had not even negotiated the market value of the raincoat, but we both knew the approximate price our present operating environment could bear.

The vendor paid me a fair cut for the coats. I would not have argued, whatever she had offered. I told her to keep the leopard-print top and use the jeans as she wished. I was thankful to have learned invaluable lessons about the dynamics of the informal economy – one woman to another and on to the next.

Vintage *[vin-TAJ]*

Üz took on the colossal task of helping his father detox from compulsive shopping and ridding him of an inordinate accumulation of more clothing than he could wear. Maybe the collection had also begun to encroach on the family's living space. Unsustainable in the long run regardless, the son obtained his father's permission to sell off the aging wardrobe, which included sizes and styles the father had long since outgrown or never fit into to begin with.

Üz, a self-made alternative rock and event-space conceptualizer, is also a planetary citizen. He takes on projects that are holistic, moving the shared destiny of the human race forward, suggesting lifestyle adjustments and widening for humanity aesthetic options.

I came upon one of Üz's alternative events atop Casa Fernandini, a pastry-cream-colored mansion from 1913 that rounds off the corners of Jirón Ica and Jirón Rufino Torrico, in Lima's colonial center. On a sun-flooded afternoon, the day after Lima celebrated its 485th anniversary, I reached the building's rooftop terrace by stairs, climbing alongside the now defunct first elevator of the city, a U.S.-made Otis lift that blogger Neydo Hidalgo calls part of Peru's "industrial patrimony."

The administrator who narrated the history of the building, while I remained awe-struck on the first floor of its decadent opulence, noted visitors from around the world identify with the European-crafted home because they find elements of their heritage adorning the interiors in the collectibles and furnishings. Mining magnate and original owner Eulogio Erasmo Fernandini had populated the place with Art Nouveau and classical throwbacks from different countries in Europe.

On the second-floor terrace, entrepreneurial Üz and I embarked on conversational tracks related to his vision. He described his rooftop project as vintage, or *vin-TAJ* as he pronounced it in Spanish. He encouraged me to visit the art in the adjoining interior rooms. I had already noticed the risqué wall images that left the past century behind as well as its Europe-centered gaze when the guide-administrator let me wander freely on the top floor with the two other unannounced guests he took on a tour an hour earlier.

Üz showed me the official event flier. In the text, linguistic blending and nouveau orthography predominated. He explained *Sansed* was the Spanish pronunciation for the English "sunset," and *Flipown* was Spanish for "flip out." I was catching on and asked if Life of Padre (mentioned in the flier) was his personal band, certain that neither Italian friar Padre Pio or the Capuchin order would have a role in the live music line-up he planned. It also seemed a likely group

name for a guy who mined the treasures of his father's closet for a living. Üz smiled.

While on the topic of linguistics, I had some other concerns. His pronunciation of "vintage" sounded French, yet I could not recall ever having seen or used a French cognate for this word. Though both of us were Google-proficient, I asked him about the origin of his pronunciation, which was based on Üz's understanding of how the word was "supposed" to be pronounced in English. Later on, I confirmed that *ancien, antique,* and *classique* are proper French translations of the term. I also asked Üz if he thought the *z* in his name could be pronounced [s], [z], or [th]. Although far from standard, he stated *[ooze]* was the "standard" pronunciation. Should any namesakes in Spain emerge, they can duke out the Castilian pronunciation rules for the consonant *z* following a vowel.

By now, the ideas from both sides were cascading. I tried to describe the difference between a voiced and voiceless *z* in English but could only come up with *Uzbekistan, zebra,* and *uzi* as examples – all voiced. No examples of an unvoiced *z* came to mind, but I hit the pause button to fact-check later. (It turns out the letter *z* has only a voiced version of itself. When voiceless, it is written as *s*.)

We turned back to the circular economy aspect of Üz's vintage project, pronunciation aside. Repurposed under new relevance and the branding of Coloso

(colossal), the father's clothing has begun a new life cycle. The initiative was sustainable and replicable.

I remember inspecting from the rack of shirts a long sleeveless basketball jersey with the Converse label intact. Brown wavy zebra pennants, suggestive of flames in motion, emanated from two vertical black-velvet strips along both sides. It was hip, retro, modern, *vin-TAJ, nouveau,* and *classique*. It was the perfect top for a tall slinky Peruvian – Üz was one of a mere handful – ready to mix-and-match cultures and defy the structural fissures in the retaining walls of a rooftop garden, open-air monument to post-colonial, post-Republican Lima as she comes of age and steps boldly into her 485th birthday year.

No Average Mom

In the 1960s I rescued from the family trash bin a turquoise portable transistor radio in perfect working order. Never clear why it was discarded in the first place, the deal I cut with my father was I got to keep it. Finders, keepers – as the adage goes. From that acquisition blossomed a life-long passion for radios and radio programming – late at night, early morning, during drive time, via short wave, and in foreign languages. The timbre of the human voice, its intimacy and cadence, fills spaces of silence like no other.

When audio streaming technology made live global radio accessible 24 hours a day, it was time to place my collection of beat-up short-wave radios on the curb for trash collection. Access to world radio without having to keep a logbook of coordinates, program hours, broadcast language/s, and reception quality meant more time to devote to my endless appetite for the spoken language.

Three months into 2020, COVID-19 overtook life in Peru as we knew it. Radio during this period brokered the silence of our separate spaces. While social, professional, and academic networks shifted to virtual platforms of remote collaboration, businesses that could not weather the extended pause caved to overwhelming economic losses.

Outside work in the security and health sectors, others of us were among the few to perform permissible excepted categories of work on premises. In the public venue I might see a single newspaper vendor at daybreak or a lone gas pump attendant on the evening ride home, but not much else. We kept company with the unnatural silence of Lima's streets.

Until the third full week in June, I came upon an average of only one person a day at work once inside the security perimeter. In my immediate workspace, silence was the norm. If I heard something, I would get up to investigate. Discreet sounds could be a sign of life on Earth, and I was eager to prove I was not alone on the planet.

One morning I heard chatter at low volume between office cubicles. Only five months ago, the murmur would have been a healthy sign of coexistence and unremarkable. In the new normal of unoccupied workspaces, however, the voices warranted closer inspection, as it takes at least two to hold forth an exchange, and I had been the only employee physically present in the sprawling office all week. I got up from my desk to check.

The talk was coming out of a cell phone hanging off the top of a cleaning cart parked in the aisle between open cubicles and interior offices. When the cleaner appeared in the aisle from an office, I greeted her and

asked how she avoided steep charges for data use by listening to the radio on her cell phone.

"It's not online radio. I block the cell to receive this FM program all morning."

"What I great idea. I'll have to see if my cell phone has that feature. Why is the program important to you?" I asked, completely unprepared for her answer.

"It is an education-from-home radio broadcast. I have to follow it so I know what my children are learning at school each day. When I get home at night, I can make sure they follow their lessons."

I was floored. It was not enough she spent mornings cleaning offices, moving from one empty cubicle to the next, disinfecting surfaces to keep us safe on the off chance one day soon a tiny fraction of the workforce might return to occupy these spaces. A contributor to our health safety in the workplace, she toiled double by listening in on her children's lessons, acquiring the knowledge to help when her real day job began, that of securing her children's future by taking an active role in safeguarding their education.

By day two, the chat was so active – easily one hundred messages in a day – I selected "silence for one year," making it possible to see the activity without hearing it.

Democracy in the Chat Room

The Tower-A WhatsApp chat lights up. My neighbors are at it again. Two days into Peru's national state of health emergency, declared late March 15 and entered into force after 11:59 p.m. the same day, an apartment owner on the first floor of my building took the liberty of deploying common sense to help residents largely building-bound under the newly imposed self-quarantine rules. Gone was the char force who had simplified the lives of Lima's 43 districts by tending to security, maintenance, and cleaning of building premises.

With the first-floor creation of a Tower-A WhatsApp group, some two dozen neighbors – many of whom had never spoken to one another, let alone met before – entered into communication over common challenges during the extended COVID-19 coronavirus disease obligatory social immobilization period. By day two, the chat was so active – easily one hundred messages in a day – I selected "silence for one year," making it possible to see the activity without hearing it. During the state of emergency, my workload mushroomed. The U.S. Embassy's effort to repatriate thousands of U.S. citizens in Peru meant that the pings from the apartment building chat were diminishing my ability to concentrate on the eighteen other group chats I had been invited to join that were a priority and critical

for getting things done in the new social- and tele-distancing environment. On silent, I could glance at the Tower-A chat erratically in the evening.

Tower-A discussions were useful for a range of information. Mostly I wanted to know when I was assigned to sweep the outside entry to the building or wipe down the principal and service elevators with bleach. I could usually only get to these tasks at night or just before the curfew took effect. Whether I was assigned or not, I mopped down weekly with a combination of water and bleach the shared landing between my apartment and the elderly neighbor across the way on my floor.

I was overworked and could not participate in the sharing of ideas about how to avoid mold or rust, which neighborhood grocery store would deliver, whose child's toy was found in the elevator, or why the garage door was left open representing a threat to our collective security. On day one of the state of emergency the garage door designated for entry was cordoned off. It was due to be repaired that day, but with all businesses shuttered, that would not be happening for quite some time. Ever since, the narrow exit garage door was also the entrance. No one was doing much of either regardless, and the main door to the building was permanently out of order, as long as our lives were in a similar state and there were no doormen to man them.

With the exception of one neighbor and myself, whose professional activities were permissible under the state of emergency, everyone else appeared to be stuck at home. So, too, were the occupants' housekeepers unless they provided around-the-clock sleep-in service. The others sheltered in place at their own homes to observe the quarantine and protect their families from the highly contagious virus churning its way through a slightly flattened bell curve and a nation trying to push back on its arrival.

During one twelve-hour interval while I was away at work, 250 messages accumulated among Tower-A residents. I read into the chat to see what was up that had sparked such a silent outcry. After much discussion among the neighbors about whether we could insist the two alternating doormen return to work for our own convenience (in violation of the state of emergency), they put the proposal to a building vote. I was very late in submitting my ballot but I could see the apartment-by-apartment tally was on. As a foreign citizen in a distant land, I had yet to be told I could not exercise my right to democracy inside the chat room. As I ate my "lunch" at 10 p.m., I cast the deciding vote, signing off with my apartment number (not an entirely anonymous e-vote) and "NO." With my sparse presence on the chat, I felt obligated to note my reasoning. As the doormen were not armed security guards, I noted, obliging them to come to work would go against the spirit of a state of emergency that mandated nationwide self-isolation. This could result

in their being detained by the police or armed forces out patrolling the streets. About an hour before that, a neighbor complained about someone jumping up and down in the apartment above her – no doubt, a child going stir crazy – leaving my uncontested vote to hang out to dry and punctuate the chat stream for the evening.

On day 33 of the mandatory nationwide quarantine, a neighbor asked me at 7 p.m., "pardon my curiosity, but what is your line of work?"

"I am a career diplomat."

"Oh right. You're all leaving."

It took me twelve minutes to respond. I had to calm my nerves to avoid what would have been an undiplomatic response. My efforts over the last month could not be described as those of someone leaving, and my neighbor had not bothered to inquire what country I represented in carrying out my diplomatic mission overseas. I limited my response to a bright mention of our long-standing collaboration with Peru, adding a link to that day's U.S. government press release about a $2.5 million donation to support Peru in its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, noting simply, "here is today's news."

"How great!" the neighbor responded while the rest of the building fell into unusual (embarrassed?) silence

for this otherwise chatty, and somewhat gossipy, group.

Today is Sunday, day 42 of the COVID-19 state of emergency era in Peru. No one moves. Sunday movement is only for frontline health workers, security forces, and sanitation workers. No shopping. No emergency banking. No pharmacy visits. It is finally a time to write this up, a month and a half late and 14 days early of a possible end of just the beginning of the COVID era.

Health and resilience to us all.

The municipal authorities have placed a man in white bio-suit as greeter for the few of us that shop this early. He points the no-touch digital forehead thermometer toward the area below my frontal lobe.

I Have Blueberries!

I stand within a small white-painted circle on the ground. Two people fill other circles in front of me, and three behind. As if pieces on a human game board, we advance to the next circle predictably when the person in front of us moves forward one space. The green grocer dispensing vegetables and tubers at the line's front is dressed for the frontlines. She is encased in a drab-colored COVID bio-suit, hair hidden under a hair net. Her face is somewhere lost inside a reusable respirator-gas mask. I think I see a suggestion of her cheek, but it may also be wishful thinking, trying to ascribe a living organism to this parody of a market woman. If we should cross paths in future, I would be unable to recognize her. I refocus on the present tense. In its own way it is more bearable.

My turn is up to advance one circle on the board, then move ahead to recite a short list of items to the woman in the gas mask. I stand six feet from her but close enough to see she is guided by economy of movement and is trying to abbreviate the day. It is just past seven o'clock in the morning. The list by rote cuts down on time and shortens my stay, well ahead of possible crowding. I choose this inner-neighborhood market because the municipality and its vendors are adhering responsibly to recommended health protocols. In fact, the current hygiene standards upheld by the handful

of stalls offering fresh produce and poultry surpass what was considered normal before the *new* normal set heavily upon us.

The municipal authorities have placed a man in white bio-suit as greeter for the few of us that shop this early. He points the no-touch digital forehead thermometer toward the area below my frontal lobe. I am double-masked myself, and do not know where to look as he does this but have little chance to consider. He directs me to step into a bin filled with a bleach-soaked cloth. No sooner do I look down, I must look up again so he can squirt alcoholized gel onto my hands. As he does so, liquid enters the base of my fingers and drips onto my fingerless gloves, making for one more item to wash upon arrival home. I know the routine.

There are a handful of vendors authorized to sell in a few rubrics only. No one has salted peanuts – a classic snack food available in all markets. I have learned to stop asking. When I finish my list, I remember what I forgot. Entering the circle of circles is too late now. At upscale supermarkets and pharmacies, they prefer bright colored lines of delineation separating, for instance, the distance between the cashier and customer waiting in line to pay. Every time I need to restock a basic necessity, I have the impression I am in line to clear immigration. And yet, given the global disruption of travel, this simile could not be farthest from reality, with all land, sea, and air borders closed in Peru.

The sole authorized fruit vendor in the market during the extended quarantine period has not shown up today. It is unusual. People who live on earnings day to day have been desperate to renew economic activity. The week before, when I went to pay my home internet provider bill and lifeline connecting me to my work and the world, the guard standing outside the bolted premises where I paid the bill the month previous explained the bank was closed “until further notice.” In the current COVID-19 environment, he need not say more. I asked no follow-up questions, neither then nor now.

As fruit helps stem my appetite between projects, I look for an alternate outside the market. A small shop that usually sells women’s undergarments dangling from the ceiling has several large cartons filled with bananas and papaya out in front. Further into her shop I see unripe mangoes and prickly pears. I stick to the outdoor purchase plan, where air moves freely, and buy a bunch of bright yellow bananas and a papaya. The owner does not have a scale to weigh the papaya because no one has ever before asked her to weigh a sports bra or a packet of lace panties. This is clearly an improvised undertaking. She resolves the issue by running into the market, earning payback on good neighborly relations, and returns with weight and price while I keep my distance six feet from the nearest dangling panty. This shop has no circles or lines. I assume the scarce supply of customers over three harsh months has led to crop diversification from lingerie to tropical fruit.

I turn the corner for the five-minute walk home. A skinny man leans forward attentively from his parked white sedan. Under the state of emergency and quarantine measures in effect since March, street hawkers and conglomerations are forbidden.

“I have eggs,” he announces discreetly, as I pass by on the opposite sidewalk.

“Thank you. I just bought some,” I respond.

Though not quite accurate as I purchased freshly butchered chicken instead, it was close enough. At one block and a half from the market and with a brimming shopping tote visible, it should be obvious I am completing rather than commencing my shopping. To my surprise and evidencing his desperation, he continues to offer his goods though nothing is visible from where I am positioned during our exchange.

“I am sorry,” is all I can muster as I continue on my way.

From a distance I hear his third attempt, talking now to the closed windows and doors of people sheltering in place against an invisible virus.

“I have blueberries!” he says loudly, to no one.

Of all the surreptitious human activities undertaken to make ends meet, his cry to sell this small dusty-blue

fruit known for its protective qualities against heart disease and cancer at a time when people with these and other medical vulnerabilities are succumbing to COVID-19 was a lot to take in. Even at far more than six feet away, it was not difficult to connect the circles of his suffering.

Confinement brings out the soul or the devil in us, and sometimes both. This is the soul. The electrical current that produces sound through my earphones has connected...

Call Center

I untangle my earphones and turn on the lighting in the hallway for a six o'clock-in-the-morning call, the first of a long day ahead. Ten and a half hours in advance of Lima, India awaits me on the other end of the line. By seven o'clock, when the call is over, daylight lifts discreet spaces of the apartment out of darkness. The hallway where I sit at a thin console table functioning as a desk is out of the range from any direct sunlight. A 50-foot Ethernet cable connects me to the router and, through that, to the world. Without the cable, the computer's throbber would spin endlessly, offering neither internet access nor a reminder that strains on the building's bandwidth stand between me and life beyond the premises. As long as my neighbors maintain their bandwidth needs and habits, this utility will remain scarce for the common good.

For the next seven and a half hours, with the help of extension cords, chargers, two cell phones, a laptop, an iPad, and seven virtual platforms, I conduct business as usual from the hallway in my apartment.

On this particular day, in the middle of a virtual seminar with a screen full of virtual classmates and my earphones to shut out external noise, the deafening rings of the intercom begin to drown out the presenter's logic. Unless I yank out the earphones

and turn off the camera, potentially offending the distinguished speaker I introduced to the class some thirty minutes earlier, I see no way out. The intercom ringing from the building front desk into my kitchen is so loud and persistent I wonder if it is audible through the earphones to the disturbance of my classmates and the speaker I presented.

Recalling that a contact indicated a possible drop-by delivery at my home today, I send her a desperate text message noting my class is in progress and requesting the delivery be left with the doorman without even verifying whether she, the delivery, and the acoustic onslaught are related. The shrill rings from my kitchen cease instantaneously.

I change platforms another couple of times before the culminating social and work event of the day – a celebration of three years together and medley of heartfelt farewells delivered and received. Five of us are departing Peru, all in different directions. My legs are numb from the hallway draft of the damp winter chill. The white wiry earphones through which I am audible to the world feel like an extension of myself. Every day the same – alarm, wake up, eyeglasses, earphones, facial mask, step, rinse and repeat.

Gone are the lives of others painted brutally before me with brushes of their own choosing. I allow these thoughts to enter. I need a break from life in the hallway before a final round of calls for the evening. I remember

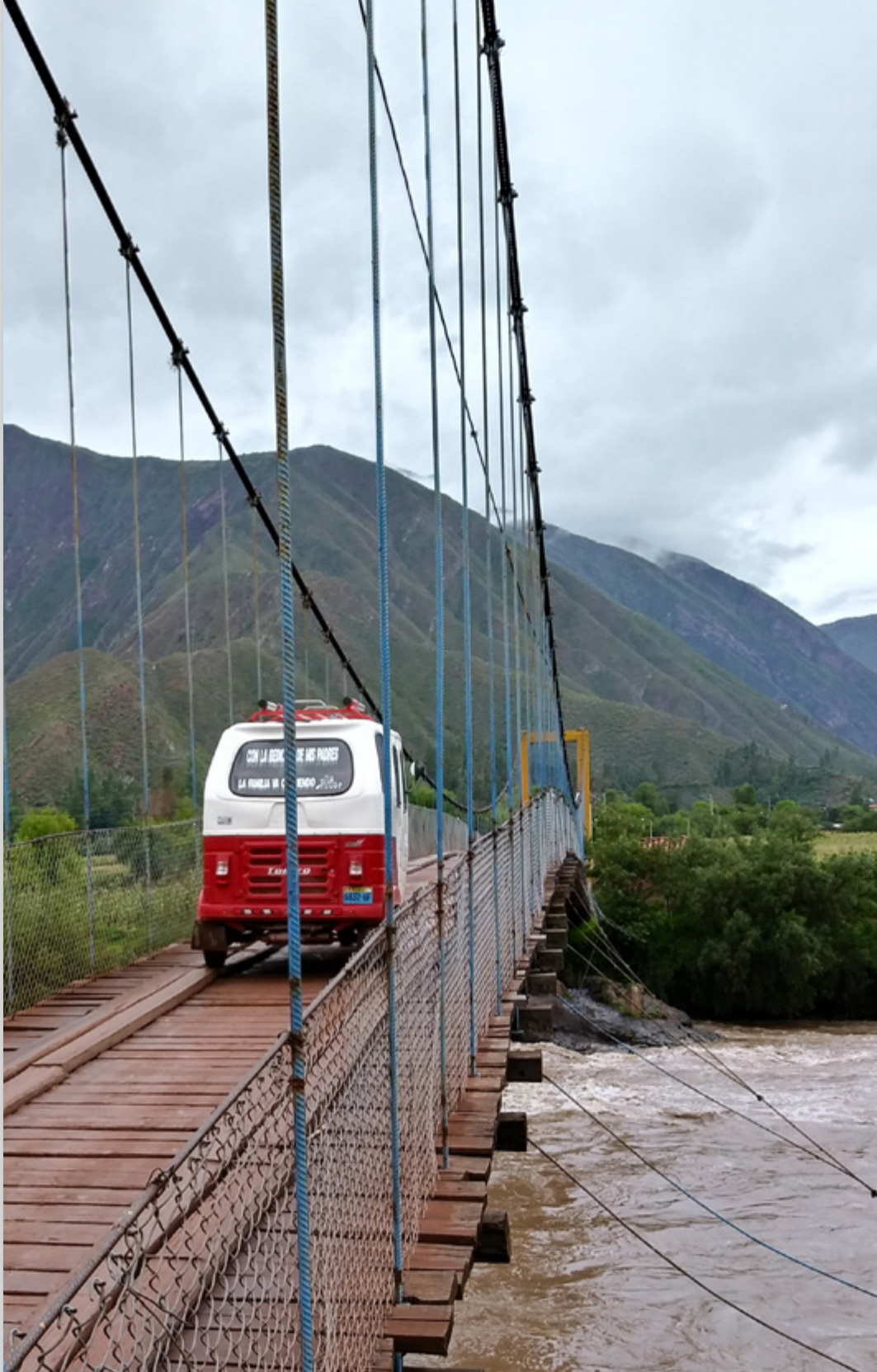
a guy in a T-shirt that says (in English), “Please cancel your subscription to YOUR ISSUES.” His potbelly causes the “YOUR ISSUES” portion of the T-shirt to protrude further into the face of oncoming pedestrian traffic, which is how he catches my attention and recollection through the scene’s reconstruction. Near the same intersection, I see a sweet shop employee rush out of a shop balancing two large square trays and a total of eight round cakes. Further adrift in the mind’s eye, I watch two young mothers on a bus sing an off-key melody from Peru’s highlands. Blaming drink for their troubles, they intone the chorus, which asks to be served *otra copa de licor*. The main singer cannot carry a tune. Her business partner breast-sleeps a baby while barely lip-synching along and scratching a plastic comb back and forth against a ribbed plastic bit. With her left breast exposed outside her shirt save for the nipple where her son is asleep with it in his mouth, her percussion is inconsistent. Nursing a child to sleep, she is also busy avoiding the slide sideways as the bus jerks through traffic. I commit these scenes to memory. They are part of the humanity I learn from and miss.

I begin final calls to close out the day. These are logistical in nature. I must alert providers of an upcoming change of address, though I invent a start date for the change to take effect because the pandemic comes with much uncertainty. I call the bank that handles my debit card. The call center representative is polite and efficient. His South Asian accent is evident through the earphones.

He verifies the old address, requests the new one, and reviews all details beginning with the date when the new address goes into effect plus the address itself. As he repeats “Chennai Place” he lengthens the double consonant. I am aware of hearing for the first time the correct pronunciation of *Chennai*, the capital city of India’s southern state of Tamil Nadu. Sidestepping formalities, I relay my pleasure at this fact to the call center representative.

In his beautiful accent he responds, “I am from India. Ma’am, I cannot miss on that one.”

Confinement brings out the soul or the devil in us, and sometimes both. This is the soul. The electrical current that produces sound through my earphones has connected not just a name to a new address but me to my gradual forward momentum from the Pacific Ocean to the Bay of Bengal. In the lilt of an accent, cold and warm ocean currents meet and continue to chart the path.



Chamba means "work" in Peruvian slang, while "after *chamba,*" is a double-slang augmentative derived from Spanglish that means "after work."

The English poem "Symphony of the Sea", on page 27 of "From Dagger to Brush" is by Majid Saeed Khan, printed with permission by Majid Saeed Khan.

Reference to Casa Fernandini in "Vintage *[vin-TAJ]*" on page 145 is from "La Casa Fernandini y el primer ascensor de Lima," in Patrimonio industrial en el Perú | Industrial Heritage of Peru (blogspot of April 14, 2016) by Neydo Hidalgo.

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(from the inside front cover)

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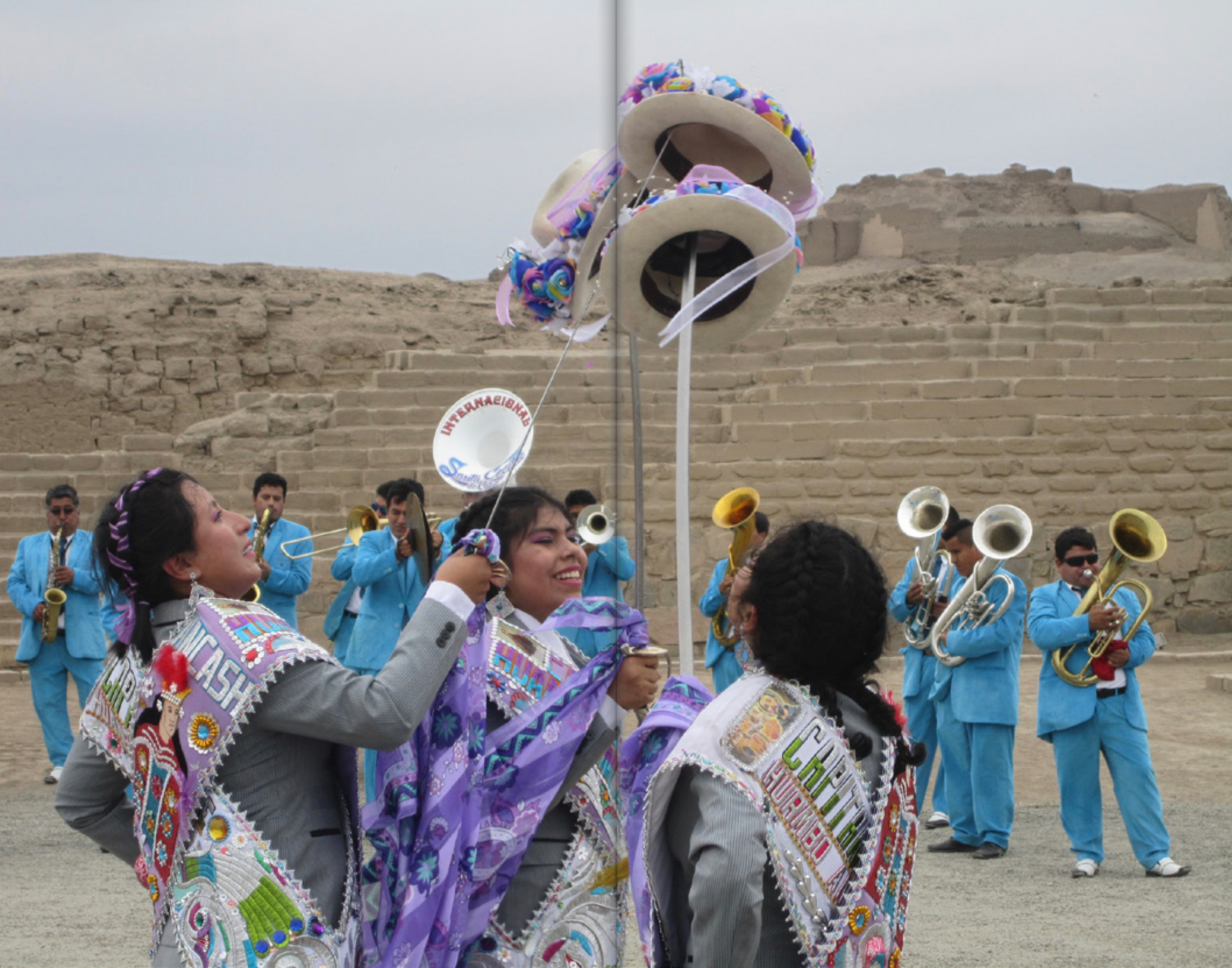
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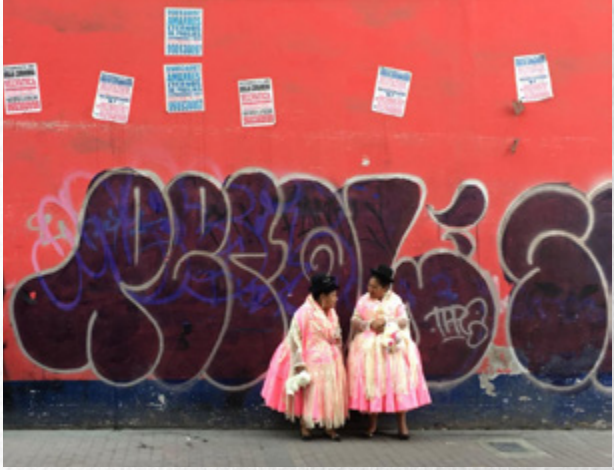

Lifted as if by an invisible force, her heels propelled her forward onto the legendary trail, through nature, in silence, where messengers of a former empire long ago had roamed. Living sketches of awe, trepidation, and humor, **Peru After Chamba** by Judith Ravin teases out the unspoken in conversation. Interlocutors of here-and-there travels impart lessons on their own terms and on their own turf, provoking a redefinition of referents. Backdrop and foreground, the megalopolis of Lima's distinct districts shares protagonism with Peru's sacred spaces, where serpents, pumas, and condors once roved. As COVID-19 threatens to fill the cleavage between summer and fall in the Southern Hemisphere, the wayfaring author ventures half-way around the globe to islands off the coast of East Africa, then returns to Peru and a world transformed in unequal measure by acts of containment and resilience. The pandemic's meteoric surge casts a long shadow over future journeys, giving rise to new ways of engaging the puzzled pieces of our humanity, and redefining commonality and dissimilitude. A collection penned outside working hours, *chamba* means "work" in Peruvian slang. The expression "after *chamba*," derived from Spanglish, serves as a double-slang augmentative that bestows upon the latitude of free time a wider, more endearing berth.

The thirty chronicles within the collection reflect on who and how we come to be.

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