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In Patagonia

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> There is a sentence that has stirred the imagination of Europe as powerfully as any call to arms. I've seen it written a hundred times, and have always felt a pang of envy for its lucky author. It is so jaunty, so unreasonably larger than life. It promises to deliver the unexpected – some fantastic reversal of fortune, some miraculous transformation in the character of the writer. It deserves a paragraph to itself, and should be printed in ceremonious italics.
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> *Having arrived in Liverpool, I took ship for the New World*. (1990: 7)

So begins *Hunting Mr Heartbreak*, Jonathan Raban's account of moving from the UK to the US.[1] But it is to another, more fractious and controversial, author that I need to turn at this point – Bruce Chatwin.

I find the same kind of allure and evocative compression in the title of Bruce Chatwin's travelogue, *In Patagonia* (1998 (1977)). Two words – a preposition and a noun. It is a title with which to conjure. 'In' as in 'within', 'from within', 'inside', 'from the inside out', 'situated', 'here'. And 'Patagonia', the name in feint print under the bold 'ARGENTINA' in my atlas. 'Patagonia', not 'Southern Argentina' or 'Southern Chile', which it encompasses. 'Paadaagonia' in the mouth of my host, Javier, the 'a' sounds elongated, the 't' hardened, the 'o' flattened and rounded. In Patagonia. Or better, In Patagonico.

Patagonia is not a name you can slip unnoticed into a sentence.[2] It is a signifier with multiple and contradictory valencies. I know before my departure to Patagonia to attend a research workshop that the place has already been extensively and contestedly 'written'. The literature on Patagonia is, of course, vast, and far beyond the scope of an essay of this nature, but I want to engage at this point with just some examples which proved to me intriguing, illuminating or provocative in thinking my way into the region.

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The almost inevitable starting point is Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*.[3] When I first encountered the text in 1998, just over two decades after its original publication, I found it something of a revelation. Chatwin's narrative piqued my already incipient interest in Patagonia; and his mode of writing seemed suggestive to me in how to turn travel literature to more significant purpose. My recent rereadings have been somewhat more critical.

Chatwin's fascination with Patagonia begins with the discovery in his grandmother's glass-fronted dining room cabinet of a piece of skin, 'thick and leathery, with strands of coarse, reddish hair', which he is informed is 'a piece of brontosaurus' (1), found in Patagonia by his grandmother's cousin, Charley Milward (actually it is a piece of skin from a Mylodon, an extinct Giant Ground Sloth). It is impossibly exotic for a small boy growing up in Second World-War, black-outed England:

> I pictured a shaggy lumbering creature with claws and fangs and a malicious green light in its eyes. Sometimes that brontosaurus would crash through the bedroom wall and wake me from my sleep.
>
> This particular brontosaurus had lived in Patagonia, a country in South America, at the

> far end of the world. (1)

The note of 'far end of the world' exoticism struck in the opening lines of the book is sustained throughout Chatwin's narrative. One of his encounters with an informant later in the narrative is illustrative in this respect: '"Patagonia!", he cried. "She is a hard mistress. She casts her spell. An enchantress. She folds you in her arms and never lets you go." The rain drummed on the tin roof. For the next two hours he was my Patagonia' (37).

In Patagonia is a strange text, its tone by turns tetchy and carping, but nevertheless compelling. There are some fairly detailed engagements with landscape:

> The bus was passing through low hilly country when I woke. The sky was grey and patches of mist hung in the valleys. The wheatfields were turning from green to yellow and in the pastures black cattle were grazing. We kept crossing streams with willows and pampas grass. The houses of the estancias shrank behind screens of poplar and eucalyptus. Some of the houses had pantile roofs, but most were of metal sheet, painted red. The tallest eucalyptus trees had their tops blown out. (10)

But overall, the book's concern is actually less with being 'in Patagonia' than exploring the region's complex and intersecting colonial histories, either though engagement with historical narratives, or interviews with people he encounters – it is a text very much about settlement and immigrants. Chatwin has little to say about indigenous peoples in the region.

The narrative gaze can be hard and unforgiving, especially when turned on the people whom he interviews:

> Sonny Urquhart was a hard stringy man with blond hair swept back and parted in the centre. He had moles on his face and a big Adam's apple. The back of his neck was criss-crossed with lines from working hatless in the sun His eyes were watery blue, and rather bloodshot. (15)

or: 'I left him to die and went down to Punta Arenas to catch the ship' (251). While it is undoubtedly an intriguing read, Chatwin's narrative could never be described as in any way 'generous'; and the narrator does not seem to be able to move beyond a response which insistently 'others' all that he encounters. *In Patagonia* finally tells us more about the peripatetic Chatwin (or his semi-fictionalised persona) than about Patagonia itself – though that may in fact be his point.

At the other end of the spectrum from Chatwin's flirtations with the exotic is *Patagonia: A Novel*,[4] by the South African-born, Canadian-based, author, Maya Fowler. I read the novel only after my own travels to Patagonia, but before writing this essay. Reflecting on a history of Boer political 'exile' to Argentina and other parts of South America, the novel offers a grim parallel narrative of two protagonists, separated by just over a hundred years – a politically compromised Boer and a disgraced university lecturer – who travel to Patagonia to escape their pasts, and find some kind of future for themselves, with the concomitant sense of seeking 'home' in a 'foreign' land. They are both followed by the women they have wronged.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala was famously pilloried for apparently reducing the entire history, culture and geography of the Indian subcontinent to the metonymic phrase 'Heat and Dust', in the title of her 1975 novel. Fowler's novel, with its unqualified titular 'Patagonia', could be open to similar critique, in that the unrelenting and overwhelming sense of parched, hostile landscape, alternately scorching and freezing, almost overwhelms the plot (which is a pity, as the storyline does carry its own interest). Here are some examples: 'desert and more desert flashed by' (266); 'The sun cast its unrelenting eye over the horizon as ever' (128); 'She was overcome by a sudden blinding thirst' (165); 'The heat had wrung her out' (166); or more substantially:

> The mule staggered on. The sun had gone as high as it would today, and there it stayed. She yearned for the thorn trees she knew from rivers at home; at least there one could

> find patches of shade. If only the sun would advance a little, the bank would cast its shadow, but it remained where it was and they walked on.
>
> Later on, the wind chased the clouds together in a bundle, a shepherd calling his flock and sending them away, because he knew this corner of the earth was not a place keen on supporting life. The clouds cast scraps of mercy, fleeting shadows, light and dark, light and dark until the dark briefly had the upper hand. Salome started shivering. As soon as the unmerciful sun was gone, the unmerciful earth took over, cold and hard as stone. (268)

The depiction of a climate so bleak and hostile as to be almost beyond comprehension is, of course, its own form of exoticism or othering, but Fowler does temper this with moments of recognition and identification, when some of the characters find reminders of South African landscapes in Patagonia.

In the tourist literature, Patagonia is presented as a haven for outdoor sport enthusiasts: hikers; climbers; mountain bikers; kayakers; and, above all, flyfishers.[5] Having a personal interest in flyfishing, as well as a professional interest in the introduction of fish species as part of my work in the environmental humanities, I am most familiar with representations of Patagonia as a flyfishing destination: in fact one of *the* destinations for flyfishers globally. Patagonia is a destination on the bucket list of just about every flyfisher.

Trout and salmon (broadly salmonids) do not occur naturally in the southern hemisphere at all, though trout are now present on every continent of the globe, except Antartica, largely though their introduction as part of the processes of global colonisation. So, as in my own homeland, South Africa, trout and salmon in Patagonia are alien species, which compete with and displace indigenous species. The biology and hydrography of Patagonia have ensured that the introduced species have established self-sustaining populations, and that they have thrived to the extent that they far outstrip in growth and size the 'natural' northern hemisphere populations from which they derive.

Angling tourism is an enormous source of revenue globally, and so the Argentinian state is strongly supportive of efforts to protect and expand the fisheries for trout, sea trout, steelhead and various species of salmon, frequently with little regard for indigenous species, the societies who value them, or the protection of biodiversity. The 'alien' status of Patagonian salmonids becomes an interesting and contradictory question: while even the state would acknowledge that salmonids are not 'native' species, they would claim that the spectacular success of salmonids in South America, specially Argentina and Chile, suggests that these waters are 'natural' homes for them. They are, in this sense, a 'worthy addition' to a landscape that is home to other 'larger than life' creatures (pumas, pangolins, guanacos, elephant seals, giant squid). This view is perhaps exemplified by the fact that one of the prime destinations for flyfishing in Patagonia, Lago el Stroebel, which regularly produces trophy rainbow trout of six or seven kilograms or more, is more popularly known as 'Jurassic Lake'. Here is a representative sample from the tourist flyfishing literature:

> Patagonia trout fishing represents the **epitome of the sport for intrepid anglers** for many reasons. Fly fishing in Patagonia, for starters, places you in the heart of spectacular country—from the windswept steppes of Tierra del Fuego to the rugged Junín de los Andes region. Fly fishing in Patagonia was born on the banks of broad-shouldered waters such as the **Río Grande**, where sea-run brown trout reach world-record sizes. To the north, flowing waters have been made famous by trout fishing trailblazers, on rivers like the **Chimehuín** and **Collón Curá**. People have tried to compare Patagonia trout fishing to what you might find in Montana or elsewhere. But the truth is fly fishing in Patagonia is a beast unto itself. Sea-run brown trout fishing, for instance, is beyond compare. These anadromous brawlers grow to monstrous proportions and they remain prolific due to staunch fisheries management and the practice of catch and release. You will not compete for runs with hundreds of rabid anglers while Patagonia trout fishing. And you will catch the fish of your dreams. (emphasis in the original)[6]

The equation of Patagonia with flyfishing (or outdoor sports) is also evident in the case of the famous California-based manufacturer of outdoor apparel geared towards the flyfishing or

climbing markets, simply called 'Patagonia'. While tourist (and some local) flyfishers may give little thought to the impact of introduced salmonids on local biodiversity, indigenous communities provide a regular, but frequently muted, note of dissent, though generally one needs to turn to academic or community sources to hear it.

* * *

With these contrasting and entangled narratives in mind, I have very discrepant expectations of Patagonia, and little idea of how I will make sense of it. So I fall back on some of the basics of writing (careful observation, intense listening and feeling) which become for me a way of apprehending, knowing, when I am searching for, but not anticipating, a storyline: a storyline that – in this case – proves unexpected.

'I'm going to Patagonia' is a statement that conceals more than it reveals. It suggests a journey, a movement from one place to the next; rather than 36 hours of disruptive, endless, stop-starting, chasing through airport terminals, bleary eyed vigils in departures, mad cap taxi dashes across town, clenched stomach nausea; until you are ejected from a sweltering Buenos Aires at 30 degrees plus, onto a windswept tarmac in Trelew at 7 degrees, with a wind that seems to come directly off a glacier.

I am travelling to Patagonia for a workshop as part of a collaborative research project on 'Global Trout' in which I am involved, which uses the global spread of salmonids as a way of reading human-environmental relationships in the age of the Anthropocene. Sadly our workshop venue is thousands of kilometres from any decent trout or salmon water, so there will be no flyfishing and my experience of Patagonian salmonids remains theoretical, discursive, imaginative. The route I travel takes me from Cape Town, to Johannesburg, Sao Paolo, Buenos Aires, and finally Trelew. The trans-Atlantic flight is long and dull. My clearest memory is sitting in the darkened cabin editing a student's thesis proposal under the reading lamp, pooled light on the page carrying me inexorably towards Brazil. In the seat behind me a young girl coughs her way through the night, obviously bronchitic.

In Buenos Aires, the international and domestic airports are at either end of the city. There is a highway connecting the two, which my taxi traverses at blinding speed – the driver handling the small Toyota like a rally car. The blurred cityscape that passes the windows reminds me, depressingly, of inner city Johannesburg. Old, decrepit tenement blocks with washing hanging over balconies; abandoned vehicles; huge billboards advertising upmarket fashion labels or cosmetics; and IT businesses dotted in office parks amidst the tenements. I have a long stop-over before the connecting flight to Trelew, and my body has no idea at this stage what the 'real' time is (it is 1.00 am local time), nor whether it wants breakfast or dinner. I settle for a Patagonian lager and a steak presaging that South American beef is every bit as good as it is claimed to be.

Trelew is a tiny airport, which services only four inbound and outbound flights per day, all to and from Buenos Aires. Despite this, it is jostlingly busy. As promised, my name is on a board held up by a man in arrivals, but with about a dozen others as well. He addresses me in rapid-fire Spanish, and points to a counter. It is bewilderingly unclear what I am to do. The man with the board then ignores me, as does the man behind the counter. Finally, I approach the latter, who demands 600 pesos, and tells me to wait. We will be travelling in bus 23, he says. Bus 23 is locked, and a few disconsolate souls have now gathered in its vicinity, pulling jackets tightly around them in the icy wind. I am so jet-lagged that all I want to do is get onto the bus and sleep. Eventually the driver arrives and we embark. As the diesel engine rumbles into life, a frantic voice calls through the driver's window for 'Brown' to get off the bus. I am escorted to another identical bus (not number 23), which sets off on the 40 km journey to my destination, Puerto Madryn.

My first view of Patagonia from the air had revealed flat peninsulas covered with what looked like green scrub, and cliffs or steep beaches dropping into the sea. The landscape we traverse in the bus is less than prepossessing – flat, dry scrubland that reminds me of the South African landscape of the West Coast around Langebaan, or a rather more thickly-vegetated Karoo.[7] The tar road is deeply rutted, but the driver somehow manages to keep the vehicle running safely in the ruts. He sips regularly from a leather-covered cup with a silver mouthpiece, which is constantly replenished for him by a colleague at the front of the bus

whose only other job seems to be to keep him entertained with lively banter. I learn later that the two of them were drinking maté.

As the bus finally lumbers and rattles its way downhill towards the coastline, I catch my first view of Puerto Madryn. It is a town of about 100 000 people, on the edge of a large bay which also serves as a port for fishing and pleasure vessels, and a few smaller ships. In Chatwin's narrative, the town is dispatched in one-and-a-half pages of dispirited prose, with its colonial origins as a Welsh settlement in 1865 being its only point of mild interest.[8] At first sight it reminds me of a less industrialised Saldanha Bay. I am surprised, and – in truth – somewhat disappointed to have travelled so far for this. What, I wonder, do our hosts think is so remarkable about Puerto Madryn that we should fly halfway around the world to meet here, rather than anywhere else (not to mention the carbon emissions of the multiple aircraft journeys involved)?

There are about a dozen passengers on the bus, and we wind our way through the streets, offloading people at various hotels. At close quarters Puerto Madryn strikes me as a Europeanised version of Langebaan, with more interesting architecture, shops, restaurants and bars, and my attitude softens a little. I begin to see some of its charm. But as we progress from one run-down hostel or backpackers lodge to another, I am silently praying each time that this will not be my destination. Happily La Posada Hotel proves to be a quirky and comfortable hotel, with an eclectic décor of Flamenco prints, Harley Davidson memorabilia, flyfishing tackle, whale bones and huge comfortable couches.

My flight landed me in Trelew at 7.30 in the morning, so I arrive at the hotel well before check-in time. I grab some breakfast, collapse onto one of the couches, and get some well-needed rest, before heading out to explore. In his travelling instructions, Javier had suggested that anyone who arrived early and wanted to stretch their legs after the long flight should stroll down to the boardwalk from which whales were regularly seen. The sun is bright, but the cold wind tugs and nags at hair and clothing. I take the gravel road down to the shoreline and stroll for a couple of kilometres along the paved walkway that follows the beach. The bay on which Puerto Madryn is built is massive, and the wind is whipping up white horses and great streaks of foam as far as the eye can see. If there are whales there, I have no chance of spotting them. But I suspect they have moved to somewhere more sheltered. There is a mountain bike race apparently coming to an end further up the road from where I began my walk (Puerto Madryn is known as an adventure sport destination), with music and festivities, but I am too tired to take much interest. I head back to the hotel, where my room is now ready, and enjoy a long shower and some much-needed sleep.

A few hours later I awake, famished. One of the workshop organisers, Heather, has arrived by this time, and I meet up with her in the hotel restaurant. Lunch service is over, but the chef says he can rustle something up for me. When the plate arrives it is piled high with cuts of the most delicious beef I have ever eaten – rump, sirloin and short rib – and a mountain of mashed potato drenched in gravy. Heather, an avowed vegetarian, seems to go pale at the sight of such carnivorous excess, but gamely says she is sure I will enjoy it. I truly do.

During the afternoon the workshop participants trickle in, including my Norwegian friends Knut and Cato, and there are fond reunions as well as welcomes for new participants. We come from South Africa, Norway, Denmark, Japan and Argentina, and from a range of academic disciplines and backgrounds, from the natural sciences to the humanities, all united by our interest in salmonids. Our hosts, Javier and Juana, speak of the ongoing political and economic crisis in Argentina, something that forms a shadow narrative to our stay there. Teachers and civil servants have not been paid for months, and children are sitting at home as most schools are closed. Their own salaries have been cut, to the point that they are in financial distress, and the country's currency is extremely weak. Ongoing political demonstrations have been happening all over the country, including in Puerto Madryn. Despite their difficult circumstances, Javier and Juana are generous and gracious hosts. Wine and laughter flow at dinner time.

The venue for our workshop is the interdisciplinary marine biology research centre at which both Javier and Juana work. It is a short walk from our hotel, down the same gravel road I traversed the previous day. The wind has abated slightly, and the bay soon reveals the distinctive white puffs of surfacing whales. We are to see many in the bay in the days to

come. The slope of the beach is very gentle, so the ebb and flow of tides outside the window of our workshop venue are dramatic: low tide sees people walking their dogs on the beach where hours before whales had been disporting themselves in several meters of water. Javier points to a small boat anchored above a reef in the bay, from which some of his postgraduate students are tagging fish.

The centre is a strange place. Alongside a framed quotation from Derrida on the walls are photographs of a massive Patagonian squid – long enough to fit onto a very large baggage trolley, and suggestive of the seafaring fables of horrifying tentacled creatures large enough to drag down ships. Its mission is explicitly interdisciplinary: humanities and social science researchers work alongside marine biologists and oceanographers in this warren of a building on the edge of a bay far south along the Argentinian coastline.

We are here to discuss 'Global Trout', specifically the spread of salmonids across the globe into places far from their 'native' habitats. We are united by our interest in the fish, but also find them useful as ways to think through human-environmental issues, including climate change. We come from different countries in which these have manifested in distinctive ways, so discussion is lively and varied.

Argentina is a place where the presence of trout and salmon is both highly valued and contested. As in South Africa and many other global locations, salmonids are not indigenous to Patagonia, but were introduced from North America and elsewhere partly as angling species, partly for fish farming (with the inevitable escapees). They have successfully colonised pretty much every suitable river basin, establishing large, healthy populations of sea-running fish caught by visiting anglers and local communities alike.

As noted earlier, in flyfishing media and travel literature, Patagonia is venerated and celebrated as a global flyfishing destination for huge salmon, steelhead, sea trout and trout. It also runs very large-scale aquaculture operations, breeding fish for consumption. The official line seems to be that salmonids have been an unmitigated benefit to Argentina and its economy.

Yet Juana's own research portrays a more complex and contradictory picture, as she outlines on the first afternoon. Coming from a social science rather than marine biological background, her interest is in human attitudes towards the fish and the rivers and lakes they inhabit. While her research among visiting and local (mostly white) flyfishers suggests overwhelmingly positive responses to the presence of salmonids, her research among Mapuche people (one of the two major indigenous peoples in Argentina, of whom she is a descendant) provides a more troubling scenario. While for some Mapuche people salmon and trout represent economic opportunity, Juana reports that others feel hatred towards the introduced salmonids, which represent for them the colonial invasion of their country, and the displacement of the indigenous fish species that they have depended on and venerated for millennia. To these people trout and salmon are believed to presage negative events; and their introduction into bodies of water which are regarded themselves as living entities and are guarded by non-human beings (the 'nwenko', or owner of the river) is seen as deep violation. It is a conversation I would pursue with her on a sightseeing trip a few days later.

Dinner is an Argentinian lamb barbecue, a gift of extraordinary graciousness from Javier and Juana under their current circumstances. The lamb is 'crucified'[9] – the term is Javier's, not mine – on a metal grill, and then cooked upright next to, rather than over, the coals. This apparently allows the fat to run off. It is continually marinated from a bottle that contains a kind of *chimmichurri* mixture: rosemary, thyme, garlic, chillies, black pepper, cumin, and coriander, with water, not, as I would have imagined, olive oil or lemon juice.[10] The basting bottle is passed around near the end of the meal as the leftover cuts are served. It is exquisite. The lamb is accompanied by peppery blood sausage, a culinary experience all on its own.

The following day sees further backlashes in the political crisis. Two pedestrians have been killed on the way to the protest in Puerto Madryn, and there is major political unrest. There is a sombre mood over the town. A quick flick through the TV channels later that evening reveals one, showing only an Argentinian flag at half-mast on the shoreline of Puerto Madryn, with U2's 'One Love' as looping accompaniment.

Our deliberations on the second day are positive, and involve planning for the future of the project. Lunch is at the same hotel as the previous day, a small skyscraper, that apparently

caused serious political arguments in Puerto Madryn, as it surpasses the height of any other building. The winds have been howling throughout our stay, and from the hotel windows we watch the fishing fleet pull into the safety of the bay. They have in the past targeted shrimp, but their substantial by-catch of squid has led them to focus on that species. The bulk of the calamari you and I eat is from Patagonia. Apparently the light shed by the combined squid fishing fleet exceeds that of the city of Buenos Aires.

Javier has told us that he has a special treat in store, in the form of whale watching. There is still enough daylight at the end of our workshop deliberations for him to offer those people who can fit into his double-cab Toyota Hilux the opportunity to accompany him to the whale-watching site. The rest of us drink Patagonian beer and ruminate on the events of the day. The whale watchers return several hours later, apparently so intoxicated by the experience that we assume that they must have encountered someone smoking cannabis on the beach. Even the usually restrained Heather is babbling incoherently.

The next morning we are to see them for ourselves. We set off in Javier's Hilux, heading south past the Aluminium Plant which is the major provider of employment in the region, but also one of the most contested. It is noisy, unsightly, but a major boost to a flailing economy. On the gravel road, Javier points to an escarpment to our left. The base rises to a considerable height, and is topped with an exposed ridge of rock, rather like a great layered dessert, probably high enough to be classified as a mountain, and extraordinarily impressive in this otherwise flat landscape. 'The top layer is about eight million years old, and the bottom about twenty million', he comments. 'There are plenty of fossils to be found up there, including giant shark teeth.' I remember the massive dinosaur recreation I saw on the road from the airport into Puerto Madryn, and the numerous references to this as a fossil paradise.

We turn off the gravel road down a stony track to the sea. There are a few vehicles parked there, as well as a rangers' station to keep a check on visitors and their interactions with the whales. Patagonia may be lacking in political will in respect of governance, but its environmental control of sensitive tourist sites cannot be questioned, at least from my brief experience. The course to the beach is down a rock strewn slope, but as we pile out of the double-cab we can already see the whales. We slip-slide our way down the rocks to the beach as fast as we can, as the whales seem impossibly close.

On the beach we are stunned into silence. There are huge whales and their calves 20 metres off the steeply shelving beach. Each breach reveals an enormous head with smooth black skin and white barnacle patches. Each massive breath is epiphanic. They are so close that you can smell their breath. There are four mothers with calves, and we watch mesmerised. On that stony beach, in the presence of these giant creatures I find that words fail me. I know only that I feel humbled, blessed, comforted; that I am undeniably in the presence of the numinous. A few months later, I read these lines in Fred Strydom's remarkable novel *The Raft*,[11] in which the protagonist describes the experience of seeing a beached whale, and find that he has put into words something of what I was grasping towards: 'The longer I stared, the less it looked like an animal at all. It was unearthly, almost god-like, something that could just as conceivably have fallen from the sky as washed up from the ocean' (50).

Walking to the restaurant for dinner that night, I am confronted with the most exquisite sunset across the bay, the brooding clouds deep purple, flecked with orange from the dying sun, and the lights from the fishing boats strewn like jewels across the darkening water. The venue is furnished like a wine bar, replete with hipster owner/manager, and an extremely impressive array of wines on display on racks along the walls. As well as the more usual calamari, hummus, and tzatziki, we are served, with Javier's explanation, the saliva glands of cows, and deep-fried sections of small intestine filled with cream cheese. Their origins lie, I assume, in the nose-to-tail ethic of the hacienda.

Our crowd disperses after dinner, and Cato, Knut and I adjourn to the nearest establishment that sells whisky to continue the conversation we have enjoyed over dinner. It is called Co Co's, with décor befitting its name, and is almost completely empty on this wind-buffeted night. But it is open, and we are thirsty. Our friendship goes back some way, and our talk is lively and wide-ranging. We sit there in this empty bar at the other end of the world from where we live (they in Norway, I in South Africa), and we drink and laugh until things start to look fuzzy.

On our final day, our hosts have planned an excursion to the Peninsula Valdés, with the added attraction of whale watching at sea. The previous day we had gone into town with Javier to draw money for the trip, as the tour guide wished to be paid in cash in this flailing economy. Our efforts to find a bank machine that worked were hampered by the fact that several streets had been closed off due to the ongoing protests.

The trip involves a drive of several hundred kilometres, so we start out early. The wind is still howling, and even more fishing boats have overnighted in the bay, their blue and white hulls and orange trawling arms bright in the morning sunlight. I lose count at 37, as the fleet seems to stretch almost endlessly towards the horizon. Our route takes us along the narrow isthmus that connects the Peninsula Valdés to the mainland, to a nature reserve, penguin colony, elephant seal colony, and finally back down the coast to go whale watching. The isthmus is so narrow that we have sea views on both sides of the road, until we reach Peninsula Valdés which on the map tops the isthmus like a double-edged axe.

To a South African, for whom the proclamation of a 'nature area' means the absence of farming, this one is an eye opener. There are plenty of sheep in evidence, as well as groups of horses, more easily spotted because each one has at least one white horse in its number to enable the farmers to locate them more easily, we are informed. Apparently the farmers in the area have only agreed to the proclamation of the reserve on condition they can continue to earn their livelihoods. We see llamas (known as guanacos), similar in colour and number to impala in South Africa, but with the distinctive lama/alpaca body form; and marvel at their ability to jump fences apparently in slow motion. There are turkey vultures circling low over the scrubland, a charming and rather bemused pair of burrowing owls that blink at us sleepily from their roadside burrow, and several very large rabbit like creatures (called maras), grazing on the scrub. And sheep. Apparently mountain lions (pumas) are present, but we are not lucky enough to see one.

We stop for coffee at a hacienda, which has opened one of its large barns as a restaurant and entertainment area. The area around it is desolate and windswept, and the farm buildings seem to cling tenaciously to scrubby earth. Long, ranch style tables dominate the front section of the barn. The back section contains an informal museum of old farming implements, mainly directed towards sheep shearing, but including a wheel barrow constructed entirely out of wood. Bright, fluffy white sheep skins for sale are on display on the walls. The coffee is strong, and warms our wind-chilled souls. There are several indoor fire places for cooking in, which could comfortably house a small table and chairs, and are more than head height to me. In one of them a 'crucified' lamb is cooking. It looks and smells delicious. Between the lamb, the coffee and the burrowing owls, I am beginning to think I could live here.

The penguin colony is a short drive from the hacienda. I have visited penguin colonies near Cape Town, which consist of narrow strips of vegetation tightly hugging the shoreline, traversed by wooden boardwalks, and reeking of guano. This one dwarfs any of those. We spot our first penguins about a kilometre from the beach, and the colony reaches well inland and sweeps across a breadth of land almost as far as the eye can see. There are penguin nests or burrows on almost every square meter of earth, under every suitable scrubby bush, and we sometimes have to step around penguins that are standing in the pathway ahead of us. Our guide has explained to us how to tell if the birds are becoming stressed (they apparently move repetitively from side to side), but these seem entirely unconcerned by our presence. The population at that stage is almost exclusively male, as the females will only arrive later once the burrows have been properly prepared. A few turkey vultures hang around the edge of the colony, obviously waiting for a sick bird, but seem to be having little success. And, in this otherwise strictly controlled conservation area, there are sheep and cattle in amongst the penguins. At the car park, there is a huge rusting vat and boiler, around thirty feet high, which was apparently used to boil down whale blubber in the days of whale hunting. A slowly collapsing stone wall reveals several small fossils in the broken rock. Near the whale fat vats lies the dried shell of an armadillo, perfectly intact.

I walk down through the penguins onto the steep stony beach. The sea is being whipped up by the fierce wind. I look across the great expanse of water that marks the edge of a continent, and think of my home in Cape Town, on the very edge of another continent, across thousands of kilometres of ocean: two shorelines that once were connected, all those millions of years ago. I stand on that steeply sloping beach, stones pushing through the soles of my shoes, pulled vertiginously towards the coastline thousands of kilometres away, once

physically joined but now only imagined, and repelled by the endless expanse of wild sea before me, booming and crashing onto the edge of a continent.

The elephant seal colony is closely controlled by conservation authorities, and visitors cannot get closer to the animals than about five hundred meters. Arriving at the main viewpoint after a short sharp climb uphill, I see five huge forms lying on the beach in the distance. My initial thought is that several whales have beached themselves and died. I am politely corrected. Those *are* the elephant seals. I had no idea how massive they are. In all the time we are there, they move not a flipper, but just lie there, impassive, immoveable. We spot some smaller leopard seals in the clear water a little further along from the elephant seals, as well as another one of the giants who flaps his flippers occasionally and apparently disconsolately.

It is here that I am first introduced to maté, the energising herbal tea that seems to fuel most of South America. Juana has a traditional leather-bound maté cup in her hand, with a long silver mouthpiece, and is replenishing the water covering the maté leaves from a thermos flask that she carries with her. She offers me some. 'It'll make you strong', she says, smiling and flexing her arms. The liquid is hot and tobaccoey, and floods my body almost instantly with warmth and a calm energy. The sharing of maté is a highly sociable ritual, and that windswept shoreline suddenly feels more hospitable, as we huddle together passing the cup around.

The tourist highlight of our day is not to be. We have been told as we set out that morning that whale watching by boat might be out of the question due to the fierce winds that have forced the fishing fleet to take shelter in the Puerto Madryn bay. Our departure point is supposed to be a small, quaint coastal village on the way back to Puerto Madryn. We hope in vain for a break in the weather, but are soon told that the coast guard's closure of the bay is still in force, and that the whale-watching boat cannot launch. The village was once a hub for the salt trade, and there is a strange excavated cave-like structure in the rock by the harbour wall that had once been a storage depot for the salt. The railway line that carried the salt out is rusted, and occupied by a defunct steam engine. Out to sea between the headlands that frame the bay lies a large flat rocky island, apparently beloved of the spearfishermen from Italy and France who 'discovered' this region many decades ago. I remember then the large sculpture of a spearfisherman on the shorefront of Puerto Madryn. Whale watching cancelled, we make do with beer and coffee at a shorefront café, before taking the road back to Puerto Madryn. After a day of exposure to icy winds, I begin to realise that I am actually quite ill, with a chest infection that will leave some of my last memories of Patagonia a little hazy (I think back to the bronchitic little girl on the plane). Most of my colleagues are on the early flight out, meaning a 3.00 am start, so there are no festivities that night anyway.

I depart late the next afternoon. I remember little of the journey, besides overnighting in a hotel in Buenos Aires that backs onto a particularly depressing tenement block in which people are, nevertheless, getting on with the business and pleasure of life, playing basketball or drinking and smoking on rooftops; a fine rib-eye steak at San Paolo airport; and an increasingly urgent sense that my fever is mounting, and that the trip seems interminable.

Not long after my arrival, I am in my doctor's rooms. I have a temperature of just under 40°C. She gives me a long course of very strong antibiotics, tells me that in 'a first world country I would have hospitalised you and put you into isolation', and confines me to bed. I feel terrible.

I emerge three weeks later after what seems like deep submersion to a vivid recollection of our conversation in the minibus returning from Peninsula Valdés. The journey was long, and traversed much of what we had seen before. We turned inward, and discussions became more intimate. Javier wanted to know from me what it was about fishing that was so special (he is a marine biologist but does not fish himself) that would lead South Africans to create some trout fisheries that had to be sustained by the annual stocking of fish. Juana asked more simply, 'Why do you fish?' I fumbled for an answer to a question that has exercised me for much of my life, and to which I have a dozen or so answers (I love the way you plumb unseen depths with a fishing line; how you must imagine a world in three dimensions that you can often only see in two; that there is something profound about being in the liminal space where air, water and earth meet) none of which felt adequate in this context, nor capable of being translated from my somewhat perplexed English into Javier's English and then into

Spanish for Juana. After various (probably unsuccessful) attempts, I mentioned my endless attraction to water. On Javier's translation of this Juana became animated. She told me of one of the most sacred Mapuche spiritual ceremonies that ends with the assembled crowd on the river bank becoming silent in order to hear, at the deepest level, the sound of the river. Our own conversation fell silent in wonder.

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ENDNOTES

1. The words are those of Hector St John de Crèvecouer, 'Mr Heartbreak', in whose steps Raban follows in the narrative journey that unfolds. Jonathan Raban. 1990. *Hunting Mr Heartbreak: A Discovery of America*. New York: Edward Burlingame Books/HarperCollins Publishers.
2. Though Chatwin apparently did. The author's note in the 1998 Vintage edition of the book states that Chatwin (with a well-known penchant for the theatrical) sent his employer, the *Sunday Times*, a telegram simply stating 'Gone to Patagonia for six months.'
3. Chatwin, Bruce. 1998 (1977). *In Patagonia*. London: Vintage.
4. Fowler, Maya. 2018. *Patagonia: A Novel*. Cape Town: Umuzi.
5. This sense of Patagonia as a 'playground' is obviously not shared by motoring journalist, Jeremy Clarkson, who said of the region, in a Top Gear episode filmed there, that the landscape 'was an insult to a great British car' …
6. Anon. 'Patagonia Flyfishing: Argentina and Chile'. (n.d.) https://www.nervouswaters.com/fishing-in-argentina/fly-fishing-in-patagonia/ - accessed 14/2/2022.
7. Fowler's various protagonists draw parallels with the Karoo (75, 77, 99, 161, 212), the Free State (77, 105, 202), Calitzdorp (162), Oudtshoorn (161), Beaufort West (158), amongst others.
8. Chatwin 1998:26-7
9. The modern-day antagonist in Fowler's novel is horrified by the image of two 'crucified' sheep: 'Both sheep had been opened up, spatch-cocked you'd have called it had they been chickens. She turned away, but the image stayed with her, the ribs splayed grotesquely. She was used to seeing sheep on the spit at home, but these were different, with the legs spread and the carcasses crucified over the fire. The smell remained enticing, though the unholy comparison turned her stomach.' (2018: 164)
10. Chatwin refers to a sauce called '*salmuera*, made of vinegar, garlic, chillies and oregano' which 'takes the fattiness off the meat' (1998: 31).
11. Strydom, Fred. 2015. *The Raft*. Cape Town: Umuzi.