

The Journey Back and Forward

**Journalistic Notes
and Blog Postings
for a Public Radio
Documentary**

~ Mishy Lesser ~

Mishy Lesser ~ The Journey Back and Forward

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Overview

Part 1—The Big Picture

When people persuade me to tell my Chile story, I start by saying that my first encounter with terrorism took place on September 11th. And I pause before adding, “1973.” Then I tell them how in the early 1970s President Nixon and Henry Kissinger hatched a lavishly funded plan to strangle the Chilean economy and trample on the democratically-elected government of Salvador Allende. After having failed to prevent Allende’s election, they helped trigger a coup that caused immeasurable suffering and claimed thousands of lives. I tell this story because I was there – my friends were assassinated and I was in danger. It was only through the bravery and kindness of several Chilean and American friends, and one functionary in the American Embassy, that I was able to escape. It’s only now, 35 years after the fact, that I am ready to find my Chilean saviors and ask them to tell their story of what motivated them to risk their lives to rescue a young American stranger.

Part 2—Getting Drawn to Chile

My story begins when I arrived in Santiago, Chile in 1971 as a nineteen-year-old student of Friends World College, a school created by Quakers to foster world citizenship and promote experiential learning. In those days no one spoke of globalization. Friends World allowed its students to follow their passion anywhere, as long as they left their country of origin. When I started college in 1970, my burning question was why so many people around the world seemed to despise my country. My gut told me I could find the answer in Latin America. I was pulled to Chile soon after Allende’s inauguration, as were tens of thousands of other young people from all over the Americas and beyond. Most of us were awestruck by the colossal enthusiasm, creative energy, and depth of engagement of the Chilean people. It seemed as though the entire country was on its feet, either supporting Allende’s vision or trying to undermine it.

I eventually dropped out of Friends World and began to frequent an urban shantytown or *campamento* known as Nueva La Habana. For two years I watched master community organizers help residents run a health clinic, design affordable housing, and shape curriculum for their schools. I was getting an unparalleled political education. The letters I wrote to my parents conveyed excitement and optimism. Their replies contained a growing list of questions about my fervor in support of a socialist government.

I lived with several roommates in downtown Santiago near the Presidential Palace. Sometime in 1972 a small group of progressive Americans gathered in our living room to create a magazine, in Spanish, on U.S. foreign policy and international liberation movements. In this pre-internet world, we wanted to provide information to Chileans about U.S. practices of clandestine propaganda and psychological warfare. We rented an office and I recall once using the

magazine's phone to call the *campamento*. You can imagine my shock when the receptionist at the U.S. Embassy answered. To my knowledge, that was our first proof that we were under surveillance. After the coup two from our group were murdered: Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi. Copious evidence suggests U.S. complicity in their deaths.

Part 3—The Horror Unfolds

In 1973 one of my roommates was an Afro-Brazilian woman. At the time, Brazil was ruled by a military dictatorship, and Chile was teeming with Brazilian exiles. The morning of the coup she and I, and our Chilean boyfriends, woke early. Her partner went to buy a newspaper and returned minutes later looking very pale, announcing "*hubo golpe*." I heard those words and knew they meant there's been a coup but I wasn't prepared for the savagery and horror. After all, in my country leaders were assassinated and election results were manipulated, but we didn't have coups.

With little hesitation our boyfriends took off. My roommate was especially at risk, because being black in Chile at that time meant you were a Cuban, an African, or a Brazilian exile sympathetic to Allende and would be arrested. Based on past experience, she knew to hoard water before power was cut off. Expecting our apartment to be raided, I knocked on our neighbor's door and begged them to hide her. After they agreed I hugged my roommate, stuffed my passport and toothbrush into a purse, grabbed a sweater, and headed out.

Army tanks roared by as they maneuvered to attack the Presidential Palace. I gasped at their size and felt queasy about my decision to hitchhike to Nueva La Habana to stand with those I'd worked with for two years. When I reached the *campamento*, I could see in people's eyes that fear had already hardened its grip. I spent the next four nights sheltered by different families. Helicopters hovered at night over nearby *campamentos*, shining powerful searchlights on the shacks and dirt lanes below. Sometimes they dropped leaflets or broadcast radio messages urging people to turn in neighbors sympathetic to Allende, "foreigners who'd come to kill Chileans," or those whose last names ended in "berg" or "stein." Other leaflets celebrated Chile's independence, not from "Spanish tyranny" in 1810, but from the "rabid communists" in 1973.

By September 15th it had become clear that I needed to move to a safe house. But dressed like an activist working in a shantytown, I would raise suspicion at military checkpoints. Friends from the *campamento* who were worried about my safety asked the doctor who interned at their clinic to take me home. He agreed, and that afternoon I crouched in the back of his sedan and we drove to his crowded middle class neighborhood. As we pulled into the driveway he told me to scurry into the house. Welcomed warmly by his wife and their three children, I hid there, sleeping in the shed behind their house. After several days they even let my boyfriend join us—a decision they ended up paying for dearly.

Part 4—Escape Plan

Within two weeks my boyfriend and I finally admitted to each other that I needed to leave the country. Chilean friends asked that I return home to help build an international solidarity movement to isolate the Pinochet dictatorship and work to rescue people from prison.

To get out of Chile alive I had to overcome three obstacles: I needed an airline ticket, money, and an exit permit without which foreigner residents could not leave. Plus my student visa had already expired, putting me at additional risk. Given my work with the magazine and in Nueva La Habana, I didn't want the military asking questions about my loyalties and expired visa. I went to see a close friend who was a doctoral candidate at a prominent U.S. university and he forged a letter on university stationery alleging that I was a doctoral student in Chilean history. He then took the letter to the one decent person he knew at the U.S. Embassy and asked him to certify its veracity. Meanwhile the doctor and his wife contacted a Chilean retired *carabinero* (police) general who reluctantly wrote a note on his calling card asking the authorities to help me leave the country safely.

With the forged letter and U.S. Embassy document certifying it, plus the general's note, I went to the office where for years I'd lined up to get my exit permits. I found the same mustached bureaucrat who in the past had flirted with me. Now with a stern face, he handed me off to the uniformed officer who looked me over before examining my papers. His first words were "So, you're a doctoral student in history, are you? Could you please tell me when Chilean independence was declared?" My brain stalled in its attempts to pull up September 18, 1810, but somehow I calmed myself down, smiled, and said "September 11, 1973." He beamed, said "excellent response," and, with ritual pomp, used the coveted embossed seal to grant my exit permit. As I turned to go he said "Thanks, and have a good trip." I've always wondered whether he thought I was one of the Americans who had helped covertly destroy democracy in his country.

And so it was that I left Chile on October 6, 1973. My boyfriend rode with me part of the way to the airport and then got out. I will never forget how he forced a smile and waved goodbye with a broad sweep of his arm. At that moment our paths parted forever. In June 1976 he was arrested, tortured, and disappeared. It took until 1984 for me to find out the barest details of his demise. Apparently the military tracked him to the doctor's house although he escaped and eluded them for a while until finally getting arrested.

When I arrived in New York my father asked me where my luggage was. "Dad, I have no luggage. Let me tell you what happens when the military take over and betray your country. And let me tell you what our government did to execute the wretched plan."

Part 5—Finding My Way Back

It has been almost thirty-five years since Allende's government was targeted by Nixon, Kissinger, and the CIA. Before last Thanksgiving I started to prepare myself for a February trip to Chile by going through decades-old boxes. I examined them as one would a treasure chest and found the forged letter, the Embassy document, the note from the general, as well as a letter sent to me in August 1974 by the doctor's wife. There was a return address on the envelope. I decided to send a letter much like a farmer who tosses seeds into the ground not knowing what, if anything, will germinate. On December 3rd I received an email from the daughter, who was a child when I knew her in 1973. She wrote that her mother had moved to the coast and her father had died recently. Apparently, when my letter arrived she couldn't figure out who it was from. This was not surprising, for I had been known to the family by a different name. She called her mom, who said, "Read me the letter over the phone." Halfway through it they both shrieked, "It's Laurita who made us the carrot cakes." It turns out that they remember me for the carrot cakes I baked during my three weeks in their home. As I read this, I felt a tender spot open up inside as I think of myself as a twenty-year-old in a foreign country, in grave danger, with madness and cruelty on the loose. In that time of terror, I baked them a cake.

Act 6—Putting the Pieces Back Together

To be written while I am in Chile and will include recordings of my interviews of the family.

Saturday, February 9, 2008

Preparing the Soil: 1st Post from Chile

Eve of my departure: February 6th

It's snowing in Boston and I'm beginning to wonder whether my travel plans will get delayed or derailed. I call Simone (my closest friend in Chile, who with her family, will be putting me up for a month) and begin the conversation using Chilean street language: "*Ya, po', Chica, llevo dos horas esperandote en el aeropuerto. Qué paso?*" (*What's up, Chica? I've been at the airport for two hours waiting for you*). It took her a couple of minutes to figure out my joke and in our laughter, I forgot to ask her everything on my list: do I need a warm jacket for the evening? do you have an electrical socket converter for my computer? did you buy me any soymilk? The reason I forgot is because of what Simone said: "*Fijate, Mishy, no te lo queria decir, pero me fui para ese barrio el domingo para buscar a tu amiga y pasé todo el día sin encontrarla y ESA CASA NO EXISTE. Con una amiga dimos vueltas, hablamos con los vecinos, y NADIE conoce a esa calle ni tampoco a esa familia.*" (*Listen, Mishy, I wasn't going to tell you about this, but I went to the neighborhood on Sunday to find your friends and THAT HOUSE DOES NOT EXIST. I was with someone and we drove around, speaking with the neighbors and NO ONE KNOWS THAT STREET OR THAT FAMILY.*)

And suddenly my trip and this little public radio assignment with the PRI's "The World" just got a whole lot more interesting and challenging. As if the prospect of conducting this interview wasn't already complex enough, now I had to track down a house that doesn't exist. Here's a quick recap of the chronology for my readers:

- In mid-October 2007 I decide to go to Chile, after months (years?) of back-and-forth about whether I was ready for this trip
- After cashing in my frequent flyer miles to secure a ticket, I start asking myself what I want from the trip. Some answers come quickly: to see Simone and spend time with her now grown daughters; to see the youngest daughter of my dear friend and former housemate when I lived in Chile, meet her husband, and give them a belated wedding gift; from there, the answers get fuzzy: to experience Chile, once again, after so many years, to see what of the past endures or can be uncovered; to visit the memorial to the disappeared and look for the names of those I loved and admired, now absent from this place forever; to see if anyone from my past is still alive and living in Chile.

And so I wandered up to the attic and began to rummage around, looking for my Chile artifacts: the old passport, Chilean identity card, the forged letter that got me out of Chile alive, and anything else that survived the last 35 years and all the attics and basements where I have lived (seven homes in Massachusetts alone). Once I located the boxes and files, I began to feel my way through them, testing my willingness and capacity to pry open envelopes, peer into files, and read their contents. I did this in small doses over the course of several days. It was a process of savoring, not gulping, and with each tasting, I had to come up for air, and do something quickly to return to the present time and space. And then I found it: a letter from the family who hid me dated August 1974, with a legible return address on the now creased, faded envelope. That night I showed my husband Chris the envelope as one would unveil a rare archaeological treasure. I decided to send a letter and vowed that if anyone from the family were to reply, I would write the story of those who helped keep me safe after the coup. I wrote my letter just before Thanksgiving and it went something like this:

Dear Carmencita - This letter will come, no doubt, as a great surprise to you. I am Mishy, the American woman to whom you gave shelter after the coup, although you knew me by a different name. You and your children welcomed and hid me for a few weeks until I could get out of Chile safely. I still have the letter you sent me in August 1974. I am planning to come to Chile in February and would like to visit you, if that is okay with you. You and your family are my heroes and I've never had a chance to properly thank you. I'm enclosing a photo of me and my husband, Chris. We live in the USA, near Boston. If you get this and have email, please send me a message with your phone number and I will call you immediately.

And so off went the letter. Chris and I gathered with family for Thanksgiving and mourned the death of his beloved Uncle Don. And about ten days later, on December 3rd, there was a message in my inbox that provided irrefutable evidence that my letter had not only arrived but reached the right hands. It turns out that the daughter, who was just a child when I stayed with the family, now lives with her husband and three children in the house where I hid. Her mom now lives on the coast and only has a cell phone. And the father who brought me to their home to give me sanctuary, died in August. The daughter said her mother was traveling and that I should call her anytime after December 11th (Chris's birthday).

I immediately replied to the email and began to call the cell phone after the appointed date. And what happened was one big, continuous *nada*. No reply to my emails; no answering of the cell phone (not even a prompt to leave a message). Meanwhile, I began writing more about my experiences in Chile and was hoping to eventually do a documentary for public radio. I felt buoyed by my September broadcast on WBUR of "Reflections on Yom Kippur," which began as a Personal Prayer I was asked to share at my temple in Brookline (TBZ).

And so I wrote several drafts of the sketch that is the first installment of this blog, and after knocking on a few doors, I began to wonder if this story idea would go anywhere. Then, thanks to the encouragement and good counsel of my dear friend, Doug Starr, who co-directs the medical journalism program at Boston University, the right door cracked open. Doug spoke to a producer at the PRI's "The World" (a co-production of WGBH-Boston and PRI), then I spoke with one of their editors, she consulted her team, and people were calling me back. Members of the team read my sketch and were ready to lend me a digital recorder and give me technical coaching. And the part of the sketch that most interested them was MY REUNION WITH THE FAMILY. Meanwhile, no word back from the family and still no answer on the cell phone. So I mailed another letter and told Carmencita about my recent experience with radio documentary, and the opportunity to interview her as part of a radio piece that would be produced back in Boston. No response came to this second letter and so I asked Simone to please go to the neighborhood to find the house, which she tried to do on Sunday with no success.

I arrived in Chile yesterday morning after a very red eye flight from Miami. I felt a hiccup in my heart when I first caught a glimpse of the *Cordillera* (the Andes) through the blanket of smog, as we drove from the airport to Simone's house. It was always a thrill for me to see the mountains back in the day when I lived here. The *campamento* where I worked in the early 1970s was anchored at the base of those mountains and I used to feel like I could get my bearings as long as I could see the foothills and towering, distant peaks. Now, I barely recognize Santiago and feel dizzy from my disorientation, anxious to spy familiar coordinates in the new sprawl and grid.

I am writing this on Saturday afternoon where the sun is strong and grapes ripen on the trellis in Simone and Daniel's garden. I had fresh mango and green tea for breakfast and this afternoon I hope to head out to find "the house that no longer exists." It would seem that some detective work awaits me before I can reconnect with my rescuers who now seem like phantoms in the steamy mist of my memory.

Sunday, February 10, 2008

A Good Shabbos: 2nd Post from Chile

It is early afternoon and Simone decides to go buy fruit and vegetables at a nearby open-air market. I am eager to be her yak (what Chris calls himself when he carries the heavy stuff on our hikes) and immerse myself in Santiago on a Saturday afternoon. The market is small and less chaotic than the *Vega* downtown. There are perhaps twenty stalls nestled in next to one another, selling either fruit or vegetables, but not both. A plastic tarp stretches across them to provide much-needed shade for the produce and those searching for the best tomato or most delicious strawberry. Most of the merchants are men. There's a little dance at Chilean markets that goes on between seller and buyer: sellers want to treat you like a regular by calling you *casera*, even if they've never seen you before, and buyers call merchants *casero* if they are regulars (or wannabees) because it might bring bargaining rights—an extra potato or a reduced price for the lightly bruised melon. Amazing: within a minute of our arrival, a woman comes up to me to ask where I got my shoes. She is disappointed but not surprised when I tell her I bought them in the *extranjero*, abroad. "Of course," she says. I never know how to take this kind of remark: is it the legitimate frustration of a consumer who yearns for better quality and design; or is it part of the "let's trash Chile" discourse that deems everything from elsewhere an improvement over the sorry local state of affairs. As soon as I bid her farewell I see a man (about my age) eye me and then whisper something to his wife. I look at him with curiosity because, for all I know, he is an old friend. He says I look like the daughter of one of his patients. It was bizarre yet welcoming. Then the smell of the strawberries (*frutillas*) hits me. And the taste of the melon offered by a merchant trying to seduce us into taking one home. Suddenly the indescribable, inimitable sing-song of Chilean spoken Spanish floods my senses as I tune into the cadence of the repetition, so common in Latin American markets: *A ver el motecito, fresco el motecito, a ver el motecito, compre caserita.*

Hours later, after the ritual *almuerzo* (lunch) back at the house, I feel the need to head out in search of the house. I study the maps in the phonebook and find a couple of streets with the right name, but neither of them is located in the sprawling settlement of small houses and apartment blocks where they lived. We decide to go anyway. It is late afternoon and the sun is unrelenting. Our first few incursions come up short and we go to the home of a friend of Simone's to enlist her help. She joins the struggle with determination and optimism, and gets us

closer but still no cigar. Finally we drive up the same street that Simone scoured last week and find some men doing yard work, and ask them about the elusive street. They say there is no such street. Then we change our tack and ask for the family, not the street name. They point us to a house one block over and finally we find the right number. But this house looks different—I remember the driveway being on the other side and have no recollection of the park. Loud disco music from the 1980s belches from the house and, of course, when we ring the bell, no one answers. More frustration. The next door neighbor opens his door and we ask him if the family lives next door. “*No sé el apellido, pero ahí vive una señora con sus niñitas.*” First, I am struck that he doesn’t know his neighbor’s last name. Then, just as I’m feeling defeated because I know a grown son lives there, he adds “*Antes vivió ahí un doctor.*” Once he tells us a doctor used to live there I know we’ve landed.

We open the gate, which is unlocked, and step past the car in the crammed carport. Simone knocks on the wooden door and finally a man appears. He looks at us and says “*Tu eres la de las cartas?*” (Are you the one who’s been sending all the letters?). It turns out that his wife and children are on the coast with his mother-in-law (the wife of the doctor). While he explains all this I am trying hard to make sense of the house. The kitchen isn’t where it used to be and I can’t quite cram what I am seeing into the floor plan of my memory. The new kitchen opens onto a small back patio, which in turn is bordered by two rooms: the shed where I hid, first alone, and then with Chico, my boyfriend, back in September and early October 1973. The son-in-law calls his mother-in-law on her cell phone to communicate that I’ve arrived. I get on the phone and instantly recognize her voice. It turns out she hasn’t seen my subsequent letters or read the emails I’ve been sending. I give her a synopsis of my messages, mostly an explanation of what I’m up to these days (working with urban youth; writing; beginning to do some radio documentary), and explain that folks from the PRI’s “The World” are interested in airing a piece about my reunion with her. I ask if it would be okay for me to record part of our visit and say that we can refrain from divulging overly personal details. She says “*Ya, po’, no veo porque no,*” which in Chilean means yes. At one point I say “*adivina lo que te traigo,*” trying to get her to guess what I’ve brought. She finally gives up and I say “*un queque de zanahoria hecho por mi mamá,*” a little carrot cake baked by my mom. Simone says it is a miracle I got it past Customs. Carmen laughs and we make a date: on Wednesday Simone will drive me to her house on the coast. Simone doesn’t know this yet but between now and then I’ll be coaching her on the use of recording equipment so that I can fully experience our reunion while she captures what she can on the digital recorder. As I speak with Carmencita, I try to peer inside the window of the shed. It looks now like a crowded, messy storage area. Before we end the conversation, Carmencita says “*Oyé, Laurita [I think she will always call me Laurita], ¿te acuerdas de la polera que mi distes?*” She asks if I remember the shirt I gave her as I was leaving for the airport in 1973. I say yes without really meaning it. She tells me her granddaughter still wears it. I feel a suction force pulling me into the past. I say goodbye, I’ll see you on Wednesday.

We spend a few more minutes in the house with the son-in-law. He says, *“Fíjate que aquí hay un montón de cosas que dejó el Chico.”* I am floored and almost speechless. He has just told me that they still have things that Chico left behind more than thirty years ago. The son-in-law was a child then and of course never knew Chico but he, too, is trying to make sense of the barely perceptible threads woven into the history of this house. He shows me rusted remnants of industrial machinery and shreds of rubber tire, strewn pell-mell in a pile on the patio. Apparently Chico kept them on the roof. The son-in-law tries his best to explain what they are but my brain and heart are already in overdrive: Does this mean that Chico stayed in this house longer than I knew? What in the world was he doing with these contraptions? Was it part of his cover, to make him look like a shoe repairman rather than a former student of psychology, now turned underground revolutionary hunted by the dictatorship? Or were they used to support the Resistance’s clandestine work? Is there anyone alive from the old days who might know what these presses were used for? I need more time to examine them but this is not the moment. How I wish Chris was here: he’d already have a theory about all of this. Should I try to contact Chico’s family and let them know about these things? I could probably track down his brother and maybe even his daughter. I wasn’t going to because, after all, I was just his girlfriend, not his wife. I’m not even sure if his family knows we were together during my last year in Chile. I doubt his daughter, then a toddler, knows that a week after the coup, on the day when Chico and I were reunited, we rode with her on a bus, trying our best to stay calm and look like a “normal” couple with a gorgeous baby girl. Would telling them any of this bring them any comfort or more grief? I am exhausted just thinking about these questions. We thank the son-in-law and drive away. It is unclear to me whether I will return to this house, the one that didn’t exist, the one that begins to reveal itself in the fog.

Tuesday, February 12, 2008

Memory, legacy, loss, retrieval, past, present: 3rd Post from Chile

On Sunday, I meet up with my old friend Gustavo who shows me the new neighborhoods of Santiago. They remind me of the wealthy communities that surround San Francisco. The afternoon is hot, in the low nineties. It is dry, unforgiving heat. In some small ways I begin to get my bearings. Simone drives me downtown on Monday afternoon but we enter the dense urban grid from an unfamiliar angle, and I am lost, unable to recover the thread of spatial logic that could restore me. The U.S. Embassy, where we picketed after Nixon bombed Cambodia, now houses a business. The street where I lived, José Victorino Lastárria, is a charmed, one-way lane. Simone goes slowly, which elicits the impatience of the taxi driver behind us. I want to get out of the car and shriek at

him to give us time, tell him this is important, that it's been so many years, that he doesn't understand. But there is nowhere to pull over and I feel dizzy as I can't find where I used to live, don't see the fruit stand, and have no idea where the grocery store is. Downtown Santiago's list of "don'ts" is now top-heavy, so we can't even turn the car around to give me another look. I will come again, next time on the *metro*, so I can take whatever time I need to invite the memories. Yesterday, they scowled at me for giving them so little.

The old Chile lives inside of me but she is mostly closeted here. In the late evening (*11:00pm—those of you who know me well will be amazed when you read this*), Simone's husband, Daniel, is eager to go out for a drink to his favorite bar. Apparently it has a beautiful view of the city, and once again, the night air is luscious—no humidity, a light breeze, temperatures in the 70s, and no bugs! Simone and I rally somewhat reluctantly and out we go. What none of us remember is that it is Monday night and most everything is closed. But before we figure this out, we drive to three different neighborhoods, seeking the perfect bar (*Chris and I are still looking for it in Boston*). We've given up on the one with the view and now are hunting for ambience, a place where people our age gather for conversation. We cross the Mapocho River and head into Bellavista, a neighborhood I knew well. I remember we used to come here to a restaurant famous for *lomito a lo pobre* (steak crowned by a sunny-side-up egg and french fries). We pass a stone wall with the indentation of a low shelf, upon which is a row of lit candles. Simone and Daniel say, "*Mira ahí, las Animitas.*" Someone perished here and their relatives have created an altar. I immediately think of my good friend Pepone (José Carrasco Tapia), a journalist, who was gunned down on a Santiago street in 1986. Not a second goes by before Simone says, "I think this altar is for José Carrasco." I am stunned. I am here. Past and present flood one another's shores. Before it was just a trickle.

We decide to head back home and have our drink there. I have way too many shots of dry Spanish Sherry, which is not a great drink on a warm evening but it's what Daniel bought for me because he remembers me enjoying Port years ago. I pray for sleep and no hangover.

This morning Simone, Daniel, and I talk over breakfast. I realize I need to decide whether to contact Chico's family. I put the question to them. They encourage me because they've known many family members of victims who appreciate meeting those who cared for, loved, and mourned their children and siblings, parents and spouses. Another layer is peeled away as a new task is added. Using Google Chile, I try to track Chico's brother, wife, and daughter and get nowhere, just the same postings about his arrest and disappearance that I've already read. If this is meant to be, the connection will come.

Tomorrow we will go to the coast. Suddenly I feel hugely unprepared. I have yet to record sounds of "daily life" in Santiago or my introduction to the conversation I will have Carmencita and her family. I am worried about everything from the

workings of the equipment to the taste of the carrot cake after being frozen and defrosted so many times. I expect to write my next posting on Thursday.

Tuesday, February 12, 2008

What Am I Doing Here? 4th Post from Chile

I just had a *que cresta estoy hacienda aqui* moment (which means, what in the world am I doing here). Carmencita phoned to ask what time we'll be arriving tomorrow. We discuss logistics, she invites us to stay for lunch, and then somewhat impulsively, I ask her about the rusted contraptions heaped in a pile on the patio of her old house. She explains that her son-in-law was wrong, that they belonged to her husband, but that Chico used them, perhaps to make leather belts. Carmencita's generosity toward me and then Chico came with huge consequences, and she is clearly afraid of further repercussions. For that reason I decided I cannot and will not record the moment of our encounter tomorrow, and if that means "The World" is less interested in this radio documentary, so be it. Only once I've reestablished my heart connection to Carmencita will I ask, once again, if it is okay to record our conversation.

Which brings me back to the question: what the bleep am I doing here? The Chilean people are still raw from the savagery unleashed upon them. People avoid talking about painful memories. It takes friends and even family members years to reveal to one another what they endured. And here I come for a relatively short visit hoping and expecting to peel away layers of an onion that perhaps would rather be left in the root cellar forever. My answer is dedicated to those from the U.S. reading this. I have received wonderful, caring, and thoughtful messages from many of you; your support and interest are my fuel. Some of you have remarked that now you understand me better; others have said how utterly horrible it must have been to experience what I did. Here is my highest hope: please widen the circle of your concern to include the people of Chile, and please use that concern to cultivate a sense of outrage over how our country has comported itself with many of the world's peoples. I am weary from hearing about how things are deteriorating in the U.S., about all we have lost under Bush. It is true: our country has become a strange land, and many of us feel exiled from it. But I have been horrified by the actions of our country for a very long time. As have many of the world's peoples. May the future transform us into a nation of truly generous people who cannot be manipulated by fear and subjugated by corporate greed, and may the world forgive us our transgressions.

Friday, February 15, 2008

The Journey Back and Forward: 5th Post from Chile



I struggle over what to name this blog:
Carrot Cake Delivered and Devoured?
Out from Beneath the Blindfold?
Making Peace with Never Knowing?
Love in the Time of Terror?
Dharma and Survival?

They are all part of this gestating story, one which has rethreaded itself several times since I arrived here a week ago.

In my last posting I announced a Wednesday trip to the coast and a Thursday posting of the next blog. What in fact happened was that late Wednesday morning, Simone and I, plus her eighty-six-year old mother and twenty-one-year old daughter, set out on this journey of mine. The jeep was laden with my laptop, recording equipment, camera, the carrot cake (of course), gifts for Carmencita and family, plus my companions' gear, which would entertain them on the beach while I visited with the family.

We were hot on the road in Simone's old two-door Trooper Jeep devoid of air conditioning, expecting the trip would take an hour and a half. About twenty minutes into it, smoke started pluming from beneath the jeep's hood and Simone had just enough time to steer us onto the exit ramp before the car conked out. After the occupants of the cars behind us realized they were honking in vain and began to help us push from the ramp toward a gas station, we opened the hood and the smoke curled into the heat of the afternoon. Within minutes, a huddle of men caucused around the snout of the jeep. *Señora*, when did you last change the oil? [There was an insinuation in the way the question was posed, as in "Don't you know you're supposed to put oil in your car?"] It's probably the radiator or a gasket. Let's hope you didn't melt the motor. Let her cool down for half an hour and we'll see what we can do then.

How is it possible that this was happening? Carmencita was waiting for me. We

were supposed to have lunch together and touch the hidden tracks of our memories.

We are fortunate that the gas station has a mini-mart. (Have I mentioned that some people here refer to Chile as the 51st state?) Doña Teresa can sit inside, at times with me, or her granddaughter, while Simone keeps an eye on the jeep as it cools down. The composition of the male huddle changes but the emergent consensus is: this jeep isn't going anywhere so you'd best call a tow truck. Meanwhile I have called Carmencita to convey the news. I can barely hear her on Simone's cell phone. I think she tells me to stand on the Pan-American Highway and hail a bus. I look at my gear and get a strong "No" when considering her proposition. I decide, instead, to try to find someone on their way to her town. At first Simone discourages me, saying Chileans have become very untrusting and there have been many recent cases of robbery and assault on the highways. In the old Chile I would have gotten a ride easily so I begin by asking a woman standing in line to pay for a cold drink, then a family sitting behind us sipping coffee. Paula and Simone help me, approaching anyone who looks kind and transparent enough to be trusted. After a dozen attempts we strike out. It turns out Simone has taken the old road, not the new, more direct one, and people heading where I need to go would have gone a different way. I decide to return to Santiago with the family and the fallen vehicle, and set out on my own the next day.

The tow truck finally arrives a couple of hours later and we get to ride in the jeep, which by now has been tilted up off the pavement. If I wasn't so disappointed, this might be fun. By the time we get home, I feel pummeled by the day. Thankfully, Daniel prepares a dinner of delicious comfort food (pasta with fresh tomato sauce) and gives me a hugely generous helping for someone my size. I eat it all. Somehow I remember to return the carrot cake to the freezer and write another post-it to myself: ***Take Carrot Cake from Freezer.***

On Thursday morning Simone and I get a cab to the *metro*, which we take to the bus station. I've left the laptop behind, even though I was eager to show Carmencita photos of Chris, my mom, sister, nephews, nieces, and in-laws. The station is crammed with travelers and I have to wait until 11:40 for a seat. Thankfully I get one in the first row. While waiting for the bus, I ignore Simone's warning and plug the microphone into the digital recorder. The sounds of the station are too good to pass up. Music pours out of one speaker while from another a man announces which buses are arriving and departing. Babies cry, dogs bark, peddlers draw attention to the cold bottles of water and potato chips in their crates.

We are finally allowed to board. The man who sits next to me is friendly. His name is Rodrigo and he is on his way to a small municipal court somewhere on the coast to retrieve his driver's license, which was revoked last week after he was pulled over for speeding down a long and lovely hill. It is Valentine's Day and

before leaving home, he arranged for flowers to be delivered to his wife. When she finally calls his cell phone to thank him, the power of his glee is palpable in our little corner of the bus, even though he is very discreet while speaking to her. It turns out Rodrigo lives in La Florida, which is where *Campamento Nueva La Habana* is located. Soon after the coup, the dictatorship tried to erase the past by imposing the name “New Dawn” on the settlement. Rodrigo tells me there isn’t much left of the old neighborhood, as it’s been absorbed (suffocated?) by several developments that encircle it. If I was to visit it, he says I would have a very difficult time discerning the original boundaries that made this a distinctive community. I feel no inclination to go.

I don’t tell Rodrigo much about where I’m headed and limit myself to saying I’m going to have lunch with very old friends. The countryside is parched except for the vineyards and their meticulously organized rows of grapes. We finally arrive and I immediately begin looking for Carmencita. Once I’ve assured myself she isn’t here yet I relax to take in my surroundings. Small kiosks selling food, drinks, hardware, sun block, and beach gear crowd both sides of the street. It is crowded and dusty. Finally she and her grandson approach. We hug and kiss, and head for the car. It is confirmed that I will always be “Laurita” to her. Her grandson drives us to his uncle’s house to get him. The uncle is the middle brother and now lives near his mom. He used to work in the fishing industry until the work dried up; now he makes spectacular jewelry with rare stones and silver, sometimes using coral, wood, carved bone, and old ivory (he refuses to purchase new ivory). I had no idea I was going to see him but am delighted he will be part of our reunion. I lament in silence that I didn’t bring him a gift.

Just as we’re about to leave the uncle’s house, Carmencita’s cell phone rings. It is her daughter reporting that ten teenage boys, all strangers, were hanging out near the house, refusing to leave the property. The uncle grabs a two-by-four and we speed off, just barely missing a young mother carrying her baby. The grandson was going as fast as he could on the sandy roads where tires tend to skid sideways unless you slow down for the curves. No one is wearing a seatbelt. I am in total surrender. The uncle calls the police to report the incident. Once we arrive at Carmencita’s, the grandson heads straight for the gully and finds three pre-teens. The older boys have taken off already. Apparently there are groups of boys that roam the outskirts of resort towns this time of year, mostly to steal things. With everyone completely focused on securing the house, I am an afterthought for a while, which gives me just enough time to unpack the gifts, the carrot cake, the camera, and recording equipment. Thankfully, connecting the microphone and headphones has become second nature.

The police come and go, and finally we get to sit down at the large kitchen table in this wonderful, rustic room of brick and exposed beams, which is clearly the epicenter of conversation and connection for the family. Our conversation rambles and vaults from past to present, and back again. I notice Carmencita’s necklace and it looks to me like the Sanskrit symbol for “Om.” I am curious but

my attention does not linger. It takes me half an hour to even broach the topic of why I want to record parts of our conversation. Once I explain, Carmencita agrees. I assure her we can omit last names, change identifying details, and turn the recorder off at any time.

The grandchildren are hungry so yesterday's lunch is heated in the microwave and eventually makes its way to the table, with little fanfare. The meal is an afterthought, except for the carrot cake. Every single morsel is consumed by them – I only taste a crumb to let them know why it tastes different from the way I used to make it. Carmencita reminds me that when I lived with them, if we didn't have carrots, I would substitute whatever ingredients I could find. Apparently I did lots of baking during those three weeks and left them all the recipes, which they have coveted and continue to use.

We eat a little and I do my best to track Carmencita's telling of the story: she and her husband were arrested and imprisoned for six months; they endured the first two wretched, terrifying weeks at Villa Grimaldi torture center where she thought they were going to cut her husband's legs off; she didn't feel thirst and hunger the way the other women prisoners did; when they tried to force her to stand on the back of a male prisoner who had been beaten beyond recognition, she refused and told them to kill her instead; the women were blindfolded around the clock and she learned to lower her gaze to peer out the bottom of her blindfold and noticed in her cell a group of women wearing the same sandals her husband and Chico made, and concluded, this must be Chico's family; once she figured this out, she became indignant when they introduced themselves as Chico's mother, sisters, and wife, because she knew he and "Laurita" were together. We talk about what is real, what is invented, and how to live with not knowing. I tell her Chico said he was separated from his wife; she tells me she's not so sure this was true. She tells me what happened to the children after their arrest: namely, house arrest for a week and then a long, strained stay with their grandparents. And then there was the betrayal by neighbors and the stupidity, greed, and pettiness of relatives.

I hear about her great love for her now-deceased husband. He was mariner, fisherman, and doctor, and loved to go diving and camping. I see old photos of the entire family, when Carmencita and her husband were strong and irresistible in their optimism about life and their devotion to one another. I ask her why they offered me sanctuary in my time of need, and she said they couldn't imagine what it must have been like to be caught in a country not your own, unable to leave and go home. They wanted to help me reunite with my parents. She also reminds me that they were the ones who introduced me to the retired general who wrote a note for me on his personal stationery, which helped me get out of the country alive. They roar with laughter when I tell them the story of what happened when I went to get my exit permit, and answered *el 11 de septiembre* in response to the soldier's question about Chilean independence. They seem intrigued when I told them about my husband Chris's work as a scholar of Asian

religions, and were interested in what he asked me to share with them; namely, that by helping save my life, they have allowed me to work with hundreds of people in Ecuador, El Salvador, Boston, and elsewhere trying to develop leaders committed to social transformation and healing. We cry and laugh, and finally her son says, "Let's turn off that recorder and talk about the present. I want to show you the jewelry I make." I am ready for that transition and allow myself to fall in love with a ring he made of pink and black coral, sunk into a small platform of bone, on silver. It brings me back to the here and now. He tells me he needs a camera to document his one-of-a-kind creations, and I decide to barter the camera for the jewelry. They want me to sleep over but I need to leave. As the son said, "it will take me years to process our conversation." I feel the same way and crave alone time and distance. I will revisit their house in Santiago before I depart, perhaps to take one last photo of the old house and shed, and then leave the camera for the son. The landscape of painful memories will always exist. And I am now more ready to turn my attention to the orange hibiscus and gladiolas outside.

Monday, February 18, 2008

Threads of Chile from Los Vilos: 6th Post from Chile



There is lament in the land. Not the shrill cry of outrage or the shriek of horror. It's more like the wail that erupts from a deep ache, one that cannot be dulled by alcoholism fueled by extraordinary wine, or the quality of sarcasm that makes one in ten Chileans a stand-up comic-in-waiting. A pair of powerful meta-themes emerges, and they are deception and denial. For many who lost so much, it is all too painful to look back. The big stories of suffering are documented and becoming more known. The smaller stories are barely on the collective radar screen—for example, people who will never again trust their relatives; children who question choices made by their parents; siblings who refuse to come together because they were on different shores when the waters parted. And for the young people, who didn't get to taste the euphoria and the treachery, there seems to be a strong undercurrent of rejection—at least among the urban middle class—of the culture of consumption that has clawed its way into society.

In spite of the wail, those who can afford it live with exquisite gusto, not in the

sense of opulence and ostentation, but rather in a cultivation of enjoyment of bounty bestowed by the natural world. This time of year rosemary bushes flourish like giant hedges; azalea arbors grow eight-feet high; blankets of aloe and sedum cacti abound in the countryside; avocado trees (here called the *palto*, which renders the fruit known in Chile and Peru as the *palta*) and olive groves dot jagged hillsides north of Santiago. On the coast people retrieve quartz pebbles from quarries and only have to pay to haul them away. If you squint at a quartz-filled driveway in the sunlight you begin to see sparkling capsules, and if your hand can follow your gaze, you can pluck a crystal. Meals are dreamt up one day at a time, shaped by what is fresh at the market. A very thin man whose skin has been darkened by years in the sun herding his goats sells a wheel of aged cheese as good as any I've ever savored. The peaches are voluptuous and people rejoice when the nectar dribbles down their chins. And the rocks...how can I begin to describe them? Los Vilos is on the craggy coast, formed by volcanic explosions that hurled giant boulders into the sea. More than once I've heard myself saying, "This is absolutely the most extraordinary rock I've ever seen anywhere."

The conversations of our group mimic the sea, at moments predictable and then like a storm that grows in intensity, fueled by memory and fine Chilean Cabernets and Chardonnays, and a bit of Peruvian Pisco. We dip into Mexican history and discuss the traditional portrayal of *La Malinche* as traitor, and the propensity to scapegoat women. We listen to a fabulously in-your-face female Mexican singer, Paquita, whose lyrics tell the story of luring one man and then insulting another for betraying her. We acknowledge the increase of femicide in Chile, with sixty-three murders of women thus far in 2008, and the connection between this systematic killing of women and the election in 2006 of Chile's first woman president. We chew on the different meanings of property and stewardship in the Andes, and how once years ago in Huancayo, Simone asked an indigenous man in the countryside how much land he owned, and he said "*hasta donde ven tus ojos*" (as far as your eyes can see). We acknowledge how, to this day, the teaching of history in Latin America ignores the historical record by placing 1492 as the centerpiece of the telling. And we ramble back, closer to the present, and analyze recent court cases, including the leading role of one of our hosts, Luis Eduardo, in the indictment of sixteen officials for the murder of a dear friend, José Carrasco Tapia (Pepone), and how he tried to warn Pepone to leave the country, but it was already too late.

Chileans have a delicious way with words and nicknames. For example, Luis Eduardo's last name is Thayer. He is a descendant of Nathaniel Thayer, who was born in New Hampshire in 1769, attended Harvard, and erected Thayer Hall. The hugely controversial and highly prejudiced judge who sentenced Sacco and Vanzetti to death in 1927 was another relative, the notorious Webster Thayer. Luis Eduardo's great-grandfather came to Chile in 1825. His lovely wife, Gabriela, often calls him "Thayer," which here sounds like "Tire," which is like

Tallarine, which means noodle. So our host was often called Noodle by his wife. And then there are all the words derived from *huevo* (egg). For example we have *huevon*, which means jerk, as in *No seas huevon* [or *huevona*, in my case]. If there's a *huevon* (or *huevona*), then there is probably a *huevada*, which is something stupid, unfortunate, unpleasant. From this we get the miraculous concoction of the word *huarara*, (the merge between *huevada* and *rara*, which is something unusual) which means a really weird, stupid occurrence. Somehow, when I first heard the word *huarara*, it touched my inner funny bone almost irretrievably and I was afraid I was going to lose dinner [Those of you who've dined with me since I got asthma a few years ago may recall the unfortunate interaction between laughter and coughing. For me it's only a short step from coughing to heaving].

I spoke to Carmencita last night. I told her about our unforgettable stay in Los Vilos and made arrangements to stop by her daughter's house the day before I leave Chile. I want to take photos of the house, the shed, and show her daughter how to use the digital camera so she can teach her brother. I told her my mom and I will pick out some new recipes, which I will translate and send. I was amazed and happy when she told me she has begun to read the tome written by the official commission created by former President Ricardo Lagos to document the torture and imprisonment of thousands of Chileans after the 1973 coup. When I visited her on Thursday, Carmencita gave me her husband's copy and said in all these years she's barely been able to glance at her copy. When we spoke on Sunday she asked me if I'd looked at it. I said that I'd read about a third of it on the bus back to Santiago. She told me she'd begun to read it as well. When I spoke to Chris early this morning he pointed out that this is a sign of healing and shows that my visit did no harm, even though it has brought her painful memories.

Late tonight Simone and I fly to Puerto Montt, about 750 miles south of Santiago, in Chile's lakes region. We will visit the island of Chiloe and figure out the rest once we settle in. We are both in need of some deep resting. The computer will stay in Santiago during my week away. I expect to take remarkable photographs in the south and if I can find an internet café to upload them to the blog, I will. Until I return to Simone's, the blog will get a vacation of its own.

Thursday, February 28, 2008

From North to South and Back: 7th Post from Chile

On February 18th Simone and I fly to Puerto Montt, one of Chile's southern cities, after deciding we don't have enough time to go "all the way" to Punta Arenas in the Patagonia. We have come to a place where the mountains meet the sea. Cows and sheep graze close to the water's edge, framed by the Andes in the distance, which peek out from behind verdant hills. The region is known for

staggering beauty, talented craftspeople, fantastic mythology, and unforgettable cuisine.

Early on our first day I am awakened by a noise that sounds vaguely like a vibrating cell phone, and then discover it is a cow in the field behind our room, announcing the morning. A salt marsh separates us from Bahia Quillaipe. The houses are painted the colors of contentment: terra cotta, lime green, fuchsia, cerulean. Figuratively speaking, we have entered a new time zone. We decide to trek in the *Parque Nacional Alerce Andino* among towering larches, thousands of years old. Our hike is among moist, moss-filled corridors, fanned by ferns of exaggerated height. Simone naps on a flat rock in the stream as I hop across to the other side. It is a great hike and I am missing Chris, craving his company. In the late afternoon, we drive on the region's primary highway, the *Carretera Austral*. Austral, which means belonging to the south, sounds like "astral," other worldly. Indeed. Seagulls and hawks commune in the updraft. The cows look happy, healthy, shiny. Wheat grows in vertical bouquets, like bunched asparagus. Hydrangeas are deep blue, bordering purple, as on Block Island. I am told it is the iron in the soil that delivers their brilliance.

The talk is about the climate crisis and glacial melting, the unprecedented heat and ocean temperatures, and the proliferation of salmon processing plants all over the region. If the salmon become diseased, the plants move farther south to cooler waters. And those who traded carpentry, knitting, weaving, boat-building, fishing, basket-making, and wood-working for a pay-check will be most vulnerable.

Over the crest of the hills awaits another bay with a jagged coastline and snow-capped peaks in the deep background. The contrast is especially pleasing when the sun sets, at about 9:30pm. A tiny piglet strays into the road. No one honks, not even when it takes refuge beneath a car. I was right to fall in love with this country so many years ago.

The drought in much of the rest of Chile and the smog in Santiago drive people south, either to vacation or relocate. We meet many, mostly women, who have moved here *para mis hijos* (for my children). They run bed and breakfasts, and restaurants, and make artisan chocolate, organic cosmetics, and smoked salmon.

We drive to the Hotel Puyehue, pronounced Pooh-Yeah-Whey. Said to be Chile's most magnificent, it does not disappoint. The landscape surrounding it makes me want to drop to my knees. We decide to give ourselves a treat and spend an afternoon in the thermal springs. At one point, it is all women in the outdoor whirlpool, except for one man. Two women flip over to direct the jets onto the fronts of their bodies. Trying to be discrete, the man cranes his neck ever so slightly in puzzlement. I notice a couple of women with hair cuts just like the President, Michelle Bachelet.

One night in a place near Entre Lagos, Simone turns on the television to watch the *Festival de Viña*, which is just beginning and is like a week-long Oscar pageant. After she falls asleep, I happen upon a dubbed version of “Men in Black.” I love the sound in Spanish of Tommy Lee Jones’s understated dourness and Will Smith’s motor mouth.

On the island of Chiloe, which is separated from the continent by the Chacao Channel, many locals, known as *Chilotes*, lead the entrepreneurial explosion. There is also a steady flow toward the region of foreign ex-patriots. Between the big island of Chiloe and the continent that lies to its east are many smaller islands accessible by ferry or motor boat. People fish and farm, and the most enterprising offer lodging and food to tourists.

If I can infer something from those on vacation enjoying Chiloe’s restaurants and artisan markets, it would be that Chile’s lower middle class is in better shape than it used to be. Ecuador shows many more signs of misery than Chile, and apparently many Chilean non-profits have suffered since the departure of foreign donors who now consider Chile off the “endangered countries” list.

No trip to Chiloe is complete without the indigenous culinary creation, known as *curanto*. Logs burn down as rocks heat up for an hour, at which point the keeper of the *curanto* begins the careful layering of seafood, chicken, potatoes, and *chapalele*. The latter look like squished matzo balls, are made of mashed potatoes mixed with flour, and are a big improvement over our knishes. All the ingredients tucked into their niches, the *curanto* steams beneath tarps and blankets for hours. I have dreamt of *curanto* for years and felt bliss as I savored it.

Young backpackers crowd the highways and town squares in the south. Many look road-weary because there are not enough buses or cars willing to pick up hitchhikers. Hundreds of modest new homes, called *básicas*, crowd the hillsides that surround the towns and cities of southern Chile. The underemployed, who used to stake out city streets and then guard parked cars in exchange for a few pesos, are now uniformed municipal employees earning a low, yet reliable wage. Every town, no matter how small, has a school and usually a church. Chiloe’s churches, constructed in the eighteenth century of native woods, were declared Patrimony of Humanity by UNESCO, and many have been restored. And some things have not changed in the least: stray dogs, mostly mellow, are everywhere in Chile.

Our final two nights on Chiloe find us in the town of Tenaún, which means Three Hills. The church is precious and the view of the neighboring islands and mountains stirring. We lodge on Mirella and Guido’s land, in the home of a woman from Santiago who bartered the house for the right to vacation there. She paid for the house, Mirella and Guido built it, and when the woman is not there

(most of the time), Mirella and Guido rent it out and keep the proceeds. Mirella and Guido also run a bed and breakfast out of their home and when we were there, "Mr. Lonely Planet" (this is what Mirella called him) was a guest. He apparently filmed Mirella preparing the "sierra" caught by Guido. The morning we left, Guido went out in his boat at 6:00am and came back with salmon for the afternoon meal.

We returned to Santiago on the midnight plane on February 26th. I spend the next afternoon trying to reacquaint myself with the urban landscape with a double purpose: to ease my way back into city life after a blissful week in the mostly rural south, and to continue my sojourn of trying to glimpse the old through the many coats of new paint added during the past four decades. The city is much more crowded now because school starts next week. There is dense smog and it is still hard to get my bearings because I have been deprived of the majesty of the Andean *cordillera*, now concealed behind layers of foul air.

I feel my time here getting compressed and wish I could stretch the hours in the days that remain. I must get my bearings so I decide to head first for the old neighborhood. Simone accompanies me in a taxi that speeds us downtown. A computer store marks the corner of Alameda and Lastárria, and a new high rise is going up on the block. I walk slowly, trying to remember where the old bar was, the one where I used to drink beer with two friends, both Jesuit priests, from the States. The fruit stand where I scored provisions for my roommate the morning of the coup is gone, and the grocery store where we'd cue up for bread is now a very appealing watering hole called Patagonia Restobar, full of exposed beams and rustic tables and chairs. I approach our building and fortunately the *cuidador* who serves as a caretaker is outside. I explain that I used to live there and ask if I could please enter the building to look around. We chat about whether any of the neighbors from years past still live there and he lets us in. I walk to the back of the building and up the stairs. The building has not been renovated, and the floors and walls look the same. On the second floor we notice that there are four locks on the front door. We climb to the third where I lived. The door is new and red. I can hear someone inside but Simone dissuades me from knocking. I will remember the apartment as it was, not as it is. Our furniture was rudimentary, all unfinished pine, purchased at the Central Market. Our refrigerator was made before I was born and political posters adorned the walls. It was all tossed by the owner after the coup and seeing it now would be jolting. This has not been easy but I am satisfied.

We continue to make our way downtown. I crave to walk the old streets where I used to stroll and encounter friends: Miraflores, Huerfanos, Morandé, La Merced. I want to soak up as much of the Chilean cadence as I can on this hot afternoon. I see the Presidential Palace and the new statue of Allende in the Plaza. I stand before the recently-reopened door on Morandé, through which Allende's body passed after he lost the fight on September 11th. And I notice I am still staring at the gray-haired ones who I spot on the crowded sidewalks, thirsty for a familiar

face. But there is no one, not a single friend from before. I have been able to rescue important memories here, but there remains inside me a deep, untouchable pit of sadness for those missing from this place. They should be among us, enjoying grandchildren, making art, reading books, writing plays. And yet I do love this place and am contented that I can now turn toward Chile, not away from it as I did so utterly and absolutely for decades. That said, it is jarring to admit the obvious: life went on without me, the past does not grip many of the new generations, and different issues captivate the imagination of the Chilean people. How I make sense of all this becomes part of my future, which might or might not unfold on Chilean soil. What is clear to me is that I have reengaged with this land that I find compelling and upsetting, and that I will forever be drawn to the magnetism of its people and geography.