MATTERING THE WORLD WITH HOLINESS

Walking with Land Defenders: Guatemala, Colombia, Canada

By Emilie Teresa Smith

Note: The proceeds from the sale of this book will go to support Indigenous land defenders Angelica Choc (above) and others in El Estor (Guatemala), and in the Peace River Valley (British Columbia).

For more information on these struggles please see:

https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/is-justice-possible-in-canada-or-guatemala-for-hudbay-minerals-mining-repression

http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/campaigns/site-c

To all the women I have loved
from my grandma, Marjorie Benson,
to my granddaughter, Addie Ayala.

You have taught me how to fight.

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INTRODUCTION

Our Beloved Mother is under attack. What should we do -- moan, cry, hide our heads? Where to turn, what to do? Who is responsible for this mess? Can we pray our way out?

Indigenous communities the world over, the first peoples of the lands, the survivors, the sufferers of the rapacious invasions for century upon century, have stories that must be heard. There *are* ways of being and believing that have ever honoured our fragile planet home. These stories are not quaint myths, but vital tales essential for our survival. It *is* possible to live a good life.

If we are quiet for long enough we can hear the humming of the ancient traditions of the Judeo-Christian faiths saying the same thing. The Earth belongs to no one, but to the Creator who made it. Be ever so careful if you fall in love with money. Treat all beings with tenderness. Woe to you if you forget these things.

I was not raised in a Christian household. I give thanks to the women of Guatemala who brought me to faith. Thanks to their witness and to their actions, I learned that faith is about commitment, struggle, justice, about the transformation of the relations between the people of the earth. Faith and Liberation embrace one another. They must. From the Mayan communities, among whom I had the great blessing to live, I learned and relearned about the way to kneel before Creation. And the way to offer thanks.

In 2012 I received the undeserved honour of being elected co-President of the historic liberation theology organization, SICSAL (The Oscar Romero Network in Solidarity With the Peoples of Latin America). That life-changing moment sparked for me a journey into the depths of the Christian struggle for a renewed church, a renewed love, based in the power of those pushed to the margins of the world. With the people of SICSAL I have been invited into the deepest untrod forest floor, and far up the rivers that slip down from the Andes. With joyous, enraged men and women I have danced in front of the powers that dominate and destroy.

In 2013 I returned to live on the west coast of the once-wild continent of the North. Here too the Earth is under attack. Dams and mega-projects, mining, tar sands and tar-thick pipelines -- the ravaging goes on. Here too the original communities have something urgent to say about how to live in these lands.

Are we listening?

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

Reflections from Cementerio La Verbena, Guatemala City

I have walked with the people of Guatemala since 1984. In and through the terrible genocide I have witnessed the return of life -- and the struggle of communities to reclaim their history. The first step in rebuilding is the act of truth telling.

(First Published in Sojourners Magazine, June 2012)

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

Reflections from Cementerio La Verbena, Guatemala City

The spirit of the Lord set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. Ezekiel 37:1-2

It is a March morning in Guatemala City: sunny, cool, windy. I walk down a dry, dusty lane, out along a finger of land jutting perilously between ravine and ravine. To one side, vultures circle in lazy spirals on the updraft, watching everything down below – waiting. We are near the garbage dump and the slums that surround it. Here, on the road through La Verbena cemetery, hospital waste trucks rumble by; when they reach the end they tip their pile down into the valley.

I am early, so I walk slowly, kicking stones through the rows of niche tombs, stacked five height, artificial flowers drooping down. I pass some of the nicer mausoleums, and then I am among the graves in the scrub grass, markers tilted over or gone. Some are simple piles of dirt; others are human-sized hollows, where the bodies have been removed and dumped into the bone pits.

I stand outside a cement block wall, papered with the faces of the disappeared. A few young staff members arrive and wait as well, under pine trees that are blowing wildly now, this way and that. They eye me, but we say nothing.

The 'disappeared' stare at me from the abyss of silence. Many are women, their hair and clothes out of style now. The men sport moustaches from the 1980s. I imagine each one grabbed by the murderers, thrown into a van, driven somewhere dark, filthy, disgusting, sticky with blood, urine, and feces. The women are raped, the men too, and all of them are mutilated, burned, or electrocuted, and finally killed. Some are then brought here and buried.

It's 9 o'clock. Someone with keys arrives and we all file in. Jorge Mario Barrios shows me around. He's a forensic anthropologist with the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG) in charge of the project. He's tall for a Guatemalan, nicely dressed in crisp black jeans, combat boots, and a button-busting black shirt. He explains: Many people were dumped here at La Verbena cemetery as "xx", unknowns. They are supposed to be buried in the ground for seven years, and then gathered up and thrown into the ossuaries, the bone wells. But between the years 1978 – 1984 – the peak years of the civil war in Guatemala – there was a massive upswing in the numbers of bodies being brought and buried, many without being registered. Some, it seems, were dropped straight into the well. It doesn't take much imagination to see that La Verbena was a dumping ground for the murderers.

The FAFG, under its executive director FredyPeccerelli, was created in the 1990s to investigate these crimes and uncover both bodies and hidden history. It is orchestrating these exhumations at La Verbena. This is one site out of hundreds they've investigated.

There's no building, just grey walls squaring in the huge work site, wooden pillars, and tin roofing, which sometimes keeps off the rain. The work tables are covered in thick black plastic; black sacks on the ground are for loose bones pulled out of the pit. Then there's the pit itself. Huge metal cross beams, dangling with ropes and harnesses, stand over Well #3. The first well gave up 2, 114 bodies. The second, massive well, 25 metres deep, held 12, 168 bodies. Well #3 is a perfectly round sink hole, eight metres deep. Investigators expect to find about 20,000 bodies total in the three ossuaries. The U.N. commission that investigated the 36-year war and genocide in Guatemala estimates that 200,000 people lost their lives in the conflict. FAFG and other human rights organizations have figured that in addition to the dead, 44, 000 people were detained and simply disappeared. Jorge Mario tells me that they hope to identify 100 remains from the pits as some of these disappeared people – a slim percentage.

I have been walking with the people of Guatemala since 1984, when these wells were in full operation, gaping open, swallowing the dead. Out of the horror of my Guatemalan experience I became a priest and theologian.My focus of study has been what the genocide means. Death. Crucifixion. So here I find myself, in Golgotha, Xibalba, the underworld, the very place of the skulls. If we stay here long enough, and resist the too quick, cheap, or artificial resolution, we may see that the place of death is in fact the place of life. That God works in the universe by pulling life out of the grisly tomb. Those who work here, then, are God's hands of reconstruction.

Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. – Ezekiel 37:9

But before new life comes the way of the cross, the crucifixion.

Candi, an anthropology student and full-time FAFG employee, finds me a smock and takes me to her table. Slowly we untangle a pile of bones. They look like a right mess to me, but Candi know how to read them. These bones speak to her. She is unravelling the language of the dead and preparing to speak these things to the world of the living. No longer secret, no longer forgotten.

Slowly I begin to see. I'm back in high school biology. This is a radius. This is an ulna. This is a tibia. Piles of ribs, skull pieces, and the jaw. Teeth, some fallen out. The hip bone, which we'll use to determine the gender. The hard ridge above the eye socket – only men have that. We'll check the vertebrae, up and down, that can tell us the age. Here is the all-important femur. They take a sample from each left femur they find, and try to match it to one of the 4,000 identified family-types now waiting in the FAFG-created Victims and Families' National Gene Bank of Forced Disappearance. FAFG has created six categories of remains, from 'A', evidence of death by firearm, to 'F', a body partially putrefied, but not skeletonized, no sign of autopsy – someone thrown fresh into a pit.

I work all morning with Candi, cleaning bones with a little stick and brushes. She tells me about the dreams that follow her night after night when she first started working here. Her friends and family wonder why she is wasting her time and career – shouldn't we all just forget what happened and move on? Did it really happen? We dust, pick, rub, clean, measure and record. We saw off a piece of femur, put it in a paper bag, mark it, then go back to the black table, on to the next pile of bones. Five in a day, says Candi: that's good.

The people that work here have a kind of bravura mixed with tenderness, and an unspoken respect for the dead. Foul language and jokes abound, but never about the bones, the bodies. No one I met talked much about faith, but each one seems to work from the ethical conviction that human life cannot be simply discarded, destroyed or erased. They balance loving compassion for the human remains before them with a determination to keep working. They forge on through the bone piles, creating order and meaning out of nothingness, and oblivion. Their actions – methodical, scientific, stubborn – threaten the house of terror that was built out of these bones. These dead were never meant to speak again. But they do.

My dreams this night are thick and worrisome. The interior landscape of my imagination is being reshaped; I embrace the cracking bones, and I love them in wordless, tearless grief.

The next day when I arrive my body is numb with fear. Today Igo down into the pit. Raul, a forensic archeologist, ahs been on many exhumations. He is a bit older than the others, very matter-of-fact. He gives me a white protective suit, helmet, face mast, boots, gloves, harness, everything I need. God, mercifully, has given me a 72-hour cold for these days, and I can't smell a thing. I'm harnessed in, clipped to the rope. "Okay," says Raul, "Swing out over the pit." I dutifully swing out, and then slowly, as I saw the others do, belay myself down, down, into Xibalba, the underworld, where the dead wait, restless.

It is damp, cold under the circling fans, eternally dark, yet brightly lit. Cockroaches scuttle every time something is lifted and moved. It is a space between worlds. I see only indecipherable rubble. But the archeologists know what they are looking for; they've done this thousands of times. We get to work. They brush all dirt, loose bones, -- anything that can't be linked to anything else—into a tub that is raised again and again. Then they find what counts as treasure – semi-intact remains. They mark them with yellow measuring sticks and a yellow number – we're up past 2,600 in Well #3. There's the flash of a photo. Then, gently, they gather the remains –bones, and clothes, and sometimes a sheet or a blanket, all caked in dirt and human compost.

At last the call echoes down, "Coffee! Lunch!" We clip in, are hauled out, and I'm done for the day. I feel slightly sick, yet exhilarated. I feel close to those I have loved, but never known, those for whom I have been working all of my adult life. The eyes on the posters along the walls follow me. I have in my heart and mind Beatriz, my murdered sister-in-law, who was not disappeared, but murdered in a way so visible, so brutal, she was meant to be found. A lesson. Another way of terror.

O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones; I will cause breath to enter you. – Ezekiel 37:4-5

It was hoped that the first well, which dates closest to the years of highest horror, would produce matches. Four thousand Guatemalan families have had their DNA recorded. So far, none of the bones tested have matched. I peer down into the deepest shaft, Well #2; I can't see the bottom, even with a flashlight. It goes down forever.

According to U.S. historian Greg Grandin, 'disappearing' political opponents was refined in Guatemala in the late 1960s under the training and direction of the CIA. Later this technique was exported around the continent, and horror stories abound in Argentine, Chile, and El Salvador. But Guatemala continue so hold the grisly record.

Each of the 44,000 Guatemalans who simply vanished during the war was a human being, with a family, dreams, and plans. Most are now just bones waiting to be found. Most never will be. But the work of Fredy, Jorge Mario, Raul, Candi and the rest carries on anyway. Whether or not they identify anyone, they are restoring dignity –life—to these bones and to all the disappeared. They are claiming them out of the dark earth of forgetfulness, and –in the face of ongoing threats of violence and the national official insistence on oblivion – saying that these, our dead, all of them, have a place in Guatemala's story. What happened was the highest kind of crime, by a state apparatus committed at all costs to the preservation of the perverse power of a few violent and wealthy people. Many of the disappeared defended the outcast and the poor – and their deaths reflect the way of the Holy One of Peace, he who died on the hill at the place of the skull.

When my third and final day in the cemetery ends, I leave quickly and walk alone back up the road. I wait, wistful and distracted, at the PolloCampero on Roosevelt Boulevard for my taxi driver from the Quiche who arrives late through a snarl of traffic. We head out on the three-hour road home to Santa Cruz, the ground zero of the horrors of war, down the road from where Beatriz is buried. I have nothing left to feel, or say, but he talks, as I nod,and then jerk awake and listen. My driver, my friend, knows where I have spent the last few days, and he starts to tell me his own story. They were 15 years old when his best friend's head was blown off by a military man. Most everyone from the region where I live has stories like this. My tears for the dead fall quietly in the dark. A full moon rises as we turn north through the corn fields.

Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves. O my people . . . I will put my spirit within you, and you small live. Ezekiel 37:12-14

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS:

Pilgrimage in the Forest of Northern Colombia (and Panama?)

In February 2016 I was invited to participate in a five-day pilgrimage by boat, foot and in the end on horseback, along the Atrato River in Colombia, up through the jungle, to the border of Panama. There we came face to face with the armies of Colombia and Panama who had built an illegal base on the land of the Afro-descendant traditional peoples of this land.

(A Spanish-language version of this was published in 2017 by Catafixia Editorial in Guatemala.)

PART ONE

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"Look what happened to us," Josefina keens. *"Jesucristo was nailed down. There by the river. Three hours before dawn. In the little Cacarica River, something happened that had never been seen before: Christ baptized St. John, and St. John baptized Christ! We were so many, so many, little brother, but at the time of my departure, I said goodbye all by myself. And our lands, our lands they were left alone."*

Josefina sings an *alabao*, a traditional death lament, of the terrible days in 1997, when paramilitaries and the Colombian army, chased the afro and indigenous communities out of Cacarica, killing dozens, and exiling thousands, some into Panama, and most to the neighbouring department of Antioquia and the dangerous dusty banana port town of Turbo. They stumbled off the boats at the "*waffa*", having crossed the bay with the few scraps they could grab, as the bombs fell from the helicopters. We stand by the memorial, flapping at mosquitoes as night comes in, and we hear testimony, launched into heartbreaking song, how do we survive, except by telling, and retelling the story. This is the truth, and it matters.

By the rivers we sat down and wept, and then we stood up and sang. And wept singing, the song brought over five hundred years ago, in the untellable story of slavery. After four long years, most of the refugees returned. But Josefina and these women, ten women, heads of families, about sixty people, stayed, when the rest returned after the original exile. Their husbands had died, so they stayed in Turbo, doing their best to build a new life. They asked us to come to the memorial, at the place where they had all lived, several thousand people, during the exile. We came, and listened, and cried, and lit candles to honour the dead in this most horrible war, the longest war of Latin America, almost never-ending, with breaths of hope, and the horror of despair. Two hundred thousand dead. Five million people displaced. Don Augusto sings of the current peace process in Havana, reminding President Santos and the FARC guerrillas of who always pays the price in every stupid war:

"It just occurred to me that I'm going to sing this song, this song about the peace we all long for. Listen to me, Mr. President and you fellows from the FARC, because this is what my people are saying. We are tired of this conflict, because those who are dying in the war are the poor, my poor brother and sister colombianos. It's been fifty years now that you have kept it up, seeking peace with guns, and it has never arrived. But by talking to one another we can come to peace. Stop with the guns, and never start again! That's what my people say."

Don Augusto sings the alabao into the gathering night. The 'sport centre', a shabby stadium and dusty field, where 19 years ago thousands of the surviving refugees were herded, and lived in humiliation and fear, fills with echoes of the living, and shadows of the dead. Jonh Mena Palacios, one of the leaders of the returned community speaks to us sternly of the reasons for displacement, and the reason they went back, and the reason they have invited us to visit them across the water. And we file out, solemn and sorrowful, to sleep one last time before we follow their flight route, backwards, across the bay of Urabá, up the Atrato river, into the jungle, the ceiba forests, and as far as we can go.

We wake up early. I shared my room with Carolina, the Franciscan sister, and we talked until late about our dogs. I sleep fitfully.

God give me strength. I am most afraid of: mosquitoes, stomach trouble, my right knee giving out, my general lack of physical strength, that I'll embarrass myself, that I'm too old for this, and what was I thinking anyway. Guerrillas, army, and especially the paramilitaries, a little bit, but there is a great group of us, and many, many internationals. Please God, carry me, if I can't carry myself, and let me reach the peak of Cerro Mocho.

We have breakfast on the roof where we can just see the sea. The regional police have no station here, so they stay in this hotel too, lounging in the sitting area with their giant guns. We quickly eat our eggs and rice and fried plantains on broken chairs, at broken tables, as their green underwear flaps drying on the lines across the roof. We pray. I lead us in prayer. Abilio – once expelled from seminary -- prays the Beatitudes, and then we exchange the Peace, and look into one another's faces. And we are off.

At the wharf, the '*waffa*', our panga, and its driver Alexis wait. We step in, me near the front, and we nuzzle out to the bay, past dozens of shaky and shakier looking boats, and houses built on platforms right in the water. We check papers with the marine branch of the army,

and then we're out in open water. The waves slap us hard as we bounce and laugh and choke on the salt sea. We pass a giant banana ship leaving for the north (Chiquita Brand was banned from Colombia after it was caught red-handed funding the paramilitaries to murder union activists and community leaders, but they've found ways to slip around the restrictions.)

An hour later we are at the mouth of the Atrato river, at another precarious set of wooden houses perched on the water. Girls wash clothes on narrow planks, and watch us out of the corner of their eye. Edwin steps out and comes back to the panga with trays of fried plantains, sweet and good, and crab, shrimp, (which I can't eat – seafood and fish allergy.)

The river is wide and thick and brown at the mouth. Mangroves line the banks, white cranes, and smaller birds snake across the sky and into the greenery, and the panga drones upstream, and I doze in the heat, and the lull. We are stopped by the marine army again, and then yet again, in a surprise check, in an army boat, which just floats out of nowhere, under the overhanging dreadlocked trees. The river narrows, the vegetation thickens, and finally we stop altogether.

Some men get out to push and pull – Bogart and Hepburn, African Queen-style – and then Carolina, and the three students from her school, and then me, of course. The water is lovely and cool, and the mud floor receives our feet to the ankles, holds for just a second and releases. Time has already changed, watches and clocks, measuring, almost useless, except for vague organizing. All up river, people and boats have been joining us. We're all heading to the holy mountain. From Curvaradó, Cauca and heaven knows where. Boys from our boat – now carrying more than 20— shriek hello, when they see a wooden dugout with a young man in green and yellow, with a parrot green cap, "Peludo!" He turns and grins, and instantly I like him.

Now we are unloading at the Tapo, where Atrato becomes a trickling stream. It is dry, dry, dry, global-warming weirdly dry. Chochó is the "wettest place on earth" – 523.6 inches average rainfall a year, but not now. Our march begins. We follow Jonh Mena Palacios. Up to the Nueva Vida Humanitarian Zone. We come, invited and drawn in, circling closer together, most everyone to me unknown. Ninety of us in total are heading towards Cerro Moncho. First stop, Nueva Vida, about a three-hour hike in from the Tapo through the great ceiba forest, birds and monkeys, butterflies and flowers. Suddenly – before we cross the trickle-creek Atrato, we come across an army patrol. Just checking us out – a hair breath away from the self-declared weapons-free zone. The Peace Brigades are on top of it, and step out front. We are being watched. But we are watching too. PBI have their radio phones, and our every move is reported in somewhere. We wait, while they converse quietly, and then we cross the plank over the river, away from the army and into the safe area.

Four years after their forced displacement by the Colombian army and paramilitaries, the people of Cacarica, supported by the *Comision* and others were able to return. Land and territory is a complicated thing in Colombia, as it is in all of Latin America. Here is a shot at explaining Cacarica, from a very slightly-informed Canadian-Argentine Anglican priest: there is a "collective title" for the northern area of the department of Chocó (the poorest

department in Colombia), in the area bordering Panama, and the Urabá gulf, and various rivers. The title is for 103,024 square kilometres, and the title holders are residents of afro-descendant background. There are some Indigenous areas within the Cacarica holding as well, and there are several mestizo (mixed race) families too, some of whom, interestingly, like don Augusto, self-identify as afro. With the heightening of the Colombian civil war, now 50 years old, the FARC guerrillas entered the region and made several mobile bases. The government responded by increasing attacks and in 1996, choking the region with a blockade on the import of goods, and in 1997, by outright attacks on civilians, who were said to support the guerrillas. The Turbo monument in the sports complex to those lost in the war explains it like this:

In 1996 there was an economic blockade and selective disappearances and killings, which shredded family and community networks. On February 27, 1997, the Evictors came dropping bombs from the air and on the ground. Some of us fled to Panama, and others were forced to go to Turbo, where we suffered nakedness, pain, fear and hunger. We didn't know anything about our family members or neighbours, our houses or our crops. We didn't understand what war was.

After the return, however, it was still too dangerous to live in the 23 villages, and countless scattered homesteads, that had previously made up Cacarica. So they themselves created two Humanitarian Zones, where the entry of any weapons is prohibited, and anyone from either the national army, the paramilitaries or the FARC. And that is where we are tonight. The *Nueva Vida* (New Life) Zone. The *Gracias a Dios* (Thanks be to God) Zone is on the other side of the region, but their people are coming with us, and are here now gathering. Our numbers grow. That evening after a dinner of rice and meat and squashed fried green plantain, there is a meeting under the great mango tree. Leaders of the communities, and invited visitors, from the *Comisión*, and all of us.

If we meet the guerrillas, the community leaders will lead the conversations. If we meet the army, the PBI will intervene. Above all, says Jhon, we are non-violent. You can't fight a stone if you are an egg. And remember, the army is prepared to fight violence. They don't know what to do with non-violence. And that is who we are. This is our land, says Ana.

The next day we are late starting, and fast. I eat breakfast – rice and deep fried meat, salty and delicious. Irene, a silver-haired Chilean woman from the School of the Americas Watch, is staying in Nueva Vida. Yesterday, she fell off a horse and bruised her arm and shoulder. Today the mules carry only food, giant pots, and some tents and bags. My small tent stayed with Irene, and now I'll share with Brigitte a bigger, heavier tent. I'll help carry it, I say. I wear my giraffe print shirt, long sleeve, but the lightest shirt I have. Sister Carolina says that the Franciscans in South Africa love the giraffe: a symbol of peace. Smile.

We gather in a circle. Peludo sings a rap song, and we pray, Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the hills
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD
who made heaven and earth.

The LORD will keep you from all evil
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

And we go out. The hills are high, and very far away. The group breaks up on this first great day of trekking, and there are many fast walkers, the young, which is practically everyone, the visitors, some faster, some slower. I'm fine for a while, and then my backpack begins to weigh more. I valiantly carry the tent for an hour or so, but then it ends up on a mule. After a few more hours, I feel sick and delirious. Ana, from Nueva Vida, who is to become my best friend, grabs my pack, and pushes me on. She is the sweep up person, and I am in the dirt. We walk. Jungle flat, jungle up, down. Trees, wild banana, ceiba, bongo, who knows what, ferns, prickles, knee-deep dry leaves, trunks on the path, root-tangles tripping, dust, thirst, hot plains with horses below, sun, sun, sun. I feel dizzy and more delirious. I am never going to make it. At last we stop at a half-abandoned ranch. And we walk again, along a ridge, always going up, steep, and then not so. Sun again. And then a river bed. Another almost-gone stream. We brought our own rice and meat to eat, but I can't face it, my stomach turns. I nibble on some seeds and dried fruit, and drink water.

Now we're in the thick jungle forest, and it is late, three o'clock, four. I am with Janis, from Curvaradó, and his little puppy, Dogi. My shirt and everything is sweaty wet, and my feet hurt. I'm not in the last group, and I'm keeping up, but they are too fast. I almost get left behind, and then they put me in front, so as not to lose me. I can feel the blisters forming. At last we reach a peak, and then a scurried downhill, dangerous, slippery, and at last, around five o'clock, nine hours after beginning, we are at the creek bed of the Perancho river. Brigitte is on the other side, pitching the tent. Others are in their underwear in the river. I want to join them, but my towel and my dry clothes are with Ana, coming down with the last group. I sit on a rock and breathe. Put my fresh-blistered feet in the running water. Brigitte offers me her shirt, bless her, and then Alexandra, the German novelist, offers me her extra shirt too (we all only have two) and her already wet towel, until my things show up, so I gladly strip, and sink into the water, and borrow Carolina's soap to wash everything. And just float in the now darkening pool. Eventually I have on my German shirt, and we sit, and talk by the cooking fire. At last Ana comes, and I return the now soaking shirt, and put on my own.

Dismay. Dinner is rice, and mushy noodles with tuna. Can't eat the latter, so I eat rice for dinner, and we crawl over the rocks to the other bank, to the slipping downhill who cares tent, and to sleep. Brigitte sleeps like a log, and I toss, but am happy.

Early the next day, this is it. Cerro Mocho. My blisters are pretty bad, and I bandage them as best as I'm able. Abilio shares the secret. Feminine protection, the thinnest ones, around the worst blisters. Padding and absorption of moisture. Who knew? Breakfast is rice and mushy noodles with tuna. I eat rice, and crumble a granola bar in, to make it taste like

something, with maybe a hint of protein. I feel nauseous, and my stomach is making slow summersaults. Uh oh.

We are at the base of the hill, and we review our plans. Stick together, now that matters. There are designated speakers, should we meet the army. Non-violence. And we slip up the riverbed, past a giant fallen ceiba, which makes a pool and a waterfall, and then uphill. Uphill. Uphill. Uphill. I push my way higher, and higher, but I'm slipping. Ana is helping me now, and Angel, the health promoter. He gives me some pain killers, and then takes my water bottle and makes *suero*, rehydration drink, with salt, baking soda, and sugar, no saltier than tears, I drink and am restored. We push on. Uphill. Uphill. Uphill. Everyone is singing and clapping, making a lot of noise. It is not our intention to take anyone by surprise. I have to make it to the top. Abilio asked me to come, and to pray with them at the top of the hill. But I don't think I can climb anymore. Not one step. Ana shakes her head, no – about me – she's not going to make it. And then suddenly we stop.

There is a sign nailed high to a tree, a new sign in a new place: Republic of Panama. Restricted Area. Do not Enter. We stop for a good while. I catch my breath. The PBI group have their radio phones out, and their GPS's and we determine exactly where we are. There's no clarity on if this is actually Panamanian territory, but most likely it is a tactic by the joint armies, to not allow us any closer. So we stop. And we move to make consultations. Each by organization, or community group. Consequences unknown. Arrest? Shots in the air? Violence? Nothing? I put my head together with Abilio. We are SICSAL here, and he is *Comision*, of course. We quickly reach consensus. We are with the community groups. Whatever they decide.

Too late! The indigenous youth have burst on ahead up the mountain, and as we're still talking they come back. The soldiers are there, and they are waiting to talk to us. So we climb the rest of the way.

PART TWO

Ana has raised seven children. On her own. She has known exile and violence, loss and devastation. Humiliation and homelessness. And above all she knows a determination that bears no hesitation. This is Cacarica territory, commonly owned by the Afro-descendant communities who have lived in these forests for centuries. What hope on earth could Sergeant Carlos Andres Candela Candela have when confronted with her? He is young, green-eyed, nervously calm, and definitely not in charge, not a decision maker. Ana has at him, firmly, not unkindly, and Abilio. I watch these three Colombians in dialogue, move, challenge and question power. That is what we are doing. And it is good.

What is the base doing here? What is that strange sign doing down the mountain? Who are you protecting? Can we see the base, so that we understand what is happening on our own

territory? What of the reports of helicopters bringing in heavy machinery? What about mining? Are there any U.S. military on the base at the moment?

They have the guns, but we are not without power. Sergeant Candela nods politely, and doesn't say much of anything. We'd have to ask his superiors for more details. Can we at least go to the perimeter of the base? A delegation can. So we mark out a select few – and that ends up being about 25 people. I decide that I'm not needed on that delegation, so I'll pass, and I wait with the people down at where we first met the soldiers. All of a sudden cool drinks appear: a pot of fresco de panela and then water. People line up, and another even younger soldier serves us. A party! Not exactly. This is still very stressed, and everyone is on edge, starting with the soldiers, who are jumpy. The people are cautiously defiant. Not twenty years ago soldiers, not these ones, carried out Operation Genesis, where this chapter of this story sort of begins.

Soldiers are servants, of course, and they don't think, but rather serve, and those they serve worship nothing short of the demonic idols of power and money. The soldiers cannot be trusted, though they should always be loved and respected, and invited to conversion. The *Comision* has identified some real reasons for fear. Yes, for God's sake, let's get the damned peace accord signed. Enough already. But, for example, Guatemala's peace accords were signed in 1996, and in 1997 the Constitution was re-written, drastically favouring foreign mining companies. The Canadian mining invasion which subsequently occurred has caused countless deaths, injury and community strife.

Thus there is great fear in Indigenous and Afro communities across Colombia. Do Peace and Progress mean a danger even greater than war – the invasion of mining companies, dam projects along sacred rivers, and the permanent destruction of their holy land, water and communities? Are superhighways blasting through the jungle likely to bring along with them the fullness of life? They have good reason to fear: Anglogold-Ashanti (South African) currently holds six concession titles on Cacarica land. How? What? On commonly held land? Like elsewhere, people can hold land title to the top part of the land, the crust, but the state maintains "subsurface rights" which it can sell at will. Fuck that. Land is land, no one but God owns it, all the way down and through the core of the Earth. How many generations of people are buried in the Cacarican soil? Are the disappeared somewhere here in the dirt and leaves?

The delegation returns, having been up to the wire fence, and back again. Not much more to see. An unpleasant Panamanian soldier, and Sergeant Candela Candela trying to be nice. Nothing resolved – for now. So we form a great circle, and begin our act of prayer. We have white crosses with the names of the 80 dead since the return to Cacarica, so we take turns calling them out, and declaring these our martyrs, Presente! Then our lovely boys, Jani and Peludo, rap: *where are the martyrs? They are in the Earth! They are the result of this stinking war!* Sister Caroline, veteran of love for this place and these people declares from Ephesians:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

And so we pray. My turn at last. I am here. I breathe. I pray:

Father/Mother, Creator of Heaven and Earth, of all that is seen and unseen, we give you thanks.

We give you thanks that you have placed us on this holy land.

We give you thanks for the ancestors, and the martyrs. For those who loved this Earth, those who cared for it, and will never be lost or forgotten, because now they are the Earth.

We give you thanks for the elders. For those who carry the story, the memory of resistance, the knowledge of this sacred land and these pathways.

We give you thanks for the youth. For their energy and fierceness and their determination to not be undone by the cosmic powers of this present age.

We give you thanks for the men and women of this place.

We give you thanks for the men and women not of this place, who have come here to stand in love with these their brothers and sisters.

We ask you to grant us courage and clarity. Against whom is Our Struggle? Not these *soldaditos* behind the fence, poor boys with worried mothers. Not the government, necessarily. But we will stand and not stand down to all those and all that which would deny the flourishing of life, holding up that which is not life and claiming it worthy of our love and praise. Our fight is against the crafters of golden calves. Have mercy on us all.

We hear your caution, O God, as we arm ourselves for the Struggle. You have outlined our defense: with what? Not with violence, or even hatred. But neither with apathy or indifference. We are armed with non-violent direct action, using your whole armour: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, your word made flesh, which is Love manifest, made action, made defense of the poor, the despised, and of the Earth, our Mother.

Here we are, oh God. In flesh and blood and bone and spirit. Here we are, and we are not silent, or blind, confused or intimidated. We offer the power of witness.

We have brought our bodies here in an act of pilgrimage, an offering of love to you, oh God of Creation. In humility, matched with determination, we have walked and climbed and pulled one another along, knowing that without you, we are lost, and with you we are found, and will never be lost again.

Shield us, this day, on your Holy Mountain. Grant us victory, in the trial of Love. Amen.

Now, we have been here long enough. Time to climb down. And so we go, scurrying, filling our water bottles from the soldiers' pot, one last time. Thanking them, and praying that God may bless them too. And we're off.

As always, the line thins out. My feet, which had been forgotten in the last climb and the prayer, are now doubling under me. Anita stays, as always, and Angel, and now, Abilio, who notes that I am having trouble, and he calls to Peludo, come, back, help us. So he does, smiling, and takes my hand. Uphill is a challenge and exhausting. Downhill is another matter, a total loss of control, as gravity helps – too much – and the dust and roots, and leaves combine to make a rush and slippery danger. Sheer downhill, flat for a while, and sheer downhill again. The massive trees, whose tops are long lost into the light of the invisible sun, watch us go, with quiet whispered gratitude. The birds flit. The butterflies float, and I cry into my kerchief in pain. My stomach turns, and I'm not sure if I want to throw up, or pee, or just lie down for a while. Not yet. Occasionally a wind picks up and blesses us and moves even my soaking giraffe-stamped shirt. One helicopter, and then two hum in the high sky above us, and then are gone.

Peludo, I ask, why are you always smiling? He smiles, pushing against my hand with just the right amount of pressure in the sharp downs. He doesn't know quite what to say, and

maybe he's never been asked, but it is life itself, bursting out in beauty between his lips, and spilling into his black eyes. And why the nickname, Peludo? I ask. Well, he says, I used to have longer hair, and he doffs his green cap, and he is rather hairy, long, black, straight, but not so much. My name is Francisco. That was my father's name.

Is your father not living? No. He was killed in 1997, along with my brothers. I grew up just with my mother. I'm so sorry, I say. And we are silent for a while. Francisco, Pancho, I whisper to him quietly, as if we share a secret. And he smiles.

At last we are on the final descent. We can hear the river below, and then see it, and the pool made by the huge uprooted ceiba, and the little waterfall. I want to be in that water. Not yet. One hundred metres to go, and there they are! Brigitte sees me and comes over, and Francisco leaves me at the tent door. Most of the kids are in the river, or washing their now empty bowls. There was lentils and rice, but it's all gone now. I'm feeling vile, anyway. Not interested at all in food.

I sit, peel of my shoes, socks, sanitary pads and band aids which have now wrapped my feet in sweat and blood, and river water, and dust from the mountain. My heels on both sides, the ball of my left foot, and particularly the last two toes on my right foot are swollen in white blisters. My stomach turns, I can barely walk, but I move as quick as I can upstream, up a smaller branch and pee, and throw up, and do a little business off the bushes on the bank, and cry by myself. Dusk is settling in and tiny frogs, the size of a fingernail, hop out of the river onto every other rock. Here there is a pool too, and no one around, not until the next eddy downstream. I hobble over, strip to my undies, and slide in. Oh dear God, thank you. I float, and let my feet rest in the rushing part. I stay until it is dark, and then pick my way across the rocks, back to our sideways tent. I crawl in, and just pray for the ending of this day, and the beginning of the next, and our long walk out, and back to the Humanitarian Zone.

Carolina comes around, carrying rice, and squashed white sliced bread. I thank her, and leave it in the bowl. Brigitte is famished, and she eats the rice. After a while I nibble at the bread. We talk for a while. The tents are lined up like sausages in a tray, touching. I'm closer to the next tent than I am to Brigitte. Last night there were couple sounds -- not naughty ones – and not intelligible, just sighs and moans, and words of question and of comfort. I don't think they know that we can hear them. Tonight the man comes back – I never figured out who exactly they were – and he says to the woman, in a sly voice, There's a great big snake outside your tent. Brigitte and I shriek out at once, a snake! Surprised silence. The man: no, no worry, no real snake. A couple of giggles. Then silence. Then muffled, non-naughty couple noises.

We are so tired, we slip into sleep. But I feel too sore and sick and squashed and rocky, and I'm sliding slowly towards the river. No sleep for me. There are deep frogs saying, WARK, WARK, WARK! Night birds, a million insects. The youth down the river laugh and scream.

And then don Augusto calls out in one *alabao* after another over the river. Singing the story. Singing the lament. Singing the promise.

Tomorrow there will be horses, promises Abilio.

PART THREE

We wake up when the night turns to morning, and the sound changes, from insects to birds, and far off, monkeys, greeting the new day. Early start. I pick away at the bread again, and find a flattened piece of chocolate that Brigitte and I had bought the week before, a million years ago, in Bogotá. I make a squashed chocolate sandwich, and I eat! Then across the river we get ready for the final great march. I wrap my feet as best I can. I long ago ran out of band aids, but a few arrive from Nico and from Marlin. My right foot toes are the worst; I can barely put my foot down without feeling the iron nails come through to my bone. Damn.

Just before we head off I notice that I've actually managed to put my pants on – inside out! To hell with it. No one cares, says Brigitte. Smile.

Francisco bounds off early, up the hill to help another tired, wounded friend, so now I climb, up, and up, out of the river bed with Angel the health promoter. I overhear conversation, but need ask no questions. He is an older man (probably my age) --years, like all time here, are measured differently. The other old dudes, and their dogs, like to walk with him for a while: Monterosa, Juan, and his dog, Alerta, and others, I don't know who else. And I get wisps of the stories. Angel doesn't live in the Humanitarian Zone anymore, but rather in a previously abandoned village, he was determined to return. Damn the men with guns. And not too, too long ago at all, only a few weeks ago, the paramilitaries came through the region. They took five people hostage, and held one woman at gunpoint. Do you cook for the guerrillas? Do you let them cook here? She answered defiantly, of course

we let them cook here. They are armed, like you are armed. Do you think we argue with them? After that the family moved back again into the Humanitarian Zone. For now.

The men talk, on the uphill, and down to the tangled forest flats, about the other people who came from away, who couldn't walk this whole route, like they do. No judgement, no meanness, but they make comparisons. I sigh, and try to loosen my pride. I have, I think, become one of the problem ones. Up we go, and then flat, and the trees again, whisper gratitude to these old men, who know the way, who know them by name. This time we're going back by a different route, all the while by the thin, shallow river.

We climb, and then sink. I am thinking about that horse. Is there a horse, really out there? We walk and walk, there is nothing else to do, and the walking and the pain, become a kind of rosary, a prayer. The men, different ones, keep talking, and I am busy thinking, and I stop listening. Step, step. Every time I step over a fallen log, I seem to catch my foot in a root, and half-trip. Every time. So often I notice, and I make an effort to lift my foot again, after it has crossed each barrier. Think, pray, walk, lift, dust, trees, leaves, walk, dust, branch, log, lift. Breathe. Ration the chlorinated river water. Breathe. I have moved into another realm of being, thinking, believing. At some point Ana is with me again, and Abilio. Angel has gone on ahead. They have talked about me, and my half-presence here. They wonder if the horsemen have heard -- will they come this way, or the other? Did the message go out, did they get it? We walk, down to the river, and others there are, gasping, waiting. Soaking their feet. Graciela has many, many bites from the naibi, ooo, the little invisible *bichos* that crawl up your socks and legs and into the warm folds of your body, and bite, along the way, leaving tiny pus filled welts.

Look, look into the trees, says Abilio. I know he's trying to lift our hearts. And there they are, I had so wanted to see them: a handful of little monkeys, smaller than cats, leaping, shaking the tree branches, and leaping again. Dear things, that I'm too sad to appreciate. Enough of the monkeys. And the bugs. Back into the woods. At least it is cloudy, and not as hot as it could be. And it's dry. Not that many mosquitoes. We walk, four, five clock-hours by now.

Leo's banana plantation is ahead, across the river. The plantain and banana trees, whispering and dry, as tall as a house. Down to the riverbed again. Angel is waiting for us, he has cut two banana leaves, and made himself a seat on the raised dry mud. He moves off when he sees me, and gestures for me to sit down. That is it. I can go no further. I want to cry. I have failed. Rather than helping the community, I have become a burden. My needs have overcome my usefulness. I say as much to Abilio, sunken in shame. And he turns to me, and with a grave, determined voice, without minimizing my grief, corrects my self-centeredness. We go out together, he says quietly, and we come back together.

The haunted banana leaves rustle a gentle chorus: this is not about me, my success, or my failure. I am, grateful, overwhelmingly humbly grateful, I am incorporated, into this manifestation of the Body of Christ, as one of Christ's own beloveds. I belong, to these people, to this holy place, for a while. I am not a trouble, and my pain is a knitting together of our shared life, death and being. But still, I can't walk. Dear God, I say, laughing with

Abilio: please send me a horse, and a papaya. Just up the riverbank, he says, we'll rest at the banana plantation, and send word out for the horses. I remember, for some reason, birthing my last son Axel, when I didn't want to anymore, in the blinding pain, and Bridget, the midwife, laughed at me and together we climbed out of that place of real power. My midwives. Ana and Abilio and Angel, pull me up out of the steep banks. Abilio finds a very ripe plantain, and he feeds me, and I am restored again. I walk again. I need to pee, I whisper to Ana, and these sheltering trees look good. As I am hidden behind one clump, I hear the cry, the horses are here!

Magnificent beasts. Mine is thick flanked and brown, shiny, and powerful. He is named, now, *Rescate Canadiense*, Canadian Rescue. Abilio climbs on an even bigger horse. And Ana, and Eliadoro, guide them, quickly we move now, through the river, up the bank. Suddenly the white face of a large monkey (capuchin?) grimaces down at me from a low branch, and then we're gone. In a minute we meet a whole crowd, eating rice, and meat, wrapped in banana leaves, sent to us with the horses, and with water, from the Humanitarian Zone.

We eat, and then ride out ahead. Ana leads, and marches fast, in her flip flops, and we don't talk, and I grow to love my horse, so solid, and surefooted, along narrow creek ledges, and down sandy slopes, through the water and up again. We move through two Indigenous villages, and up again. Until, after a few hours, we arrive at the Popular Papo's house. My papaya, the other half of my prayer to God, is waiting there for me, fat, dark orange and soft. My stomach is completely put back together. We drink fresh cocos, and I give seven guavas to the earnest, deserving Rescate, who pulls them gently into his mouth past thick, uneven lips. We trot back happily to Nueva Vida, the Humanitarian Zone, and as we enter, right from beside the school, a flock of children come running, waving homemade flags and greeting us like heroes. And now, damn it, I *am* going to cry. Who the hell cares? Back to the community house platform, I slide off of Rescate, and pray that I'll see him one more time. I am thoroughly besotted. On the ledge of the house, I rest for a while, and then begin the process of peeling away my feet coverings. Not a pretty sight, though the children, and even some of the youth come and see. They are transfixed. It is night now. Five hours of hiking, and six of riding, and we are back. Someone brings me dinner, and I am hungry, at last. Lentils and rice, meat, and bits of homemade cheese softening in the lentils. Squashed, fried plantain. A banquet. There's a small boy beside me, and we share the plate of food and I hope we are both filled. Brigitte, the mighty, who hiked both there and back again mostly carrying the heavy tent, has now popped it, beneath the giant mango tree. And there we sleep.

The next day we rest, at least from walking, but the *Comision*, and the community leaders meet all day, for analysis, and for planning. I hobble up to eat, and then lie in the tent, in the sauna heat, and will my filthy feet to heal. I can't quite reach them, and I can't be bothered. There's no running water in the village, and the river is too far away. Brigitte brings me fresh water to drink, and does some of my laundry too. Terribly, Luis, known as Piki, from the *Comision*, our photo and videographer, is stung in the river by a ray. He lies in great pain, on the platform, and the ladies bathe his wound with herbs and hot water. He moans, and we are all sad.

We gather in the late afternoon, to read, rewrite, and affirm our declaration, the history of what we have done, and what we are demanding. This is the peace plan, on the ground – not in Havana, but real, and with will and voice. Angel has been in the meetings all day, but at dusk he sets up his first aid kit on the edge of the common house. At last it is my turn. He washes my feet with hydrogen peroxide, and scrubs the grit and dust out of the broken blisters. Three are infected with yellow pus, and are red and hot all around. He bathes my feet next in iodine, and they turn orange. He smears on polysporin, and then he wraps them in gauze, and orders me to tent rest for what's left of the day. Then he moves along to other feet. The closing ceremony is going on, at a distance, dancing and singing, a play, and Alexandra, the German is sharing a bit from her novel about this place. I look out at them longingly, and then sigh, resigned. I don't need to be there either, because others are, and that is good enough. All night, until after one in the morning, the young people have a dance. Unbelievable. The bass is heart-throbbing, but the accordion and the voices make it fun, and I smile. Then they crash around us, right beneath the mango tree, in the eternal homo sapiens mating ritual of teasing and pursuit. I sigh, and smile again. Who needs to sleep with such fun to be had!

And just a little while later, three hours still before dawn, we are up, collapsing the tent, folding and packing. Out of nowhere, a tiny fist-sized kitten appears, miew, miew! So I give him a bit of bread, and he pounces, and I hobble over, and leave him on the other side of the mango tree, and then we're off. The horses are late, so the walkers leave first, and then we go, Piki, on one horse, and me on the other, and the mules carrying a mountain of bags. Ana is resting, so Jhon takes my horse, the return of Rescate!

We start, and the mules are behind us, pushing, single-minded, in the dark. Suddenly, by the gate of the Community I hear, miew, miew. Way down below is the kitty. Clomp, clomp go the horses and mules, stopping for nothing. Miew, miew! Jhon reaches down, and in one fell swoop, kitty is in his giant hand. Then deposited three logs over. As we move on, he can be heard from the back. Miew! Miew! Jhon shouts out something to someone, and the kitty is taken gently out of the path again, and away this time for good. The anxious mules, set on their work, pass us, and suddenly we are alone: Jhon, Rescate and me in the jungle forest and the dark. From across a clearing the sky is just barely turning light. Jonh calls out to an owl. And after a while the howler monkeys begin their morning greeting to the dawn, and the whole forest shakes awake with life.

After three hours, now fully day, we arrive at the Tapo. As we're looking for the boats, Edwin calls out, And Abilio? Where's Abilio? Somehow, in the walk between the Humanitarian Zone and the deep river, between the first stepping out, and our final horse ride in, Abilio and the high school girls have vanished. Edwin turns white. We can't imagine what has happened. A wrong turn somewhere in the dark, probably. Eliodoro charges away on Rescate, and we wait, quietly, subdued and frozen. After a while, we decide to carry on, some of us anyway, get a head start. So we fill a worried dugout canoe, and we drift down the river. Just as we are turning the first bend, I spot Nico. And if Nico is there, then Abilio and the girls must be too. We can't hear much, but we hear *SI! Aquí están.* They are here, and we float away, relieved down the rest of the way. To the Panga, down the interminable

river to the brown sea. Piki sits between me and Sister Caroline, swooning, we hold him up together, across the rough bay, to the bus, to the plane, to the other plane back to Bogotá.

It seems we take the jungle with us. As we line up for the baggage check in at the Apartadó airport, I notice that we've tracked in a whole trail of dirt. It follows us out, and to the tarmac. Piki is in a wheelchair now, I'm limping, and we look like we've slept and sweated in our clothes which, of course, we have, for many days. All of us are immeasurably dirty. On the other end in Bogotá, everyone else in the whole huge airport is clean and polished, and still we carry on. Quite the scene, into the armoured cars as big as tanks, with the armed men, we are carrying our dirty laundry. And our stories, limping anyway.

Restored to the Sisters' bed, with a pillow, I rest, and try – unsuccessfully --to contain my leaky heart and eyes. I'm lonely. I cry, and the tears roll into my ears. Ana, Angel, El Popular Papo, Augusto, Jhon, Janis, the children, the women, the youth, especially Francisco, who only twice stopped smiling, once when he told me the origin of his name, and a second time, when we saw that Abilio was missing. When I close my eyes, at last, I continue to rock, with the boat? the horse? my own two feet? Sheltered in God's loving hands. Thus it is every night.

Jonh moves sure with the horse and above, the stars -- ones I don't know that well, of the southern sky -- fade into the white of morning. Each step of this pilgrimage is an affirmation, a demand to be acknowledged, left whole. This land is God's holy temple. And on this land live God's holy people. We walked, only for a little while – and me not very well – on self-made trails of righteousness. Beloved people. This land will be saved.

Standing on This Holy Mountain:

The Tsleil-Waututh defend their land

On April 23 - 24, 2018, people of many faiths gathered as part of a wide network to stand with the Tsleil-Waututh Nation. The People of the Inlet have suffered depredations of their traditional lands since the invasion of the English colonizers. In 1935, with no consultation, oil refineries were built by Standard Oil on this mountain and then in the 1950s they were greatly expanded. Since 2012 the oil companies planned to push a hugely expanded pipeline from the tar sand pits of desolation on Cree and Dene territory in northern Alberta, to the Salish Sea. The Tsleil-Waututh said no. Over two hundred people have been arrested so far, blockading the road to the site.

LETTER TO JUDGE AFFLECK

Delivered after a guilty conviction, before sentencing.

August 7, 2018

Dear Esteemed Judge Affleck,

It is with much consternation that I find myself before you, charged with contempt for your court. Let me begin by apologizing. Never at any moment have I, nor do I now, hold you in contempt. I see you. You are my brother, a fellow child of God.

Now, I know nothing about your personal life, but perhaps you are a husband, a father, a grandfather even. I am sure that you have worked hard, and loved well. I believe you must have done your very best, dedicated many long hours, much study and earnest reflection, to achieve an honourable position in your profession, and that you have deep confidence in the way we have ordered our human community, here in what has been called British Columbia in Canada.

I am grieved that my actions have been interpreted as a sign of disrespect. My intent, through my actions, was to engage in urgent dialogue, in honest conversation. The need to speak with one another is so great it caused me to behave in ways that ordinarily I would never consider. I, too, hope to be thought of as an honourable woman, who has worked hard and who loves, above all, this earth, the creatures of the earth, all of God's Holy Creation.

Our world, the planet we all live on, our Holy Mother on whom we all depend, is in peril -- She is dying. And we humans have caused this earth-wide devastation, because the dominating culture has a way of being and believing that is drastically mistaken. This worldview has named greed as the central good of our human community and has forgotten the cost of such selfishness. Forgotten to the degree that those who hold this way of being no longer see, or give value, to the virtues of moderation, cooperation, harmony, balance, generosity. The result of this forgetting is the snaking growth of the destruction of fields and forests, mountains and rivers, fish and caribou, lichen and cedar.

Somehow – bizarrely – many of us have accepted this greed-based worldview. We have—reluctantly perhaps – agreed that there is no other way to achieve a good life and security for ourselves and our children, but by destroying the earth. Maybe we think someone else will clean up the mess, or that some miracle technology will come and scoop our toxic poisons out of the sky and water and earth. Or that if we do the damage now, we will still have time to correct things later. Or maybe we just can't imagine another way, and we have given up trying.

One of the very specific ways that the world has gone wrong is in this plan to expand a corroding pipeline that carries toxic bitumen, and winds its way from the ravaged and contaminated boreal forest of the ---- people, through the mountains and then the dry lands

of the interior, alongside the great salmon river almost to the sea, where it plans to cut through a low mountain to the ocean inlet that nestles into the great green-blue mountains to the north-east of this courthouse. It was on a road, between the weirdly-named tank farm – as if something good were alive and growing there — and the marine facility of this pipeline, that I found myself one morning last April, standing, and kneeling with a handful of my beloved brothers and sisters, praying and singing and saying no to this way of being that says we have to destroy the earth, in order to live.

You see, there are other ways of seeing and being in the world. And these ways of seeing and being are desperately trying to communicate with the greed-based worldview that is killing our planet. For example, my ancestors' traditions, which emerged over two thousand years ago out of a small, dry country on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea say these things:

The Earth is God's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein. (Psalm 24)

God so loved the world, that God sent a Son into the world to save the world. (Gospel of John)

Woe to you who sell the poor.

The founder of the tradition that I proclaim, Jesus of Nazareth, was very often at odds with the legal authorities of his time. Yet he said, "I did not come to abolish the law, but rather to fulfill it." Humbly, we too, the followers of this way, do not mean to destroy any law, or to act with contempt for your court, and much less your person, but rather we mean to stand up for a deeper law, the essence of all law which says that protecting life matters more than profit.

I hope that I am not speaking out of turn. But it is time to stand up. And to demand respect for this other law, this other way of being in the world.

I am sorry if at times we have appeared to be angry. You see, these things are urgent. Last year my first grandchild was born. He arrived during the swirling smoke storm of summer, caused by the unprecedented wildfires in the woods and dry scrub in the interior, yet another terrifying manifestation of our rapidly changing climate. For almost a week he couldn't go out into the world. His soft newborn lungs breathed the filtered air in a sealed-off room. Outside the sun hung menacingly orange in a thin grey sky. Now I await with joy for my second grandchild to be born this coming September.

But I am scared too. Honestly, I don't know what world we are leaving to them. I feel helpless, and I feel mad. I am furious that greed seems to trump long life and well-being for the generations to come. But then I remember: my tradition also has something to say about righteous anger.

There was one time remembered in all four of the gospels when Jesus was furious. Incandescent with rage. This is when he cleanses the temple. Making a whip of cords, he drives the money-changers out, those who prey on the poor.

"You have made my Father's Holy House a marketplace!" he roars.

All of Creation is God's Dwelling Place. All of Creation is holy. It is not to be used for the filthy piling up of trinkets for a precious few, for a short period of time. The Earth is not a product, it is not a resource to be developed. It is holy and lovely and worthy. The Earth has a body, a spirit, a life, a soul and memory.

Tragically, our Christian teachings were used as weapons in the process of colonization, assimilation, destruction, yet in their heart they proclaim a different way. There is a core teaching of profound love and worship of God's world, and a teaching about brothers and sisters and neighbours, about caring for little ones, vulnerable ones. Above all, we are to honour in humility the Life force of the Universe.

When the colonizers came to this land, they did not bring these teachings. The colonizers brought fear and power, greed and violence.

Recently, we in the church realized, with shattered hearts, that in our direct and full collusion with state power, with what was then, "the law", we betrayed the very message of what Jesus came to reveal to us. We forgot about love, we forgot about humility, we forgot about inclusion. We looked back and saw the trail of destruction laid behind us, that lay on our altars, on our very doorsteps. We have come up short, stale and sick. We have seen and said that we are sorry – more than we could ever say—for the harm done in our collaboration with the state in the horrific Indian Residential School system. These things were perfectly legal then – and horrifically wrong.

We apologized. In 1993 Michael Peers, then Primate of the Canadian church confessed and apologized before the First Nations, Inuit and Metis people of this now country.

I accept and I confess before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God. I am sorry, more than I can say, that we were part of a system which took you and your children from home and family. I am sorry, more than I can say, that we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity.

He also said:

I also know that I am in need of healing, and my own people are in need of healing, and our church is in need of healing. Without that healing, we will continue the same attitudes that have done such damage in the past.

We have even changed our liturgy. Baptism, the most significant sign of belonging to the One Church has a list of promises we make as renewed people, recently incorporated into the Body of Christ. We promise: to safeguard the integrity of creation.

We have used the same language in how we understand what we are to do, as Christians in the world. We have what we call the "Five marks of mission."

We have preached reconciliation.

We as a country have signed on to UNDRIP, and the International Labour Code Convention 169.

Through all these renewed statements and promises, we hope to be new kinds of people. We intend to move away from a dominating position, where we are always right, to a place of humility a place of true reconciliation. Not just pretty words, stepping back, stepping down, allowing cosmovisions to have power.

We contemplate – if we dare – the end of life as we know it, as we look out and see catastrophic climate change, and unspeakable collapse of species and life systems.

In separate canoes, in the same direction.

The morning of April 20th passed in prayer and song, in quiet conversation. Slowly the sun rose over the oil facility, and the tanks glowed eerily in the pale green morning. It smells like a gas station here, and my stomach feels soft inside. Visible, just barely, was a tall tree, in the midst of a clearing. Something caught the sun and flashed. It was an upside-down cone, suspended in the giant cedar, to prevent eagles from nesting there. It was enough to make me hang my head in sorrow.

And then Will George came to stand with us:

Will George stands straight across from me, drumming and chanting. From him the song sinks and the song rises and covers us, pressing us, pinning us to the land. We cannot move. The song is so loud the mountains across from us hear and are glad. The little mountain where we stand -- so carved and damaged already by human greed --breathes and says thank you. The drum echo shivers up and along the inlet, comes back filled with the promise of the ancient ones, the ones who have been here forever. The echo is a song of gratitude, an invitation and -- finally -- a command.

Listen to me says the drum, song, the echo, the water, the mountains, the inlet, the sea, the ancient ones, the ones whose hearts were broken when this land was taken, the ones who watched when this land was murdered for the first time. Listen to me says the drum. In humility, in sorrow, in reverence. Listen.

And so we stand, we kneel. I kneel. With all that I am and all that I am, I am sorry.

At the invitation of Will George we are here, allies on the mountain. I would leave if he asked me to, of course I would. But I will not leave because the court of Canada has granted an injunction to a Texas oil company, saying they can do what they want on this place which is not theirs. The oil companies have been on this mountain, in these waters, for some 50 or 60 years, practically my lifetime, but that does not mean they actually own it. They don't own anything. None of us own anything.

I arrived at the Kwekwecnewtxw, the Watchhouse the night before, as darkness is sinking down onto the mountain. It has been raining all spring it seems, and everything is damp, but this night is clear enough that a slip of yellow moon hangs in the west. It is misty or cloudy and two stars burn through, they watch us like the eyes of a great owl, discerning,

curious and noble. We share, in a circle, who we are, and what our plans are, and we sit by the sacred, roaring fire, and it speaks to us, as we decide together to stand tomorrow in front of the company gates. And we retire to rest in the cedar house that stands on the hill.

We wake before dawn. We are shivering cold in the house, on the mountain. We eat hot oatmeal, down in the camp kitchen, and I drink hot water, and the chill begins to fade. Some of my oldest friends are here: Vikki, Vivian, Laurel, Ron, Bishop Mark and some very new friends, Rachael, Steve, Brian, Chuck, Chris, Beth. And my sister-in-law, Lini. We head out. Before dawn we are blocking the main gate, and a smaller side gate, and almost immediately traffic pulls in, white pickup trucks, swinging around the corner, pulling up short.

On the other side of the fence birds scatter-sing in the trees that are left, but as the sun rises, a clearing can be seen, freshly mown alongside of us. Trees have been cut, making way for the tail end of the pipeline. There are a few trees left, the tallest one flashes strangely. A cone has been placed there to prevent eagles from nesting. Placed there to crush the next generation of eaglets, to block the eggs before they can even be laid.

We say those eggs and eagles matter. We have come to be an interruption. With our bodies we are acting out a determination that things will be a different way.

On this mountain, through this land, my grandfather and his brother came from Sweden, almost a hundred years ago, sons of poor potato farmers, looking for a way to keep going. They wandered through, in the labour camps, logging, mining, before being pulled back by the Scandinavian magnet of Minnesota. My people passed through here, maybe fifty years or so into the full-scale destruction of this land and its people. I wonder, what did it look like then?

What was done here was so thorough that hardly a sign remains of the original inhabitants, their communities, their sacred places, their way of being with the Earth. It has become ordinary not to see it, one can grow up without ever seeing or knowing, and then to not care, or to normalize as forever, as inevitable, this not-knowing way of being. Residential schools, anti-potlatch laws. Stamp. Stamp. Stamp. Destroy. And the Anglican Church first among equals. Assimilate, diminish, stamp and destroy.

The companies came and made this inlet their slag-heap, their garbage dump, their toilet. The railway bosses came, and the mining bosses came, and the forest-felling bosses came, and we came along with them, working men and women. We brought along our religion, our state, our laws, our courts, our roads, our houses, our city, our entire way of being, which made no room for others, but smothered, suffocated, ripped and destroyed. And then pretended that there was nothing else ever here.

But they *are* here still. The eagles, the trees, the bears, the whales, and the original peoples.

Because the crucifixion of this land, and the people of this land did not work.

Though the bosses try again to say this land is theirs, we kneel and say, no. This land belongs to the One who made it. And we turn in obedience towards those who have promised in truth to care for it.

Which is why, now, we kneel here. We stand here. And we will not leave.

The genocide of the Coast Salish people did not work. They are still here. Will George stands before me, drumming. Cedar George is in the camp with a wide open smile. God, the creator of Heaven and Earth, continually pulls life out of death, and all things are renewed. The crucifixion is not the end, but the pivot of all things towards God. All that was done on this land, that was unholy, a sacrilege, will be undone.

We kneel, and we will not leave. The only authority that speaks here is the drum.

LETTERS FROM ALOUETTE CORRECTIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN

Maple Ridge, Canada, August 2018

(First Published in Reckoning, Creative Writing on Environmental Justice, June 2019)

The First Letter

August 9

I have paper! I have a pencil! I'm in jail! The world is sharply divided. There is a here and a not here, a yes and a no. Mostly the women in green, like me, are broken and hurt, of course. The women in uniforms are thoughtful and gentle, at least to me, at least for now. All is well. I sleep, eat, wonder, try to phone out, but can't make things work, so I settle and I wait.

Yesterday was like a strange dream.

"Guilty," said the judge, and then it all happened quickly, and then just as quickly stopped. Handcuffs, and down and away. Steve looks a glance of firmness and love as they take him away first. I get a glance of Patti and the others.

Cal and Gil seem sorry to do this. They can barely look at me. My organic blueberries go into the garbage. My wedding ring, so recently acquired goes into a little safe baggie. My jacket goes – it has an attached strap that could be used in harmful ways. And then the waiting begins. The holding cell is in the bottom floor of the beautiful Arthur Erikson courthouse.

I sleep on the hard plastic bench, a sideways toilet roll is my pillow. I shake with cold. Gil checks on me, brings me an old red sweatshirt. It smells foul, but I take it with thanks. The yellow, shining cement bricks become Rosary markers and I pray: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me. Holy Mary, Mother of God, Our Father, old way, new way. If I close my eyes and drift it goes to the old way, but I like the new one: Save me from the time of trial.

This is no trial, uncomfortable, inconvenient, but not that hard. Cold, clear, everything taken away, nothing to do. Pray, sing, sleep. Daze, sleep, my mind moves, slips into the border between dream and vision. A Holy Place of the great invisible. An Anarchic Vacation from the Law. Well, I never!

There is no clock or time, but the men come and go and peer in to the window. I am cold even with the sweatshirt so I get up and pace. That seems to be what one should do in jail. I try some of the salsa moves that Michael taught us before the wedding, but no. Not only do I have two left feet, but I can't remember a single thing. But then joy! Guess what? I remember the Swedish dancing from the winter! Step, lift, step, step. Step, step, step, step, turn, turn step, step. I figure out how to time the twirl so it misses the semi-wall that shields the smelly toilet, and the dip. I dance, sing, pray. I can't write or read or speak to

anyone. The hours slide down into one another. I can't tell time, or hear anything. Muffled unrecognizable voices, distress, keys shaking. Time is measured by Gil's 15-minute footsteps, peering into the porthole, smiling, thumbs up, disappearing. He brings me lunch – a McDonald's chicken salad. Delicious! And he's gone.

I dance and sing, I pace, I lie down again, I adjust my arms inside the jacket sweater, leaving the sleeves dangling.

Desperation begins to settle, boredom, apprehension, loneliness, fear – but not really.

Maria Choc is on trial this day in Guatemala.

Edwin Espinal is in jail in Honduras.

How many thousands of Guatemalans were kidnapped, held, tortured, disappeared, murdered, mutilated? Was Beatriz even ever held in a jail? I sing a lament.

The expected graffiti is scratched into the door. True love and R.I.P. and a few foul declarations: Fxck thee cops. There all goofs. And Girl Thugs. A couple of East Van Rules, and maybe my favourite: Tracy and Joseph . .. Best Friends Alwayz. These markings say: Here I am, here I was, I loved, I lost, I mattered. Into the days and years to come, forgotten, dead maybe, in jail, slivers of staying, remnants of saying I am. And I pray for Tanya and Joseph, for Shorty, for Bubs and everyone.

At last Gil comes. He takes away the sweatshirt, and we're moving. Handcuffs and shackles this time, which cuff and rub and hurt my sockless feet. And into a van. All in our own hot boxes. Gleeful defiant men a few slots down. They yell, "Are you really a pastor, or is that a costume?" I forgot, I'm wearing my black shirt with a collar. "Ha! Ha! Hallelujah!" one man yells. I try and look around but can't see Steve anywhere. My ankles ache, and then we're off through the downtown streets, so strange through a little caged window, to the Main Street courthouse (I think).

I shuffle awkwardly into the building, off come the cuffs. I stand hands against a wall lift one foot, and another, off come the shackles, and into another cold holding cell a room where I see D., my first fellow prisoner. I am about to hear the first of many, many stories. These are not my stories to retell, but what I can say is that with everyone who shares with me, and many, many do – there is a common thread. Violence, sexual violence particularly, and then substance use, addictions, layered upon layer, beginning from the very beginning of life, or at least memory. Beautiful girls, lovely women, every one.

D. paces a true jail pace, pounds on the door, anxious to leave. She got bail today and wants to get back to Alouette, maybe the people from the recovery house will wait for her and take her out. We have to get there before seven. Chains and shackles again and we go out to the van. D. and I share a tight bench in a cage, and there is a woman with black hair sitting on the narrow slit of floor in the next cage over. "What's your name?" yells D. The other woman looks up, but shakes her head and looks down quickly. It is after 6pm now and we head out along Cordoba. Hi St. James, hello Commercial Drive, Victoria, hello 1900 block, hello my darling, my house-family, Fritz, garden, bread, cheese, coffee, chocolate, figs and tomatoes and blackberries and the last raspberries and pillows and stuffies and books and

clothes and photos of boys and Oscar, flowers and birds and spiderwebs strung across everything.

It is stinking hot and the woman in the cage beside us in distressed. She gets up, crouching, no one could stand. Highway One inches along. At last we stop and wait forever in a hot parking lot, waiting says D. for another van, collecting prisoners to take home for the night. Our neighbour is ever more agitated until she is pounding and kicking at the door and walls. "I am dying! Help! I can't breathe!" D. tells her to shut up, but then somehow I am helping D. take of her green sweatshirt, separate from her green tee, it hangs over her cuffed hands. Our neighbour takes off her sweater too, but she can't undo the t-shirt, so it comes off too. She kicks again at the door, slumps and is quiet.

I lean my head against the caged window between the two of us and shut my eyes until I open them and look ever. She's done the same thing at exactly the same time and suddenly we are looking into each other's eyes, both frozen, about four inches apart. We both start, surprised at such strange closeness, almost nakedness, human and woman and sad.

Who knows her great sadness. And mine? Wondering if we'll win or lose. The Judge, the Prosecutor, the Company, the Government, the Law. When is the law the foundation of our humanity and when does it serve only those most powerful, those rich enough to make the power work for them alone? What are we to do now? How can we stop this destruction, this peril -- that seems so far away from this very moment, but is why I am here, after all? Global warming, and pipelines and bitumen. And me.

Suddenly the van jerks and moves and D. cheers. We haven't waited for the other van, and we're heading straight for home. I am relieved too, longing for the what-ifs and unknowns to end, and to rest somewhere. Then -- What? Wait? Where are we turning? D. peers through the narrow thick window, and now she's yelling and swearing, pounding in frustration. We're not going home, we turn to go over the big bridge, and down, down into Surrey. We'll never make it home before seven. We pull into another down driveway, another jail, and inside, and wait. We are moved, and another van, and getting in beside us come four young women, recently convicted, like me, exhausted, still high, dirty, worn and done. They stare and stare at me.

One young woman is fierce-eyed, shorn head, tattoos on her face and barefoot. D. says to me, "She's cursing us. Don't look at her." Obedient, I look down, but then we're driving back up through Surrey, and she throws herself at the window, head up to a small filtered screen up top. "My grandpa would want me to do this," she yells. "Are you a priest? Will you hear my confession?"

I'm too astonished to reply, and she starts to list things. I can't really hear her, the screen is too small, and the traffic too loud, but I hear some. Dear Lord, what to say, what to do? I know nothing about this young woman, not even her name, but I know she is reaching for that truth-star and I say what I've said many times before, though never in these circumstances:

"I don't know you. I know nothing about you, but this I know: No matter what you have done, no matter what has been done to you, you are a beloved daughter of God. You are

loved. God holds you in the palm of his hand, and God treasures your heart." I yell through the grate that I can't say more. We sit in silence. Silence all around, or rather the steady roar of the van. It is less hot. The sun is setting and we are arriving home: The Alouette Correctional Centre for Women.

The shackles are rubbing a small sore on my shin, and the handcuffs are heavy. We are brought into yet another bright room to be processed yet again. The young women are spent and throw themselves on the hard bench as we are called out one by one. I go through the final process, am stripped of my own clothes and get green prison sweats. Everyone attending shakes their head. Who are they to say to the judge, but this, to them is ridiculous. I have more allies, more friends.

I hear I am going to Alpha: the special secure unit. I shuffle down the long, nightmare hall with heavy locked doors on either side, and into the tiered unit. I am inside now.

Alpha in the secure zone is maximum but for the least troublesome – the immigration cases are here, they say. My ears perk up. But I'm too tired to notice much – an open area, and clanging stairs. I'm up to the second floor, a small cell, a bag of sheets and a towel, the door closes and locks and I sit and plan the night. I don't have a toothbrush or soap, so I make my bed and arrange a shirt over my face. The lights never turn out here. And the day is done. Two thin slits show the outside, a patch of yellow grass under the glare of blazing light, and the dark forest beyond.

The days stretch out down the way but first there's the first night. Now everything is obviously gone. Industrial silence. And so, I turn in and examine myself.

My heart is pierced through with love, none of it earned by my goodness. It just is: Patti, my beloved boys, their girls, Oscar, the new little one coming, my family and my family-in-law, and my house family, my church, my brothers and sisters in Christ, my co-land defenders everywhere, especially in Latin America, and especially Guatemala, my doggie, the forest, the great sea, the looming mountains, and the wee sparrows. All these are my nest of prayer. And so, I weave them all around me, and sleep comes gently and carries me into the heart of God, where I spend the night free.

Letters from Alouette

The Second Letter

August 10

(I have just been given a pen by a friend and fellow inmate, S. Now I will be able to write faster.)

I wake up stiff on the board-hard mattress, and I stretch before opening my eyes. Outside it is that thin light that waits as dawn approaches over the trees. I no longer decide most things, so the things I do I cherish. Mostly what I have is me, and how I can be with everyone I meet.

I am so absolutely conscious of my privilege. I will be here for a few days, loved and carried by all that I have. I have no life to reconstruct from scratch when I leave, my traumas are not deep and lasting. So how can I mirror compassion without curiosity? Can I be open and vulnerable, reaching out with a measure of concern and confidence, in the flash moment of time that I will have here? No problem. I have done this before. I say a quick prayer and sing a little bit to warm up my heart. And I wait.

At seven the doors click unlocked, and a guard, H., comes by and turns a key, and I step out to the balcony, seeing for the first time others in green now stepping out. Two women are busy in the common area below, setting up plastic trays, and a breakfast is served: raisin bran with watery milk, a muffin, sweet, and two pieces of wonderbread. Coffee, a powdered creamer, four packs of sugar, a portion each of margarine, jam and peanut butter – oh and an apple. I'm eating quietly, politely, and slowly I say a few words and it happens. T.L. and J. start talking, I have delivered to me a story, and another. T.L. tells me some things, and her eyes narrow, and she asks me to pray with her, I think not quite believing I will. "Of course I will," I say. "We'll find a place and a time. I'm not going anywhere, at least for a few days."

J., in the meantime, is telling me how things work. Fill in this form for this, that form for that.

I'm looking at the soggy bread on my tray, and over by the phones I spy a toaster. Toasted is so better.

"Can I just go over and toast this?" I ask J. "Oh no," she says. "You have to fill in a form first!"

I look horrified, then she grins at me. We laugh. My first jail joke!

I give T.L. my muffin. "Really?" she asks. "You don't want it later?" "I'm good," I say.

E. comes by. I give her my sugar and whitener. “Jail candy!” she says. “Mix sugar, whitener, jam and p.b. Microwave for 30 seconds. Let harden. Eat.”

Before we’re shooed back to our cells I find the book cart – and a book on dogs! Oh no, it’s sentimental and inspirational. I slide it back. Next, I find a Bible—Yay! And then Atonement by Ian McEwen. Back in my cell, I get lost in a world of child writers and big houses and real from another place –not here. Then I hear a call – Yoga! And we’re clattering down the steps and through the door to the only outdoor space, a weird stuffy courtyard with a screen ceiling two floors above. But I can see that the sky is blue, and incongruously I’m lying on my back looking up, and then doing downward dog.

We have a jail meeting. I nod to everyone. I make a few more friends, there’s some drama, some quiet, some promises, some pain.

The drama of me-not-being-able-to-phone begins. Deposit money in jail account. Done on arrival. Set up special phone voice recognition ID. Done. Try and call, no go. Oh. Must fill in form to transfer money from jail account to phone money. Do this. Must wait now until later. Okay. Sigh. Notice while rifling bored through the request forms that we have to ask specially for a visitor. Fill in a request for a visitor. Wait. Get a small plastic toothbrush and a cheap slip of hotel soap. Celebrate.

The regular rhythm of the day plods along. Now it is lunch, and then we are locked in for the afternoon. Atonement is seamless and transporting. Read, read, read. So desperately quiet and alone.

Then the guard, S., comes in – we’re moving you. Right now. Hurry! Pack, sort, clothes/bed clothes. Wait, I’m leaving T.L. and we never got to pray. Can I say goodbye, guards? No. Okay. Rats. Out. Long hall, nightmare doors. Strip off the green clothes, switching to grey. I’ve been moved from secure Alpha to medium Cedar B.

Cedar B. The Canine Unit. You’ve got to be kidding me? Arf. Six dogs here, with 23 women. The ‘girls’ have finished their workday and they’re lounging about – laughing. It is LOUD – jarring after the quiet of Alpha. Some have booming voices and roaring laughter. The small bungalow shakes. It is three in the afternoon. Still hot and sunny. August air – for the first time in almost two days I breathe, and there are birdies, and ants and dragonflies. And trees for 360 degrees, beautiful cedars and firs.

There are gardens, a memory area, with painted stones for the dead, and a labyrinth – no actually – a spiral. I come back after dinner and hop its painted tiles. And I stay out until almost 10.

Some of the girls call this Camp Cupcake, but it is a prison, of course. We can see the forest, but not go into its cool shade. And this day and the next, and the next, the stories spill out. I hear them and I brace: Mothers have died, and brothers, and boyfriends are in jail too, and

children have been taken away, who knows where they are and worst of all, a child, a daughter who died. Drugs stab in and out of most stories. There is talk of lawyers and trials to come, and days and months and years to wait. And there is drama, and exhaustion and frustration, and lots of swearing. I am uncomfortable with some women – there are more than 40 women here, on both sides of the Cedar bungalow – and there are the don't-give-a-shit ones, loud and sarcastic.

Pretty soon they know why I'm here – and some amazement – that someone would more-or-less do this voluntarily, but then some nods of interest, and good job, and that A-Hole of a judge, and I look for a way to be still, interest, compassion, welcome, with no prying, and I balance with escapes to quiet – relatively – and green.

Phone drama – I filled the request form, but it was done incorrectly in pencil – they wouldn't give me a pen – and that doesn't count. Damn it. I borrow a pen and fill in the form again. It should work tomorrow. Okay, I say.

In the meantime a guard, A., takes me to the library – looking for a replacement for Atonement which they wouldn't let me take from one side to another, and while I'm there she whispers "You did fill in the visitor request form? You have to fill it out and request it, before they can schedule a visit." "I have indeed," I reply. A. says under her breath, "I talked with her." A flash of sympathy, and then a sliver of her own story. She talks, and I nod and we smile furtively. Then she goes out. I follow. The flowers are singing: Patti is coming! Maybe, not sure, but when? Tomorrow is Friday.

I take my new book outside. The sun has set into the trees to the west. The raucous girls laugh on the steps. One woman ignores everything and waters the lawns and the flowers and the flower pots with a rough determination. I write with my new glorious pen at a table, now shaded for the night. On the tops of the eastern trees the sun still lights up the branches. A hawk, a fat one, flies straight over, from east to west.

There was morning, and there was evening. The first day.

The Third Letter

August 11

It's Friday morning, a work day. Apparently, I'm on Hort. After breakfast I get new clothes and work boots. I follow my new roomie, B., out to the spiral. Together with two other women we weed, for hours in an ever-tightening path towards the centre. On my knees I pull weeds from the stepping tiles leaving the hens and chicks which bubble up, thick, prickle-less succulents, that spread and grow everywhere. The two women I don't know are talking, loudly, well one woman is talking, the other is listening, nodding, saying uh-uhum, and a few words of comfort and solace. Pluck, pluck, dig, and I can't help but hear another tale of horror. My heart contracts. It actually aches. The speaker leaves, and I say to the woman left, "Your voice sounds so nice as you listen." She nods, and ping! we see each other.

After break we move to the lavender patch. I sit harvesting in the shade, surrounded by purple, breathing in calm, peace. The bees and I take turns reaching for the flowers. I watch one take its time, and I wait for it to finish. Lavender saturates everything, my lap, my hands, my clothes, my hair, the scent stays for a while. We stack them, tray by tray in the greenhouse. B. warns me: "Don't even take one flower. You could get punished." Oh dear. I've already taken one small sprig and tucked it into my rib-squashing, chest-flattening bra. The contraband lavender pricks my skin guiltily. I don't have any intention of following this rule.

After lunch it's too hot to be outside, so I'm allowed into the empty library. I sort and stack and arrange in cool silence – the Dog books and the God books are all jumbled up on two long, low shelves – until it's time to rush back to Cedar and stand with B. outside our door. We are counted at 7am, 11am, 1pm, 4pm, 7pm and 10pm, standing like sentinels guarding our own cells.

I don't feel like going back to the library now, so I lay down for a while. But now there's nothing to do. I let a little bit of Patti-sad into my heart, just a small sliver of longing. I remember her singing – of course I do -- and waving her hands, and holding me, and wondering why I do what I do, and loving me right through it. My boys too, Abel at the demo with his sign. Oscar. His wispy red-gold curls more precious than a million mountains of gold, die-for-him precious, give-the-whole-world-for-him precious. And the women here, and their children, and their love, and their longing. It makes me furious. I cry two tears, that's all for now, in frustration. Maybe Patti's coming today, this afternoon. Maybe she is! Two extra tears for hope.

After a while I spring up and go to the pay phone – maybe it will work at last. I follow the commands, punch in several series of numbers, say my name three times. The voice recognition ID fails. I go to a guard, can you check this out? "Oh, your voice ID has become invalid. Fill out a form (in pen) to request a reset. It should work by 3pm tomorrow."

The afternoon is hot and maybe will never end. I go outside and sit by the roses for a while. The roses surround the closed-up Eagle Hut. The women tell me that the elders used to

come and smudge, and drum, and mysteriously they no longer have these healing circles. But, why? It's impossible to get any clear news of any sort here but surely Indigenous spiritual care here should be a priority. S. finds me on the bench by the hut. "I always come here to pray she says. I wish the elders would still come. It used to help so much, you can feel it healing." There is a sad carved eagle outside guarding the way into the round building.

I head back inside, and coming around the corner of the bungalow I find a large group of women including A., the loudest -laughiest of them all. "Hey," she says. "Tell us more about why you are here." Deep breath.

"Well," I start, "the pipeline would bring really dirty oil from Alberta, to a place in Burnaby where they plan to ship it over the ocean. There would be seven times as many oil tankers going through the water out to the sea. There could be an oil spill – and that would be the end of the orcas and the sea animals and fish and life along the coast. And the First Nations people there, the Tsleil-Waututh – they never gave their land away in the first place. There was no treaty or anything for their land, and they don't want the pipeline at all."

We enter into a robust talk about climate change and indigenous rights and reconciliation – many of the women I've met along this jail journey are First Nations. There are lots of nods and more right-ons, until one woman stands up and says, "I'm all for the pipeline."

"Hmmm," I say. "Tell me more."

"I'm from Alberta, and we need jobs," she says, looking defiant, if a bit nervous.

"I totally agree with you," I say. "About the jobs. Of course people need jobs." Her eyes are interested.

"My son's a carpenter," I go on. "He's been to the protests with a sign that says Carpenter for Sustainable Energy Projects. There's lots of jobs in making clean energy. More jobs for a long period of time. This pipeline will make some jobs, but mostly it is about a small group of people making a pile of money, and wrecking the earth."

The vigorous discussion continues until A. says, "Teach us to protest!" Uh-oh.

"Hmmm," I say again. "Well, what would you like to protest?"

"The awful food, and the expensive extras we have to buy from the canteen."

"What do you think you could do?"

"Write letters." "Protest at the admin building." "Blockade the kitchen." "Go on a hunger strike!"

I smile and leave them to it, retiring again to read for a while before dinner. After about 10 minutes I look out the window, and I see a huge crowd, shouting and gesticulating in front of the main building. Uh oh. Now I've done it. I sink down behind my book again.

D. comes into our room.

"What's happening out there?" I ask timidly.

"Oh, nothing," she says. "We're just getting our meds."

"Oh,'' I say, ever so slightly disappointed.

Dinner time comes, and is gone in 10 minutes. My roomie is watching crime shows on tv, so I go outside and read, and then wander and wander. I'm tamping down a circle in the grass. Up to the 10 feet from the fence allowed, and then around and back. I remember the circling polar bear, disgracefully held in a cramped and crumbling enclosure at the Stanley Park zoo. Thank heavens that has gone. Poor bear. Pace, pace, turn around, backwards pace, pace went the creature, 25 feet where a thousand were required.

In the north the sea ice is melting, further south the forests are burning. Over the thick green trees here to the west of the prison Venus pops out shining.

August 12

The Last Letter

Saturday morning. There is a thin haze over the pale sky. No work today, no lavender, no weeding, no hours in the cool library. And no breakfast! “Brunch” is at 10. One hard boiled egg, one slice of bacon, wonderbread. The gals invite me to coffee – real coffee, strong, made from their canteen stash. The morning is long and drawn out. D. and I go to the gym for a bit. Huff, puff, step, pull. The minutes go slow.

And then I hear there’s a Catholic Mass. Well, I’ve always been ecumenical, and I hope the priest is too, because of course I’m going. G. and I head over. G. is older, like me, and from a community up the Fraser River. She’s hoping her brothers will put up some salmon for her for the winter. Some others hear we’re going to Mass and come along. Father M. and the three volunteers who come with him look up in surprise. So many people. The small circle is full. And so we pray.

How could I, how could anyone come as a Christian to prison but as a penitent? Any wrongs by the women in grey were first wrongs done to them. In what way did the State, the Church fuck up first? Grabbing the land, out-lawing the Potlatch, Indian Residential Schools, smallpox by intent or by accident, poisoning the waters, ripping down the trees, killing the buffalo, the caribou, the salmon, alcohol, poverty, derision, soul-crushing, body-crushing violence of every kind. And then come here and try to reform these women? These lovely, precious, fierce women – once girls, born perfect. T.L. back in Alpha said “I’m so angry, so fucking angry at everyone.” Well, no kidding!

Father M. is kind and encouraging, and we sing loudly, but I’m not sure that much we say and sing really makes sense here. But the beauty of the Christian Mass is that it doesn’t matter at all who says the words. And the words themselves carry our faith, through the distortions and confusions and the sins, the horrendous sins, of a fallen church.

“This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble.” Jesus came for those abandoned, crushed, forgotten, expelled. To restore those who had been crucified by a greedy, violent world. Love embodied for you, and for you, and for me.

Fr. M. tugs a bit at his collar, the earnest women with him smile helpfully. The vessels of his communion set shine brilliantly and clean.

And somehow or another we take and taste and see that the Lord is good. I sit down, of course in silence.

I’m burning angry too. Ready still to stand with land defenders everywhere, to turn over every table of the truly guilty ones. Carving and crapping all over this holy earth. They must be stopped.

G. and I and the others trip out again into the blasting sunshine. It’s lunchtime and then wait time. Will Patti come, did she even get the message?

I go to the phone one last time to see if I can make the damn thing work. Nope. I check with the guard yet again. She looks on the computer. “Oh, no. You are getting out tomorrow.

Your phone money has been transferred back into your trust fund." Sigh. Then the guard whispers to me, "Don't go far. She's coming at 2:45."

One hour from now! The longest hour of my life begins. Sixty seconds times 60 minutes. That's 3600 seconds. If I count slowly. My stomach hurts. I don't believe anything. I've forgotten everything anyway. I give up. Who cares?

I lie on my bed and feel guilty. Not many visits happen for these women, and I've been here for just a flash of time. I'm going home tomorrow. Who am I to silently whine? I try to kill every emotion. And at last the guard comes for me. We walk over to the main building, down the nightmare hall of doors.

I wait outside the door of visiting room number one. Will I be able to hug her at least, a small kiss? Will we sit at a table, in a lounge? I go up the narrow stairs, open the door . . .and then the shock. We are on real prison mode. A chair in a small enclosed glass box, with a desk, facing an identical box with the same. A small circle-screen between us.

But never mind -- there she is. My love. And I can't believe my eyes: she's wearing her wedding jacket. Nothing could have been better. Patti in that jacket, with her ring still on, and everything is restored in me. Jail is meant to kill the spirit, and in a small way mine had been suffering, until now.

We have the strangest conversation of our lives. Small talk, a few stories. How is the dog?

"I'm getting out tomorrow, 8:30am" I say!

"Tomorrow! Damn, I'm working. I'll figure it out."

She brought chocolate (can't have it) and a print out of all the messages she'd been receiving. Can't have that either.

"Should I read them."

"No, I can't stand it."

"Well, I'm bringing a U-Haul of love, support and prayers."

"I know you are." All I can think of is T.L. and S. and D. and G. and everyone.

And before we can end the awful, precious visit, the guard comes. Patti goes first. I'm left standing in the echo chamber of the stairwell. And what else should I do, but sing?

Back in the yard, I wander again. Everything is weird. Calm. Until A. and R. get into a water fight. A phalanx of guards swoops down, and I walk around the side to look at the lavender that's left to be clipped on Monday. Not by me.

My last ten-minute supper. Then it's Saturday night bingo! We wander over to the gym. There's lots of rules, but we settle in at last. We have time for nine rounds. And I win the eighth! I hand my winnings ($2) over to the elder, G. We hurry through the ninth game to be back and ready for the 7pm count. I'm finally starting to get the hang of this.

What to do now? I feel like there's nothing I can say that will heal or help anything at this point. I hang around and admire beautiful beading and lovely crochet blankets. If I were only here longer. "I like the rainbow unicorn one," I say, to the woman beading Snoopy.

We talk a bit more about the people up on Burnaby Mountain, making a stand.

“There will be more women coming,” I tell them. “I’ll tell them how nice you all are.”

I decide to make the rounds of the grounds one last time, and say goodbye to the plants and the dragonflies. I stop to smell the smallest rose outside the boarded-up Eagle Hut. I sit on the grass.

S. finds me here, and I don’t really want to talk much more, but I can listen. “I used to cry right here a whole lot,” she says. “After my son was murdered. He was four years old.” I sit and hold that pain in my lap for a while. She’s so used to telling the story. I know it must still hurt, but she smiles at me. Generous and gracious and beautiful.

Others come around the Hut. One woman cuts the tiny rose and hands it to S. who puts it in her golden hair. I’m sure that’s against the rules, but I’m sure they know that too. Later on, as we walk together all of us back to the bungalow, the rose is invisible.

In bed by 9:30, I say goodnight to sweet D. And I sleep like a log until 6 the next morning. We’re allowed out to go to the bathroom, but I’m out quickly searching for some coloured pencil crayons and markers that I saw yesterday. All put away, except a green highlighter. I go back into the room and in the penumbra of the early morning in cell 25, Cedar B, I write out a prayer in blue ink and green highlighter to the women:

To My New Friends On Cedar

May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make His face to shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious to you, and grant you peace.

Love,
Emilie

And by 8:30 on the dot, after a pile of paperwork, and getting my phone money back plus $2.00 for working one day, I stand at the great metal gate, while the guard shouts:
“Smith for release!”

Outside I see Lini, my dearest sister-in-law. She has brought tea and granola and yogurt and fruit. Of all the people on earth I think she's the one I am happiest to see right then. I flail and dig until I find it-- the little plastic bag with my wedding ring. Deep breath. I put it back on.

We slowly make our way back home, but first drive up that Holy Mountain, to greet the sacred fire.

THIS RIVER WAS NOT MADE BY HUMAN HANDS

LETTERS FROM THE SACRED NAYA RIVER

In August, 2018, I was invited to visit the Indigenous community of the Neperara Nation, on the banks of the Naya River, (Colombia). The settlement of Joaquincito, together with the 62 afro-descendant communities along the river have suffered terribly as part of the internal war, and the struggle of narco-empires for control of this important waterway.

THIS RIVER WAS NOT MADE BY HUMAN HANDS

LETTERS FROM THE SACRED NAYA RIVER

First Letter

Marcia stamps her flip-flop on the dirty floor.

"I don't want to leave you. With a whole two hours to go until the bus," she says in a low voice.

"Go, go," I say. Maybe the government official will have the grace to finally show up, five hours late for a 2pm meeting, I think, but don't say.

"Go. I'll be fine. Be careful on the street."

We drop all my luggage on the sagging, tipping plastic seats. We hug again. I brush her straight black hair back.

"You haven't had supper," she says.

"Naw."

I'm trying not to cry. I'm old enough to be her mother, but I feel like her sister. Her ally. Her friend. She matters to me, and I feel helpless, unable to do anything more to keep us close. And she is so small, so invisible, so vulnerable. Steady, persistent, unstoppable, like a sturdy-- but threatened-- tree holding her branches out wide to protect her community, of the Eperara Nation, on the mouth of the Naya River, in Valle de Cauca, on the southern Pacific Coast of Colombia. The Eperara are so determined, so strong, so right. They have been on this river for time out of mind. But the enemies they face are monstrous, more dangerous perhaps than ever before: internal enemies, and foreign beasts crouching at the door. Waiting. Is it the right time? Who can move in? Who has more power? Bigger guns? Who can twist things around, play the game – cocaine, mining, hydro-electric dams – make the pile, shit on the people and the earth, piss in the river, and move on?

"Go," I urge gently. "I've got food. Plantain chips and lemonade made with panela. Besides you guys have been feeding me too much for days. Plan de engorde – fattening-Emilie plan. I already didn't fit in the canoe!" We laugh.

"Okay, Emi," she says. And she turns around, and walks away. Her shocking orange wrap skirt stands out glowing in the gloom. Somehow the bus station manages to be both fluorescent bright and deeply dingy at the same time. And she's gone. I take a deep breath. Alone at last. Time to think about where my heart has been and gone these past five days. I look around for my chips. Eat a few. I'm really not that hungry. Days of fish and glorious starch of different incarnations, and fruit I never knew existed, that's never for sale anywhere.

And all of a sudden, the flash of orange is coming back! Marcia. Her face is crumpled.

"I can't leave. Two hours 'til the bus."

"It's good, really. Go. Go," I say. The stupid government official told them to be at city hall for a meeting at 2pm. That meant getting up at 5 in the community, waiting for the boat, waiting to catch the right tides, and then a three-hour choppy ride along the angry ocean into Buenaventura, the departmental capital. Then more waiting. In the park, in a fruit café, to the Indigenous rights office, back in the park, on the waterfront. Then finally, I thought, I better just get myself to the bus terminal. My bus leaves at 8pm for Medellin.

"Okay, Emi," Marcia says, resigned. The orange in her beaded necklace, her orange skirt, her determined eyes, her round face. One final, final hug and she's gone, becoming a carrot-coloured dot, disappearing into the darkness. Just in time. The evening rains call down to the earth, the world outside is erased and walls of water seem to form both up and down. I squeeze my eyes tight in prayer. Surround her with an impenetrable circle of protection. Make her invisible. Keep her safe. These are hard days for Colombian leaders, especially for women and men from Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. More than 342 have been killed in the past year and a half, since the signing of the Peace Accord between the government and the guerrillas, the FARC. Murder is alive and well in the blood hands of Cain's Colombian descendants.

I met Marcia about three years ago, at an international gathering in Brazil, *Fe y Territorios*, Faith and Territories, held at the educational centre of the powerful Landless Workers' Movement, Latin America's grandest social struggle, with an estimated million and a half members. Marcia and I somehow made friends, amidst the hundreds of people there. We spent a lot of time together and she asked me to visit her at her home some day. Of course, I said yes. There's been no regular communication, but every once in a while, when she has access to the internet, a note pops up on facebook, and three years later, here I am. I was in Colombia for an international gathering to mark the 50th anniversary of the Medellin Conference of Bishops, the launching pad for liberation theology, and the cracking open of the church up and down the southern continent, called America. Marcia was supposed to be there, but problems on the river took over, and the boat couldn't get out. I have to admit, I didn't actually know *where* Marcia lived, somewhere on a river, somewhere in Colombia. I didn't know, exactly, how to get to her. Fortunately, I have friends.

The Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace (See my publication: Blessed are the Peacemakers), made the connections, and sent me off. I came down to Buenaventura on the night bus with two young women, Nidiria, a poet, and her friend Yamali, leaders from the Women's Committee of the Naya River Delta, who had been able to get to the Medellin conference. The young women had been charged with shepherding me from the green sanctuary of the Mother Laura Convent on the outskirts of Medellin, through the long thin

windy road down to the coast, through the sketchy, rough streets of Buenaventura to the safe house of the local *Comision* leaders, Enrique and Maria Eugenia. The *Comision,* being on the frontline of energetic insistence on human rights for all, especially Indigenous and Afro-descendant community leaders, has been a particular target for violence. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (of the Organization of American States) ordered the Colombian state to provide for the safety of *Comision* leaders. There is an armoured car in front of the anonymous looking house, and a guard, presumably with a gun.

We arrive to a household waking up. Maru is making eggs and heating up arepas, Enrique pours coffee – and surprise! There are three human rights leaders here from the Washington Office on Latin America: Adam, Gimena and Alex. They are going up-river this very morning, all the way to Las Conchas. We can all go together. I have no idea where Las Conchas is, but it's somewhere on the Marcia-associated river, so let's go!

The dock is a filthy, smelly place, things have died here, and rotted. A dead wooden boat sits submerged in the water to its deck. Alongside it, men are loading two fiberglass boats which look hale and hearty. A group awaits, and then we're onboard. The two boats are full, four of us gringos, and the *Comision* accompaniers, but mostly community members returning up the river, including baby Kaila, and her mom, from Las Conchas. Kaila had been sick, and come out to see a doctor. Now she is sleeping beside me, in her mother's arms, well covered in a pink fuzzy sweater for the wind and the spray that is coming. There are life jackets! Soon we are put-putting out into the harbour, and then into a mangrove swamp.

The boats are fast and they flit across the narrow brown water, choosing first the left branch, then the right from an impossible puzzle of choices. The drone is so steady that I am almost asleep, head nodding down, until suddenly we're in open ocean. Everything is blue, white and grey. The ocean is a silver curve of an ancient coin, across which are days and days of sea, until there are at last some distant, wistful islands or another. The sunlight is deceptively thin, but strong enough to burn Alex to a crisp. I had remembered in time, and bought a man's long-sleeved fancy embroidered shirt before we set off. Jarring, nudging, roaring and soothing, the boatmen know how to move through the swells, and then we turn into the mangroves again. Nidiria calls, "Emili, this is the Naya!"

The Naya is a 120-kilometre-long stretch of a river that begins its life in the foothills of the soaring Andes and snake-winds its way down and across the jungle lowlands becoming a fat and brown river at its mouth, thick with mangroves, where it finally meets the Pacific Ocean. Indigenous peoples have lived along its rich banks since time out of mind. In 1526, Spaniards arrived in the area, a little more than three decades after the first hairy unwashed Europeans landed on the islands of the Caribbean, claiming them for King and Queen and Church. Sebastian de Belalcazar, a former Castilian donkey thief, decimated the hot lowlands of the Pacific littoral, founding the city of Cali, all the while slaughtering Indigenous people and fighting internecine battles with his fellow invaders. In the highlands beyond, in the meantime, Belalcazar's countrymen, the Pizarro brothers and their friends, had actually come across the fabled Golden Cities, and were busy murdering,

pillaging and raping the great Inca Empire. Belalcazar, it is reported, was a particularly vicious man, even called to account by the Spanish authorities for slaughtering all the women and children of a particular village, while the men had gone into hiding.

Belalcazar died in 1551, while awaiting extradition to Spain, where he was to be tried for the murder of a fellow Spanish land-invader. There were no pots of gold to be had in the lowlands among the fishers and gathers, so the Spaniards set about creating sugar plantations. With the Indigenous communities all but extinguished, the Spaniards brought in boatloads of African slaves to work in the fields. Beginning in 1518, when the slave trade began, an estimated 1.1 million Africans were brought through the hideous slave trade capital: Cartagena de Indias, on the Colombian Caribbean coast. Slavery was abolished in Colombia in 1852. Today, along the Naya river there are 64 Afro-Colombian communities, while there are two Indigenous reserves.

We buzz along the lower reaches of the river and after about half an hour pull up to a collection of wooden houses built on stilts. We land at a shaky ladder leading up to a big house. It is the Casa Grande, the sacred gathering space, and the meeting space, and the passing-through health clinic space, of Joaquincito, the home of the downriver Eperara People.

There she is! Marcia is waving madly, and coming down the ladder. Everyone from the village is in the Big House, waiting to meet me. Enrique and Maru are talking with Marcia, explaining that we're not staying, that I'm not staying, but that they'll drop me off the next day. "Do you want to come?" they ask her. "We're going to Las Conchas. You should come, but hurray get your stuff."

Marcia disappears, and then is back with a little pink backpack and a little girl, maybe about nine-years-old. They jump in the back. We beam with joy at one another, here we are at last, but no time to say much, and we're off. Up the river, buzz, buzz.

The green walls of the jungle close in around us hiding who knows what. The trees seem endless, eternal. Looks like here the jungle won. But then we come around a corner and there's a town: Puerto Merizalde, named after its founding bishop, who had visions of minor grandeur. We move along the wooden houses right over the river until – there He is! All of a sudden on the massive proto-cathedral in the town that never became a city standing right on the dome reaching out to his people: a giant, giant, scary white Jesus hands extended in blessing. Good Heavens! We float along under his outstretched arms.

On the other side of town we dock, and climb out onto a soggy wooden platform. We're stopping for lunch. At last Marcia and I hug each other. I meet Yasmin, her daughter, and we head up arm in arm to a table, to my first fish of the Rio Naya. I am a little anxious, being formerly allergic to fish, and still very allergic to shrimp. But it looks like they're out! I eat my egg and rice with joy. Marcia and I catch up. Things are not well at all, on the river, in the country. Peace Accords have meant nothing here at all. I listen, shake my head. Four community leaders dead in the last few months. Everything a great unknown. Solemnly we board the boats again to travel to the next stop upstream.

Second Letter

We're heading further inland. Our next stop will be at the Humanitarian Zone of San Francisco, where we will exchange our ocean-going boat, for a river boat, that will make it easier to journey farther into the shallow river through the ever thickening green jungle.

The region around the Naya river has a troubled history, explains Enrique, with input from the WOLA experts, Adam and Gimena. In the past thirty years or so the Naya's relatively short length from the thick coca-leaf sites up in the highlands, along the back and forth of the main arm of the river, to the lonely and unguarded Pacific coast has become a strategic route for the moving of drugs and arms. Everyone was in the business, making big bucks: the Colombian military (the largest in Latin America), the shady para-military bands, which have direct links to the official military, but operate with impunity, and are responsible for the greatest number of human rights abuses, and the two guerrilla organizations, the Rebel Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the much smaller yet still fierce National Liberation Army (ELN).

During Holy Week, 2001, one of the worst massacres of Colombia's more than 50-year long civil war occurred along the Naya river.. Between April 11th and 12th, paramilitaries from the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia brutally murdered and mutilated an estimated 70 people on the Naya. Thousands more fled into hiding along tributary rivers, and to Puerto Merizalde and all the way down the river, and along the ocean into Buenaventura. After a number of years of displacement, communities started to return and to rebuild. An important tool for peace-making was granted to them when the Inter-American Court on Human Rights ordered precautionary measures for the communities, and a number of "humanitarian zones" were declared. These were to be areas exclusively for civilians, and they were to be entirely free from weapons of any kind, on any side of the on-going war. The communities would patrol themselves, and the Naya Community Council would offer oversight to the civilian network.

We arrive at the San Francisco humanitarian zone. I'm feeling a bit ooky, maybe the food, the sun, the sway of the boat. I breathe deeply. We all pile out on to the shore. Good thing Enrique told us to wear our flip flops. The landing is muddy, rocky and wet. We are met by community leaders at the river's edge, and we walk into the village to speak with others. The village is crumbly and worn, but close and functional. We stop at one place and another, everyone knows Enrique and Maru, and there's some laughing and teasing. At one place we are given a shot glass to share. The WOLA people hand it around, and I take a wee sip when it comes to me. Holy! There is a coal of fire in my mouth, in my throat, in my esophagus, in my gut. Oh, I remember this! Isabelino, an Afro-Colombian leader who I met in Brazil, had some, and shared it around. It is a sacred drink, made with many herbs, but also alcoholic. My stomach ache eases. I remember.

Just when I'm feeling warm and soft, suddenly there is a helicopter close over head. It seems to be landing somewhere on the other side of the village. It is an army helicopter. We

go down closer to observe. Then we see them, soldier after soldier, each shouldering a bundle comes down from behind a hill, turning left and disappearing. We watch them warily, then go down to the next street. The community leaders tell us what's going on. The soldiers have set up camp, right on the edge of the village, actually, right in the village, on a jutting bit of land sticking into the curve of the river.

Adam, who carries himself with calm and confidence, consults with the villagers. Then leaving them behind, we gringos move forward to check in with the military camp. An infantry specialist comes out to see us. Adam and Gimena chat with him, while Alex and I fall back. They are not supposed to be here, while we have every right. We are invited guests, and of course we are unarmed. Quietly I take out my phone and snap a few shots. There are heaps and heaps of provisions. It looks like sacks of sugar, or rice I can't quite tell. Everyone is polite, if tense.

I'm getting the story in pieces. Officially, it seems, the military are here to search for evidence concerning the four community leaders – three brothers and a cousin -- who were kidnapped, disappeared and finally murdered in April and May. Adam raises his eyebrows. Of course, there is a lot more that's not being said. Reaching even a basic understanding of what's unfolding requires many years of experience and information, and a canny ability to read into the silent murky places. Who has the most to lose here? How is the game played? The victims, it seems obvious, are the weakest ones, with the least access to power of any kind.

Later, I get a few more pieces of the puzzle. Valle de Cauca, a distant, forgotten corner of Colombia, was a central battleground and hiding place for players in the civil war. More-or-less it was controlled by the FARC guerrillas. After the Peace Accords went into effect, the FARC complied, and disbanded, moving into controlled de-escalation communities (where there are also infinite problems. A delegation from SICSAL visited one such community after our conference). The result of the disbanding along the Naya has been the creation of a vacuum of power. In the meantime, the movement of drugs hasn't ceased. There's a lot of money involved, a lot of money to be made. Adam said that he's heard that ordinary soldiers request to be sent to this region. This is the place to come and make money. That may be the real reason the army is here. And behind the army, there are always paramilitaries waiting.

Finally, we move back to the boat, the new boat able to go further up the river. I am sitting beside Marcia's daughter, Yasmin, in the front row, the bumpiest place. The green jungle walls climb higher and higher on either side of us, as the river gets both shallower and narrower. A couple of lime-green iguanas scuttle into the brush. There's no more sun to burn us -- it's rumbling and cloudy up in the darkening heavens. There are occasional single wooden houses on stilts, and every once in a while, another Humanitarian Zone, with its big vinyl sign declaring it to be a weapons-free area, exclusively for civilian use. There are children running along the shore, men, and sometimes women, in impossibly skinny dug-out canoes, standing or sitting, and women, and sometimes men, leaning on the window frames of the wooden houses. Everyone waves, on the water, and on the land.

The boat sways and swoops. On one riverbend intersection we come across, incredibly, my friend Isabelino, who had given me a sip of the sacred drink when we were in Brazil. We wave, and laugh, and then our boats take off like horses to a gallop in opposite directions. The boat drones. I'm not sure we'll ever get there. Baby Kaila has been with us, and all that time, in five hours, I haven't heard her cry once. We haven't seen houses for a while, when on one swoop we hear a sickening scrape, and thud. Then the engine dies. Our boat turns lazily in the current and starts floating aimlessly downstream. Where will we stop? What happened? Sometimes its better not to ask anything and just encomendarse (hand yourself over) to God.

Our able boatman manages to get us into one quiet lull on the river's edge and then another, going backwards, we come to a wooden house high on the river bank. He calls up. A gruff answer comes down. Then a man appears high above us with a rifle of some sort. It looks like he won't help. Are we going to have to float down further? Then suddenly, it seems, peace has been made and we are receiving some help. A white wire appears, and something fancy is going on with the raised motor. We all cheer (mostly quietly, with our fingers crossed) as the engine put puts. And tentatively, we're off again.

The going is tenuous, with the driver occasionally killing the motor. What has happened is that we are too heavy, and the river is too shallow. Once or twice we get out of the boat and walk along a sandbar. At one point, Alex, who's a big man, falls into the river, while exiting the boat. What a star-studded super guy he was! Not one complaint, just a jolly resignation at riding the rest of the way in wet jeans.

It is officially pouring now too. Tarps appear from the boat's storage, and we wrap them around ourselves. I tuck the end in around Yasmin. She's shivering. I take of my sun-screen tacky embroidered white shirt and wrap it around her, and then the tarp, and then my arm holding it all in place. And then it happens: I love her. This little Eperara girl, who has the bravest mother on earth. Marcia, who has traveled to Spain and to the States, who has seen and touched and laughed at snow, who has macheted her way through every obstacle placed before her, a rural Colombian Indigenous woman with NO rights. Her sheer will is making it happen. Last year, in a short post on Facebook, Marcia announced that she no longer had a partner. So, there you go, Marcia, superwoman, single mother, protector of her people, especially the women, who knows her rights. I hold Yasmin closer.

Enrique drapes himself off the bow of the boat, holding tight to an oar, and measuring for depth every other bend in the river, or so. For a long time, Las Conchas is 15 minutes away, just around the next corner, until at last, half of us are dumped onto a sandbar, while the boat makes its final push to the community. Then it goes back for the other group. We are here. It is dark, and the rain is tropical torrential. We were supposed to be here at noon, and now its seven in the evening. In all it was almost a nine-hour boat trip.

We shake our feathers out in a dry little house on stilts. Kaila and her mother are welcomed joyously, and Kaila disappears into the arms of one auntie and then another, and then

through a series of cousins, or sisters and brothers, I'm not sure. But her mother rests after a long ride. Nidiria is here too, though Yamali got off the boat back in Puerto Merizalde. The WOLA people are here of course, they're the reason everyone has gathered, to tell the story of what is happening in these days. One problem. Everyone is on the other side of the river. Where are we going to meet? Will they ferry us over?

At last we make our way in the dark, in the rain, up the walkway that has become a river, to a school. We sit in the small desks, and the room fills up. They are crossing the river to come to us. Someone jerry rigs a lightbulb and a microphone, to a cord which goes out the window to a generator somewhere. More people come in. The room is packed. There are people standing thick along the outside of the barred windows.

First a round of introductions: leaders of five communities from the Naya Community Council, different roles, different functions, Nidiria who works with 300 women up and down the river, Marcia, leader in the Indigenous communities, Yasmin, and Enrique and Maru from the Comision, and finally Adam, Gimena and Alex, the friends from WOLA, and me, the co-presidenta of SICSAL.

Then, before we talk, a smaller group of men and women, young and older, gather in front of the small classroom, to drum, to sing. How could I ever describe this sound, not even music, exactly? How could I, with my thin-white-nordic blood ever say anything at all about what this drumming and singing means? It was something so ancient, so holy, so filled with resistance, and struggle and survival from what would it be – 15 – 20 generations from the capture and devastation of the ancestors in Africa? If this isn't Resurrection, I don't know what is. The drumming, the singing, the shaking, the lament, the song of fierce struggle fills the room, fills the hearts and souls of absolutely everyone present, pressing them into a bonded commitment, a kind of vow that can never be broken. When they finish at long last, I don't know what else needs to be said. The women leading the singing say one thing: "This is a song of gratitude, and welcome. Thank you." My eyes burn with love. I lower my head.

But of course, there is more to be said. Things are not well. One person after another speaks a part of the story. Adam types away on his computer, that came up river sealed in a freezer-size zip-lock bag.

On April 17, three men, Hermes Angulo Zamora and Obdulio Angulo Zamora, brothers, and their cousin, Simeon Olave Angulo, disappeared from somewhere along the river. After they failed to return community members searched up and down the waterways. They reported the disappearance to the government officials in Buenaventura. Tensions continued to climb to an unbearable peak. A third brother, Iber Angulo Zamora, was being increasingly threatened. Support was again requested from the departmental capital and at last on May 5th a commission from the Human Rights Ombudsman office came to escort Iber out of the region. On the water they were confronted by armed men in a boat, who pulled Iber into their possession, and disappeared. Later, all four men were found executed. There were some reports that the murderers were dissident ex-members of the FARC, who had refused

to surrender.

Fears were high that the army is using these murders as an excuse to move in and take over the region. And right behind them, the paramilitaries. The river is, some community leaders said, already surrounded by the army, who have no regard for the communities' ways of practicing vigilance. Nidiria pointed out that for more than 300 years Afro communities have defended and conserved the river, and the earth. There was hope for increased unity between Afro and Indigenous Nayareño/as. People spoke of the memory of the displacement of 2001, and declared that these threats of remilitarization of the region shouldn't startle them. The 2015-16 Peace Accords were a step forward, but there was still a lot of work to be done to gain full control of their territories.

There was some debate around small-time coca farmers, up and down the river. Historically these small farmers have never become wealthy, but have served as a source for the raw coca leaves. Coca farmers are trapped. They have no other options. The government has promised to help with new crops, and thousands of farmers have signed contracts stating that they will no longer plant coca. But again, those getting shafted are the already poor. There has been no meaningful government support for the transformation, and in the meantime, the power struggle to control the trade ratchets up, with the farmers trapped in the middle.

The discussion carried on for a few hours. Lollipops and chocolate cookies were distributed at some point, and finally the gathering came to an end. I was surprised when Enrique asked if I might pray with the community.

"Of course," I said. "That's what I do." Good heavens. How to pray here in this place, with these people, what can I possibly say? Thank God for the Holy Spirit who always gives me the words to speak. I thought, well, what the hell, why not start the prayer like I start every prayer. Not sure if it will work here.

"El Señor sea con ustedes," I said.

"Y con tu espíritu," came thundering back, more people than I could count.

And so, in the dim flickering light, in the pouring rain, in a school house in Las Conchas I closed my eyes and prayed.

Arriving in Joaquincito

It rains all night in Las Conchas, and other than that it is perfectly quiet in the little dry house, except for a dog—there's always a dog. Bark. Bark. Bark. But I sleep completely senseless, wiped out from so much sitting, travelling, listening, until the first roosters join the morning chorus.

We are up before dawn, so much to do. We eat soda crackers, and drink hot, sweet coffee, and then we go backwards down the river, and so much faster than the day before. The shallow areas from yesterday have been filled in with all the night's rain. It's still blustery, and even a bit cold, especially in the fast boat. Marcia and I make a Yasmin sandwich, and we wrap ourselves all up in tarps. There are children in school uniforms in the thin *canoas,* the dug-out canoes, standing up and pushing along the river's edge. Today's the first day of school, after holidays, and they are heading to the nearest classroom. Yasmin whispers to me, "We have school today too." I have no idea how far we still have to go down river. Go, boat, go! We arrive in San Francisco. No sign of the soldiers, we change boats and float down past the giant Jesus frozen in eternal blessing.

Before long we are in Joaquincito, in Marcia's community. It's still morning, about 9 0'clock. Marcia, Yasmin and I disembark, climb the wooden stairs. I duck under the low roof, and step in -- suddenly we're in the Casa Grande. It is dark, cool. I imagine it full of people for ceremonies and meetings. The WOLA folks and the *Comision* people wave and push off in the boat, and move down towards the river delta and beyond. About a month, Adam says, until they have their official WOLA report on the Naya River.

So, here I am. Now what? Surrender, open, trust, love. Plutarco comes out to greet us. He's the head of the community, and later I find out he's Marcia's older brother, and the community health promoter.

Joaquincito is the *Resguardo,* a reserve of the Eperara community of the lower Naya river. There are Indigenous nations all over in Colombia, settled from the lowland river systems that head to the Pacific, or north to the Caribbean, or east to join the great Amazon, to the highlands that meet the mountains and the edges of the descendants of the great historic Inca nations of the Andes. In Joaquincito there are 42 families, mostly Indigenous, with just a few Afro or Mestizo families blended in. Along the river there are far more Afro-descendant settlements, 30 times as many as Indigneous communities.

Marcia leads me through the other side of the Casa Grande, through a wooden kitchen with a fire pit rigged up on cement blocks with a sand base. There's the biggest cooking pot I've ever seen – upside down now. That must feed everybody.

"We just had a big feast," says Marcia. "Five days ago."

We shimmy down a treacherous (for me) damp wooden ladder, across some soft planks, and then up onto a long cement platform, about three feet above the wet ground.

“That’s the bridge,” says Marcia. “We fought years for that. Blood was spilt for it.” The bridge stretches out along the front of the houses. Each house reaches the bridge with a simple plank. Drainage canals carve up the land which is often under water, depending on the level of the river, which floods with heavy rain, and the sway of the ocean’s tide.

We go down two, three, four houses, to Plutarco’s place.

“We’ll stay next door, with my mother,” says Marcia. “But it’s more comfortable here.” We slip inside. “I’ll make breakfast.”

There are piles of kids, Plutarco’s children, Paula Andrea, Paulo Andres, Junior and little Ingrid. And Marcia’s son, Alejandro, and Plutarco’s wife. Then comes Marcia’s mother up the plank, carrying two full, sloshing pails of water from the river. What a delight it is to meet her!

I sit in a chair at a small table. Marcia has disappeared through a door and left me with the kids, who play, swinging in a hammock. Ingrid, who is one and a bit, stares at me with a look of suspicion, as she moves from sister’s hip, to cousin’s arms, and then back again. Who’s this woman, say her fierce eyes.

Marcia comes back in a bit with a plate piled with food – just for me. Yikes. Four boiled green bananas, a hill of rice and a piece of rich pink pork.

“That’s from the feast,” she says. “My brother smoked it. It takes a long time, but it lasts then for a good while, about a week.” Of course. There’s no refrigeration here, only electricity once in a while with an expensive generator.

Dear Lord. I’m in Rio Naya bacon heaven! Who knew that pork could be this delicious? Greasy and meaty and smoky. The green bananas are starchy and bland, perfect with a piece of bacon embedded. While I’m finishing up a great fuss is going on in the house across from me – later I find out it’s the general store, which enjoys the only constant electricity, provided by a large solar panel. We head out to see. José de la Cruz has hunted an animal in the night, and now it’s coming to be weighed, and sold, I presume. I ask what it is, and get, “Rabbit.” “Wild pig,” as an answer. The beast is now headless, so I can’t really tell. Not by looking at its little trotters. A sharp thin knife carves it into pieces.

After this, Marcia calls me to go back to the Casa Grande. There’s going to be a community meeting – a chance for me to get to know more people. We gather in the cool dark space. We sit on wide platform benches, men, many women, and many more children. Plutarco greets me officially. I say thank you, and then I listen:

Arturo, the school teacher, speaks first: We are one of 102 different nations in what is now called Colombia. After the Spanish invasion we were called savages, then we were called, pejoratively, “minors” or infants. In 1991 there were reforms to the national law and we were recognized as nations, and the afro-descendant nations were as well. We lived in peace. Then in 2001 we suffered the terrible internal displacement. We fled to Buenaventura, to other rivers, and no one helped us. We returned, and we know our rights, but so far that is just on paper. In 1989 the limits of our Reserve were defined, then in 2005 they were extended. There has been some disagreement with the Afro-community, but

there has been a lot of work on building unity. The government owes us a lot, and we have received barely anything. Now, for example, they are saying something ridiculous: We own the land, as Indigenous people, but the government owns what's under the land. That makes no sense to us.

Oh, dear Lord, I say. The mining companies are already hovering here. Beware. I tell them of my experience walking alongside the peoples of Guatemala.

Then Inez speaks: I am the head of the Women's Association. We have had a lot of troubles. The government has promised us support, but nothing at all has arrived. And then there were the fumigations. We lost everything: even our seeds. We had yams and yucca, sugarcane and plantains. We lost most of it. We lost the seeds, and the earth no longer yields much. We've had to go further and further into the forest, away from the village.

Norberta speaks: We don't want mining, or any such thing. We haven't asked for much, but we haven't received anything at all. We need a health centre, a school, decent housing. We've had no support since the displacement in 2001. We have insisted that there be dialogue. We are tired after 52 years of war. Our young people don't want war. We live in paradise here. We have taken care of this place, we have looked after our own. They don't want to admit that the military are here, and the paramilitaries, but we know that they are around. This is a Reserve, not a Humanitarian Zone -- like they have up the river. But this is a weapons-free zone too. Twice the army has arrived in the community, and twice the community has chased them off. All the Naya River has been in resistance. We have been fighting for 527 years, with our own culture, language and art. The last straw has been the fumigations in 2012, and 2013.

Cecilia agrees: Everything was lost. The earth herself got sick. Our food supplies have diminished. Our pineapple, for example. So diminished. And we live in fear. We built our Sacred Big House in 1991, and we have been saying forever: Mother Earth is not to be destroyed, not our forests. This is the very heart, soul, strength of the Earth. We are the only Indigenous community on the lower Naya, and we have been fighting: militarization, and big companies. And now they are threatening to fumigate again.

The meeting goes on, until many have spoken. I feel like I'm starting to get a sense of the story. Just a taste. Marcia invites me to go back to the house. They are going to carry on in meeting. I am exhausted. I need a nap. I think fondly of the hammock, as I negotiate my way up the slippery plank to Plutarco's house. But what do I find? Ingrid is sleeping in the hammock, across its soft width, a perfect little bundle. I am embarrassed at how grouchy I feel : here I am uncomfortable and tired – and jealous of a baby!

Marcia is away in the Casa Grande for a long time. I'm glad she doesn't feel like she has to entertain me constantly. I sit and read my book by the Andean theologian Victor Bascope, the man who showed me how to make coca leaf tea, and how to chew coca leaves.

He had told me about how hard it was to research the detailed story of the invasion of the Spaniards. The murder of so many leaders, named and those now-forgotten, and so many

others. The treasures that were stolen, and much, much worse, the theft, destruction, attempted annihilation of the Andean cosmology.

“When I look at the rocks making up the walls and churches and colonial buildings I just cry,” says Victor. “Each stone is an ancestor.”

I am reading about the nose-bleed high Andes, and I am here in the warm always wet lowlands. The people and stories are linked, though not the same, of course. But the invasion stories of the Spanish, the Portuguese, the English and the French have common threads. For King, for Queen, for Church.

At last, Marcia’s back from the meeting. They aren’t going to Buenaventura tomorrow after all. Not until Wednesday. I can go with them. Marcia’s worried that I haven’t had lunch. I’m stuffed, I reassure her. She’s trying so hard to help me, to guess what I need. I am still figuring out how to be here. Mostly – I try not to be a nuisance. Whatever may be uncomfortable or different or not the way I would do it. Forget it! Receive everything. I am filled with gratitude.

We go to the sacred river. Yasmin comes, and Paula joins us. Everyone jumps into the river. Even though we’re in the warm equatorial waters, I have to ease myself in, down the worn ladder. The water is brown and slow and cool. The river seems wide and endless, once I’m in. We splash and play. Marcia washes herself, and then a tub of clothes, while sitting on a low wooden step. The girls pretend to be sharks, and they do cartwheels from the soft bank into the water. They are like baby otters, twisting and splashing and smiling. They find a canoa, and they paddle around and around. They convince me to get in, and around we go, laughing without walls of any kind. And here at the river, it happens. Laughing, playing, we are now all friends.

This river is holy. It is the artery of the whole body, the means by which people here live. It is where they bathe, and wash, and pull water for everyday things. It is their means of travel and their source of fish. The river changes, with the tides and the cycles of the moon and the rains.

“Naya Tooja.” Sacred River Naya, Marcia whispers. “Cho nara weda tooja beda.” No human hand could have ever made this river. No human hands dug the channels or made the turns. We float, and more than that: we are carried.

The Fourth Letter

It rains all night again, and I sleep in Marcia's bed – without Marcia -- with the mosquito netting all tucked in around in the absolute dark, in the absolute silence, but for the roosters that set one another off, and then call down the row, at three, four, five in the morning. By five or six o'clock, I know, everyone will be getting up. There was one single shattering of thunder last night—I didn't see the schism of lightning. It was after we were in bed around nine and it seemed to crack the wooden houses with the power of its loud. Yasmin began to cry. Her mother's soft words pulled her back in to sleep, to comfort, to shelter.

Again, I wonder what I can do, what I can say? It takes so much energy to host me, to welcome me, to worry about me, to make space for me. Would it be better if I did something in a different way? Why am I here? Of course, I am not the Great White Saviour. But is there some part of me that wants to be? I have nothing to offer but myself. Marcia is clear, and she has shared with others: Emilie doesn't come to bring projects, or money. Yet there is something about me being here – for me, and for the community. What does it mean that someone sees, someone notices, someone listens? I lie and think and toss a little. The rain comes down in steady soft waves along the roof and, in a while, it is not quite as dark as it used to be.

At last it is five or so, and we get up. The day starts. Children are sleepy, still staying close to home, and to mothers. The women go into the wet side of the house. I am starting to figure it out. The front of the house is the 'dry' part. Here people sleep, sometimes in a separate room walled off, and in the back is where the cooking and washing happens, in a room still up on stilts. The back food-area is divided too, the preparing side, and the washing part -- where dishes and fish, and root vegetables and even babies are rinsed and scrubbed -- and then out on the very edge a fire, on a bed of sand and stone. The back area is open to the sides and the bright green everywhere of growing things. This room is where the action is, at least in the daytime. Grandmas and mothers and aunties and kids are all here. Another hammock and a few small stools are occupied, so I sit on the floor. I like it better here than on my own on the other side of the wooden wall, where I spent the afternoon reading yesterday. Plutarco comes in with a mess of fish, and Marcia's peeling green bananas. For now, we drink sweet hot coffee and eat soda crackers, while the fish get cleaned.

I'm starting to understand food here now too. All meals seem to be: a starch and a protein. Starches so far have been: yucca, taro, purple yams, and green banana. The first three, and the last too sometimes, are prepared boiled. Twice we have the bananas fried, once whole, and once squashed into disks, *patacones.* The protein we eat are: best bacon ever, eggs, lots of fish, boiled or fried, beans, and once, chicken – but we'll get to that part later. Everything is so good. Then there's the fruit: sugar cane (peeled, sucked and chewed, spitting the hard, twiggy-part out), green coconuts (drinking the fresh water first, then eating the thin, slippery bits inside, after cracking open with a machete), guanabana, grenadilla, cherimoya, pitaya (weird yellow blobby thing with black spots, mushy white and melting inside), lulo (only for juice), papaya, maracuya (passion fruit? eat together with crunchy seeds), bacao

which I thought was cacao, and is indeed a relative (very strong smelling and tasting, bitter crossed with sour, inedible for me– I give to happy, receiving children), bananas and plantains, which I only see cooked and green, and my favourite: zapote --pumpkin orange, sweet and slimy, with two fat, long, slippery brown seeds. The zapote is given to me as I walk along the raised cement platform, by a young man rushing by with two of them. He stops when he sees me, and hands me one of his treasures. The fruit is all gift. People come by the house to deliver, or call me into their house, across the wooden plank. I receive everything, try everything, like everything, (except the bacao).

Doña Cecilia, particularly, likes to come by. She talks to me, and she asks me questions. And she invites me to her house. "My house is really clean" she says, and she shows me around the yard, back a bit from the cement platform and along another platform, this one made of wood. Her yard is a little bit drier – at least for now—as it is farther from the slow mud-brown river that rises up every twenty days or so and floods under the closer houses. She shows me where she has a raised compost pile. She shows me her flowers, her fruit trees and her medicinal herbs -- she and her husband, Bejerano, are healers. "This one is for stomach upset, this for headache, this for *ojo,* this for sadness." She takes me – and a whole handful of children -- up a narrow path that leads even farther away from the river. We should have gumboots she says, eyeing my flip-flops skeptically. We wander up the squashy path, until it is apparent that it just won't work. The earth is just too soft. I am ankle deep in mud. Farther up, she points, we have our plantings, the yams, and papa chinas (taro) that we have been eating. And she tells me more about how terrible it has been since the fumigations.

The Colombian government, with the full support of the USA, and its 'war on drugs' has engaged in extensive spraying for years. The chemical defoliant, glyphosate – the main toxic component in "Roundup" was repeatedly sprayed in aerial raids on coca plants and -- according to residents of the Naya river basin -- everything else: food crops, houses, animals and even people. In 2015 the government promised to stop fumigations by airplane, after the World Health Organization declared that glyphosate was a proven carcinogen. However, the threat of the resumption of spraying remains, the latest possibility being the use of drones to deliver the poison.

"So many things have just dried up," says Doña Cecilia, sadly. "No pineapple at all. Nothing is growing in some areas." People have told me of strange diseases, not known much in these regions before. Marcia's mother had to endure the choppy boat ride to Buenaventura, and have a large tumour removed from her neck.

We go back to Cecilia's house, and Don Bejerano shows me his carvings: a sweet little turtle, a bird, and a gorgeous walking stick, carved with a couple of birds, and just below the handle, a man, holding a staff of his own, and a mochila, a woven bag.

Doña Cecilia worries at the fire, and brings me my first fried fish of the day. It is delicious and crispy with salt sizzled right through. I pick at it and eat it delicately, saving on the side the bones thinner than a needle. Her grandson comes by, and Doña Cecilia sends him up a palm tree to get us a couple of fresh coconuts. He sheds his shoes and shimmies up fast, but

stops about two-thirds the way up. He yells something down to his grandma, and then scoots down quickly.

“There’s a new wasp’s nest up there!” they explain to me, laughing. We’ll have to wait for our drinks. Back to the fish.

As we share stories – I tell them about my red-headed grandson, and my black shaggy dog – I can feel the threads begin to connect us. Doña Cecilia tells me about her son, who died, about how heartbreaking and constant is her desolation. Once, she says, a long time ago, she tried to live somewhere else, her husband is from the Chocó region, but she could never get used to not being on the Naya. She wants to tell me her story of the displacement in 2001.

It was further up the river, in the Afro communities where the worst violence took place, by some estimates between 40 – 130 civilians were killed over a few days, many brutally, with excessive violence. Bodies were dissected with a chainsaw. Quickly, the information flew down the river: leave, now, get out. And everyone did. It was a massive exodus of boats, big and small. Some went into the town of Puerto Merizalde, to stay with family, many went into hiding along quieter branches of the river. And others went all the way to Buenaventura. The whole river was almost drained of people. Doña Cecilia says, that at first they refused to go. Neighbours came to inform them, and everyone bundled up their few things, and fled. Then at last Doña Cecilia and Don Bejerano, and their children climbed onto a boat. They made it down river, to a branch along the mangroves where they hid for five days.

Then they decided to go back, no matter what. So they returned to Joaquincito. Five families came back together. They stayed in one house, afraid of the paramilitaries, who were hunting up and down the river. They stayed, and ate what they could.

“The worst thing was listening to the dogs and the chickens die. We had nothing to feed them, and almost everyone had gone. They didn’t have time to take their animals. The animals cried and cried from the pangs of hunger, and finally they died. That was the hardest. The Sisters (from the order of Mother Laura) heard we were starving and brought us a little bit of food, dried rice and beans, and we held out for a few weeks, but in the end, we had to travel down to the city, to Buenaventura, where for two years we lived as refugees.”

We sit together for a while. I am thinking about the recent deaths, the murders on the river, the on-going deaths, the attacks on leaders of all social organizations. Back at the conference in Medellin, we named and prayed for the over three hundred leaders murdered since the signing of the Peace Accords, two years ago. We sit and then I go back, with the flock of children, to Marcia’s house, well, to Plutarco’s house. We eat more fried fish, soft and salty, which never seems to be too filling. Marcia’s sister-in-law drops by, with a young woman -- her daughter-in-law -- and her brand-new baby grandson. We chat for a while, and I hold the baby, and then, when it seems polite, hand him back to his mother. The women consult for a while in Siapidaara. I smile nicely. Marcia comes up to me, and asks me quietly, “They want you to baptize the baby.”

My heart thuds. What to do? What would Richard Leggett do? Richard was my excellent liturgy professor at Vancouver School of Theology, and I would trust him to be both pastoral, and within the bounds of acceptable church practice. I know I can do the former, and don't always trust myself with the latter.

The only important question in this instant is: What would be of assistance to this family? What do they really need? I don't worry that much about correctness within the church, but care everything about wanting to do right and honest with this family. Baptism is a mark of belonging, of being. Of course, all creation, and every creature, especially this perfect little one with dark hair and black eyes, lying in my arms, is loved, adored, treasured by the One who made us. But baptism is a way we humans turn and shout yes back to God. There is no priest or pastor who ever visits this community. And me? I am, now, a friend.

I say yes, let's bless the baby. Let's get some water. They bring me some clean water, actually from the big jugs of filtered water left for me by the prepared WOLA people. We pour a bowlful of clear water. We gather around, the children and the women. I hold little Liam Mejia. We pray together, and I hold him tight in my arms. May the Creator of Heaven and Earth ever hold you close, little one. May you flourish in love, in this place. May you grow to the fullness of your life. May you play in this river for many, many years. May the fruit be abundant. May the pineapples return.

In my heart I pray that the wolves of greed and violence that surround this community may be held at bay. I pray that the Naya won't be invisible to the world. That the Afro communities standing for their right to exist, to live, to flourish, may be allowed to exist as signs of the bursting through of justice. And that the Indigenous communities may be left to practice their knowledge, their time-out-of-mind knowing of things that matter. So many things that we have forgotten. Liam is asleep. He moves and stretches a little as the water pours off of his head, onto the wooden floor, through the cracks, and back to the water below.

Earlier in the day, as I peered out of the wooden morning window and out along the cement walkway, I saw a woman carrying two unfortunate upside-down chickens. They seemed to have given up, no squawking was happening as their tails pointed to the sky. Uh no, I thought. Too much. Has Marcia asked for them to be brought to me here? I *am* being a nuisance. I nodded as the woman approached, and then sighed in relief as she walked by our plank, down one, two, three doors, and up to another house.

But now, after our blessing, I'm told that there is a chicken soup coming back to Plutarco's house. The chickens had been killed to celebrate this impromptu baptism. And so, again, we eat, I am served a big bowl. Liam sleeps and we eat. Later I spy his mother with a whole group of young women and men out on a raised platform playing soccer with a squashed, wet ball. Every few minutes the ball flies off into the mud and the water on the ground. Then it starts raining. No one stops playing, laughing, shouting, and the game goes on until the sun hovers over the western river.

Just before it goes down, Marcia and I go along the cement platform, then along the wooden walkway to the holy river, to her most holy river, her *cho nara weda tooja beda,* her ancestral river, made by no human hands. Here we sit, and dangle our feet into the warm

water. Tomorrow, before dawn, we will be going out to the open sea, through waves rolling bigger than our boat, to Buenaventura – one of the most dangerous cities in Colombia – she with Plutarco to settle things, to fight with the municipality, me to catch a bus back to the Convent of Mother Laura in Medellin, and a plane back to Canada. We feel sad already. I know I go with my heart made bigger, my life somehow different. Marcia, who knows why she reached out to me, what she saw, what she sees?

This is how two women become friends.

RESURRECTION FROM THE BONE WELLS

(In May, 2019, I contributed this paper to the Religion and Violence Inter-Religious Conference and Think Tank at the Vancouver School of Theology.)

RESURRECTION FROM THE BONE WELLS

"Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, however sacramentally prodded, can never yield light."
Cynthia Ozick

Sometimes a phone call is a knife. The cut is made and the world bleeds. Never again will there be a time like before. On the morning of December 10, 1985, we received that call -- my sister-in-law, Beatriz Eugenia Barrios Marroquin, had been kidnapped by Guatemalan security forces. For two or three or four days she was tortured and then she was viciously murdered, her mutilated body dumped along a busy highway, a message to all who dared to stand up to power. Witnessing to my family's suffering of this particular atrocity within the context of the vast Guatemalan genocide, I grasped for language to speak about what had happened.

Liberation Theology and the Road to Genocide

The Guatemalan genocide marks one of the most vicious and heinous crimes against humanity of the latter half of the twentieth century, but it is curiously under reported, and often forgotten when naming the other horrors that half century had to offer: the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Like these unspeakable and unimaginable accounts of extreme human cruelty, the Guatemalan genocide unfolded with a totalizing destruction. In the worst years of the killings, 1978 – 1982, the violence moved from targeted attacks in the urban areas on known student, union or community leaders, to whole scale indiscriminate massacres in the countryside. Almost 700 entire villages were razed, according to some sources. In a methodology repeated again and again soldiers made an inescapable ring around a community, then moved in, dividing women from men, systematically slaughtering all. Sometimes the killing took days. Many women and girls were kept alive for a time, forced to work as domestic and sexual slaves, before being murdered themselves. Infants at breast were not spared, neither were pregnant women or the elderly. Massacres swept out across the Mayan highlands, intending to destroy all challenges to the elite established power, aiming to end all potential sympathies for a weakened armed guerrilla movement that had arisen in their areas.

The genocide had a particular cruel focus on Mayan-indigenous leaders who identified with and practiced liberation theology, a Roman Catholic renewal movement which emerged out of the Second Vatican Council (finished in 1965), and the Medellin Conference of Bishops (1968), and spread across the southern continent and then beyond. Beginning in the 1960s and moving robustly into the 1970s, this movement mushroomed across regions stricken with centuries-old human-caused extreme poverty, proclaiming, reclaiming, a different theology and, most of all, a different ecclesiology. Church was not to be about power and riches – but quite the opposite. Church, following its founder who ever practiced radical welcome, was to be an equalizing gathering of community in love – with special attention to the most vulnerable, the marginalized, the poor. The practice of liberation theology turned Latin America upside-down, challenging the entrenched power

of the elite – political, social, ecclesiastical – those who had ruled for 500 years since the Spanish invasion.

Hundreds, even thousands of priests, religious sisters and even a few dozen bishops on fire for justice shed their fancy trappings and high symbols and fanned out into the poor barrios and the abandoned countryside.. Lay people, now empowered, began to organize, demanding radical change to the structures of misery. In Guatemala the oligarchy, a small clique of some 15 – 20 in-bred families, with solid beliefs about their historic and God-given right to riches and power, was shaken and toppling. Their reaction -- using the national army as their private enforcers -- was unimaginably ruthless. In a country of then nine million people, almost a quarter million Guatemalans were murdered. The United Nations report on the atrocities, *Memory of Silence*, named what the state did as genocide, the intentional total annihilation of a particular group, with the determination to wipe it out.

It was into this community that I landed, an Argentine-Canadian woman raised with precious little religious training, now in my twenties, married to a Guatemalan refugee. It was within this community that the murder of Beatriz made sense. Her gruesome death had shattered my young heart. Over the next decade or so the people of Guatemala, especially the women, without saying much, invited me to understand the story within the framework of a Christian cosmology. The crucifixion of the Guatemalan people, and later the unstoppable movement of life to emerge from the bone wells and hidden grave pits, gave me the deepest knowledge of the most important things I need to know. It is a debt I will spend my life discharging.

The Historical Cycles of Crucifixion

Crucifixion was, of course, an instrument of execution, but an execution with a particular purpose – other than the obvious one, to end a human's life. The primary motive of crucifixion was to impose terror, to annihilate hope, to impose power with a kind of zero-response option. Crucifixion was punishment for transgression for the individual, but more particularly, it was a public act, a visible display of power to people daring to question the order of the world. Crucifixion was the symbol of the most extreme violence required to keep people subjugated and afraid. Public vicious murder kills rebellion.

To rebel is an expected action of peoples who have been denied their very nature as men and women beloved of God, powerful and beautiful. God is mighty, nameless and mysterious, yet God is also that spirit-fire from within that urges us forward and -- if it is not crushed in the first acts of childhood willfulness -- this fire will lead us closer to our full humanity, to our full selves, as made in the very image of God. This fire will manifest as indignation and erupt in our hearts when we experience injustice, when we are wronged in our very soul, our humanity. Rebellion, when it grows from an act of personal outrage, to a collective movement for transformation of systemic injustice, becomes a real threat to the elite powers of domination. This story, of domination, rebellion and crucifixion, is the cyclical story in the historic land of the multiple Mayan nations baptized by the invading Spaniards as Guatemala.

The Mayan nations: the K'iche', the Kaqchikel, the Tzutujil, the Mam, the Qeqchi, the Achi, and 17 other Mayan sub-groups in Guatemala at the time of the conquest, were decimated first with disease, and then were crushed with military power. Kingship, nobility, the Mayan religious elite, almost everything about their previous existence was obliterated – at least to the public eye. In truth the traditional knowledge and practices did not disappear, but went underground, where they were studiously maintained and preserved, and they surreptitiously popped up in Catholic syncretic acts of public expressions of faith. The indigenous communities, those survivors, with fantastic cleverness and wit, created sub-systems of belief that would carry their worldview forward, though partially disguised. Urgently, the ancient knowledge was also preserved in Latin-lettered texts, and great books were recorded: the Popol Vuh, the Chilam Balam, the Annals of the Kaqchiquel. Other prehispanic cosmologies were cloaked in dance and theatre, particularly the story of the Rabinal Achi, practiced from the time of the conquest and until this very day in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. And thus, the Mayan nations survived many cycles of violence, from the initial invasion, through waves of destruction, land theft and domination, until the latest rise of rebellion, and its devastating annihilation in the early 1980s.

Horror in the Mountains

They murder the widow and the stranger
And put the orphans to death. Psalm 94.

Inside the [burnt] house lay the bodies of the women and children. There were three pregnant women. You could just make out the small corpses of the fetuses inside their mothers' wombs. You could see their heads as they hadn't burned well. Their mothers' bodies had been completely burned, but not the babies inside. We saw all of that."

Another account:

One person captured was Bartolome Tomas. He was 102 years old and had white hair, a little old man, according to different witnesses. He could not have been a rebel. His crime was to be carrying several shirts and pants in his bag and to be wearing two hats. He was going to make a scarecrow in his cornfield.

And another:

Crisanto Gomez had a house on the banks of the Xalbal River. He did not want to leave for the jungle – he wanted to stay home.

Seven people were killed in Kaibil: Crisanto, his wife, his son Manuel, who was about twenty, Manuel's wife and their baby, and two more of Crisanto's children.

The rest were killed on the other side of the river where the soldiers had chased the people from Xalbal. They place the man's son in a kneeling position. They left him there as if praying. The man was hung from a tree, as though crucified, like Jesus Christ, tied with reeds from one tree to another.

Some Mayan communities had the additional misfortune of standing in the way of mega-project development. Such a community was the Achi village of Rio Negro, on the banks of the Chixoy river, upstream from a massive hydro-electric dam, the biggest project ever undertaken by the Guatemalan state, funded and supported by the World Bank. Almost 2,000 people were killed in the two-year sweep to clear out the way for the post-dam flooding. Jesus Tecu Osorio, an eleven-year old orphan, lived on the banks of the river, his mother already dead, murdered, and his father. On March 13, 1982, soldiers, and civilians working under them, gathered together the women and children, Jesus, his three younger brothers, and older sister with her children among them. After the day-long massacre, 17 children survived. They were divided among the murderers, taken home to work as slaves in their homes. Jesus sheltered his two-year-old brother, Jaime, huddled among the survivors. One of the murderers, Pedro Gonzalez Gomez, seeing the infant survivor wrenched him away from Jesus.

"He tied a rope around his neck and dragged him away by one of his hands. Jaime was kicking, I ran behind crying, I begged a thousand times that he let my brother live, but no. We arrived at the ravine where the rest of the victims' bodies were piled. He threw my brother on the ground. He took his feet and he smashed him against the stones. When he saw that he was dead, he threw him into the ravine."

No Light

The Guatemalan genocide is a black hole, one of our world's black holes. There is no light coming out of it. No redemption. Every single assassination is not just the end of one person's life. Jesuit priest Ricardo Falla writes: "Each name is a person and a constellation of people." The shattering of a community, and a family. And thus it was with the murder of Beatriz.

All crucifixions are like this. History's other genocides: the waves of English and French colonialism ploughing and destroying across North America, the Spanish and Portuguese invasions of South and Meso-America, the kidnapping of children and their taking away and destruction in Canadian Indian Residential Schools, the current mad hell-bent destruction of the Holy Earth in pursuit of ill-gotten gains. The Nazi Holocaust, we know, we remember, we grieve, which erased the lives of 6 million Jews. The Armenian genocide, the Ukrainian Holodomor. These things are too hideous to even believe. From them there is no resurrection. Not for these dead. No one has been saved by their blood.

Dashed on these rocks, burnt to the end in these ovens is this kind of idea of God, the almighty, maker of all things, and intervenor on the side of justice.

Psalm 94 promises that God will turn their wickedness back upon the evil-doers and destroy them in their own malice. Our God will destroy them. So, if God does *not* rescue the orphan and the widow in their distress, what kind of God do we proclaim?

Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.

Christians say this every day. But if God does *not* save us or deliver us, then what or when? If God did not save or deliver them, then were these little ones unworthy of salvation? Does God only work, is God only real, if these ones are saved? If so, then our God, our religions, have failed. They have fallen flat. They are worthless.

For how long shall the wicked triumph?

When does it ever end?

Where is God in the genocide?

God, like the little boy in Elie Wiesel's *Night,* God is hanging on the tree. God is dying, God is dead. God has been murdered, again and again. God is these little ones, who were not saved from the hands of their enemies, or from the hands of all who hated them.

Beatriz' hands they cut off, and I do not know where they have laid them.

The Turning is in Remembering

I sit on the side of the speeding boat, moving over the strange water, that is not a lake, that is not made by time, nor by the natural movement of the elements. This strange lake is a flood zone, and underneath are the fields and gardens of the dead. Jesus looks into the water, he says nothing. Neither do I. I know, and it is better not to talk about it.

We speed across the water, and land on the shore. Here is the site of the original village of Rio Negro. We hike up the hill, in single file, like the women and children did. We pass under the conacaste tree. Here is where the women were made to dance. We arrive at Pak'oxom. Here is where they were raped, and here they were murdered, their bodies dumped: in total 70 women and 107 children.

The very telling of the stories of the genocide becomes part of the recovery, the refusal to allow these individual deaths to disappear forever.

Resurrection

If they kill us women, Carlos, I ask you, please, not to give up, not to lay yourself down. Look after yourself, hide in the mountains, and if the time comes when there is peace, go to the world and tell them about the injustices we suffered, about everything that happened to us. Paulina Iboy Osorio

Resurrection does not happen because of human will. Rather it is the way of God, to pull life out of death. Death is not the end and, finally, murder does not win. Nothing is gained by death, but despite death, murder, atrocities, genocide the plans of the wicked are foiled. Somehow life sneaks back in. God sneaks back in. That's just what happens. That's what God is. That's what resurrection is: the not-dying, and then our response, the telling of what happened, the seeking of justice, and rebuilding of life.

Jesus Tecu Osorio was rescued, at last, from the clutches of his persecutor, and now works with others to denounce what occurred. After many years of agonizing struggle, they had some success. Forensic anthropologists exhumed the dead in Pak'axom. The remains were painstakingly identified, and finally given a dignified burial. Three of the dozens of murderers were finally convicted and sent to prison for 60 years. Jesus, after winning a major international human rights award, dedicated the award money to the creation of a new organization: The New Hope Foundation. Among other things, they built a school which is for preservation and remembrance, not only of the recent violence, but of the history of oppression since the arrival of the Spanish. In its 20th year of operation, generations of Maya-Achi youth have graduated.

Several non-Guatemalans, including many Canadians, have dedicated their lives to supporting survivors with these three things: the remembrance of the genocide, the seeking of justice, and the rebuilding of life. Rights Action, in Toronto, Breaking the Silence, based in Nova Scotia, and the human geography students together with their professor, Dr. Catherine Nolin, at the University of Northern British Columbia, in Prince George, have played crucial roles in witnessing with the witnesses to genocide. And I with them, modestly, have done some of these things too.

I went to Rio Negro, to Pak'oxom with Jesus. I spent the night on that holy mountain, soaked in the memory of the women and children killed there.

I went to the cemetery of the nameless bodies in Guatemala City. With the Guatemalan Association of Forensic Anthropologists, I spent three days, sunk deep into a bone well – one of three -- the next-to-last resting places for 20,000 bodies, thrown there, never identified, Jane and John Does. I witnessed as the young anthropologists dusted the skulls and the frames of human bodies, peering into their secrets, deciphering their deaths, returning the story to these long-lost ones. Remembering them.

I moved to Santa Cruz del Quiche, ground zero of the planning for the genocide and into a house straight across from the military barracks, where thousands died. Here Don Tiburcio was almost murdered, here he witnessed a bloody, sticky pile of discarded sandals and boots and belts and shoes, a metre high, and three or four metres wide. In the shadow of the torture palace, we created Peace House. We painted murals on the walls, telling the history, and the hopes of 25 Mayan youth. The house became the headquarters for the Chilam Balam Association, which hosted Maya Aj'kij, spiritual leaders, who held burning ceremonies daily in the courtyard. We planted a garden on the roof, and peach trees in the courtyard.

And in the end, I found Beatriz. She is buried about an hour east of Santa Cruz del Quiche. Her tomb is golden and pink and etched with the words of the Beatitudes: Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Here I brought flowers and water and candles. Here I cried. Here I prayed. Here I promised. Here I remembered.

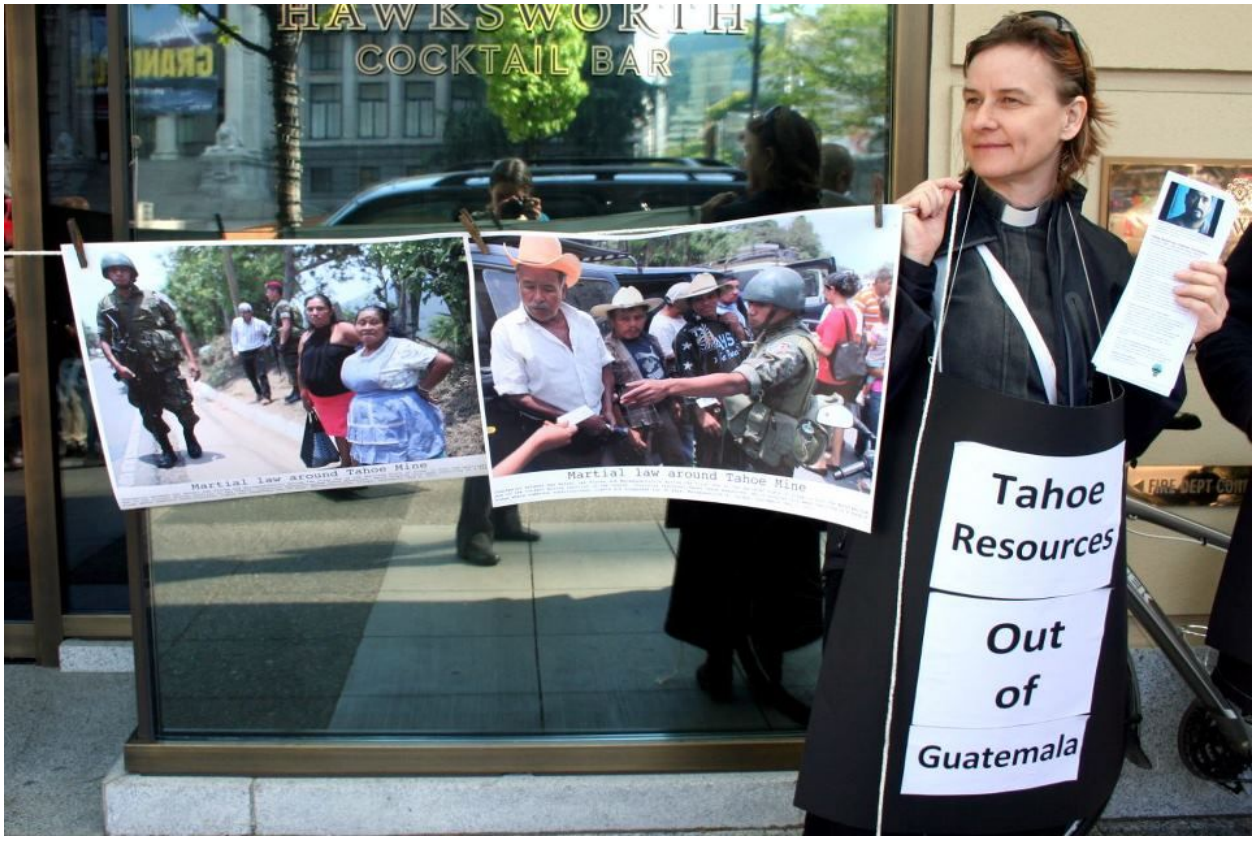
The genocide failed. Because people everywhere carry on the struggle for righteousness, for dignity, for justice.

In memory of them.

THE MURALS OF TRANSFORMATION

The world is beautiful. Creation is overflowing, and ever-healing. In 2011 a group of Maya-Kaqchikel artists organized 25 youth from the town of Santa Cruz del Quiche. For six Saturdays we dreamed, planned and then created a series of inter-connected murals in the courtyard of Peace House. In the process we all discovered our common love for one another, for our shared home, for our diverse cultures and communities. A blessing which cannot be erased.

The Maya-Kaqchikel artists who carried the mural project into fruition were: Edwin Joel Simon, Carlos Yool, Liz Sirin, Carlos Chicol, and main instigator and organizer, Berta Chirix.



Emilie is a parish priest. She is the mother of three young men, grandma to two (almost three) precious children, wife of Patti. She was born in the shadow of the foothills of the Andes, and lives with gratitude on the unceded territories of the Salish people.

“The trees in the forests where I live are young. All of their ancestors were cut down when European settlers slashed their way in. If you go into the dark, green woods you can see the massive, crumbling stumps. It is a cemetery of sorts. If you listen, you can still hear the trees cry. But then cemeteries are good and beautiful places, where the bones of our elders lie. And so I go often to be in the green, in the sorrow and in the promise.”