

Questions of Travel

By Sarah Hoeynck

Ever since I was little, I wanted my toes to know foreign soil—to squish in the mud, burn on the asphalt, and cool in the grass of unknown lands. Sadly, because of financial limitations, I didn't travel outside the country until I was twenty, on a scholarship from my college and my own dime. After that first plane ride over an ocean to South America, the travel bug bit my ass *hard*. Its essence has been coursing through my veins ever since, compelling me to discover Central America, the Caribbean, Western Europe, the Balkans, and Turkey

The “authenticity” of these trips was mixed and usually depended on if we were visiting friends and family. In Valencia, Spain, my husband and I lingered over a six-hour Sunday lunch, catching up with Spanish friends we hadn't seen in years and jumping in the Mediterranean when we got too hot. Last year, my mother-in-law took my husband and me to Wurzburg, Germany to see the house where she grew up, which her father built after World War II. During that week, we took leisurely walks to ornate churches, drank dry white wine, and enjoyed the city from her perspective. On the U.S. Virgin Island of St. John, I got wasted on Fernet with friends who'd moved there to work in the restaurant industry. We drank under the stars of Cruz Bay and hung out with the West Indian locals. Other times I was the consummate tourist: seeing four Parisian museums in a day, walking the ramparts of Dubrovnik, bartering with a merchant in the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, riding a gondola in Venice, and snapping pictures of the Library of Celsus in Ephesus.

Like me, my fellow Americans love to travel, often taking part in the same touristy activities I've enjoyed. With those adventures come the stereotypes of Americans abroad—loud

talking, clueless manners, dorky accessories, pasty skin, and rigid preferences. Sometimes these labels are true, other times not. One of the most incorrect beliefs is that only ten percent of Americans have passports. According to the U.S. Department of State, as of 2019, about 43 percent of the population has a ticket to ride the international skies. Granted, the majority of these Americans don't necessarily go too far from home—at least not too far from their home continent. Mexico and Canada definitely see the most American tourists, but the runners-up of Western Europe, the Caribbean, and East Asia show the typical U.S. globetrotter's desire to get out of town and appreciate a bit of variety.

However, just because lots of Americans are travelling outside the United States doesn't necessarily mean they're seeing another country. That's because when white Americans travel to non-Western countries or non-European nations—places whose populations are NOT majority white—they often stay at all-inclusive resorts or fancy, expansive hotels. Sure, their bodies are physically on the soil (or sand) of Nicaragua or Vietnam, but so many of them are separated from the actual place by miles of concrete, artificial palm trees, and Westernized tour guides.

These massive Shangri-las have it all—twenty-four hour room service, an English-speaking staff, gigantic rooms with oversize furniture, private transportation options if you were ever wanted to—God forbid—leave the resort, exclusive beachside deck chairs with matching cushions, and an endless supply of alcohol. Basically, these sanitized, removed mega-lodgings forbid travelers from leaving unless it's on an excursion planned by the resort. But as a result, they don't see the real people that live in the real place they are in. Odds are that if they're going to Africa, they're staying in some sort of compound masquerading as a hotel that makes them feel as protected as a pride of lions. If it's the Middle East they're after, I'm sure it also includes a swanky hotel where the staff all speak English and the women are free to wear whatever lack

of clothing they prefer. And I cannot count the number of friends I know who “love Mexico” but have never actually had a conversation with a Mexican person beyond “Uno mas margarita, por favor.” Although they paid a lot of money to come a very long way, they do not *experience* the country. They lose the truth behind travel—the substance.

But I’m all about the truth, whether it’s found in a crowded museum or a secluded site. However, it’s usually hiding on unknown shores. Twice in my wanderings I’ve stepped outside the comfort zone of Western-European, majority-white countries. In 2005 I took a summer abroad class in Brazil that involved homestays in various states in the south and central parts of the country. And a couple years ago in 2018, I went on a backpacking trip to Belize and a variety of states in southern Mexico. On both trips, I experienced the cultures much more authentically than if I’d gone to a resort. Comparing the two journeys reveals a great conundrum and sad reality of how countless white Americans travel as it relates to *age*.

Young people in their late teens and twenties travelling on their own don’t stay in resorts because they can’t afford it and usually don’t want to anyway. Instead, they take risks in dwellings and transportation, opting for hostels, cheap hotels, acquaintances’ couches, buses, trains, and sometimes even hitchhiking. In the process they meet fellow travelers and converse with locals. This sampling of authentic cultural flavors is intoxicating for a young mind and body opening up to the world and relishing in the novelty of it all.

That’s because people in their twenties are so very young and new to life. Sure, they are legal adults and able to do any grown-up activity they like, but their brains aren’t fully cooked yet. They’re still figuring out who they are, and their knowledge of responsibility is often underdeveloped. When this fresh mindset encounters a breathtaking, unfamiliar place like St. Petersburg, the Great Wall, or the Galapagos, young people don’t really know what they’re

experiencing. Yes, these kids journey off the beaten path, eat food they probably shouldn't eat, and talk to people they otherwise wouldn't talk to, but it's all about how the place affects them and their individual perception. They come away with unique stories they can tell their friends and amazing memories they can return to—most of which are about how they grew or what they got out of it. They gain knowledge of themselves and a new perspective on who they are, but these realizations are not about the people or the place. This is because the ability to ruminate and truly reflect on something outside yourself doesn't develop until you are older and have some life experiences under your belt. It's simply part of growing up.

Yet things turn tragic precisely when the growing up occurs. In their thirties and beyond, people may still wish to roam, but they get domesticated. As incomes increase and obligations like houses, careers, and children pile on, so, too, do worries. When you have more to live for, whether its people or property, you are hyper aware that you have more to lose. Plus, your body just ain't what it used to be! It's the nature of growing up—we get creaky, sore, cautious, and secure. Mortality and responsibility become very real things. But hey, you still need a break every now and then! So you book resort vacations and live within the travel bubble. People do this because they are mature enough to know what they want and just frightened enough not to jeopardize any of their physical and familial treasures.

Therein lies the paradox. Those who are more likely to travel to lesser known places in an authentic way tend to be young, but the experience is internalized—it's about the traveler rather than the place. As for older people who *are* able to acknowledge the gravity of an encounter, their “safe” travelling methods often remove them from the culture, people, and place that they are visiting. Basically, young people take risks and see the culture and place, but miss the meaning, and adults who can appreciate the meaning are no longer willing or able to take the

same risks. The result is a lot of older Americans who “travel” but who never *experience* a place from a mature perspective, especially when it is foreign and unfamiliar.

Nowhere was more unfamiliar for twenty-year-old-me than Brazil, as it was my first trip out of the country. Not only did I speak very little Portuguese, but I am terrible at languages in general. Luckily, the class was a cross-curricular History and English course focused on modern Brazil and the luminary writer Elizabeth Bishop, who was and still is my favorite poet. This amazing woman made Brazil her home throughout the mid-20th century, writing some of her most stirring works while living in Ouro Preto and sharing her life with Brazilian artist Lota Soares. As an English major, I already knew a ton about her, but my knowledge of Brazil, a giant, hugely populated country, was basic. Due to my fangirliness for Bishop and total lack of international travel experience, I was wide-eyed and open to anything.

This willingness translated into countless memories. Feasting on so much meat at a churrascaria in Belo Horizonte that I split my pants. Sleeping on a tenth-floor, open-air veranda overlooking the Copacabana neighborhood of Rio. Singing Neil Young’s “Southern Cross” while gazing at a totally new set of stars in Tiradentes. Peeing in the ocean at Ipanema because I drank too many caipirinhas. Dancing barefoot at a samba club in Juiz de Fora after the heel on my sandals broke. Having a brief romance with Tiago, a charming Adonis who loved my long blonde hair. Walking through Elizabeth Bishop’s house and leafing through her diaries in Ouro Preto. Like Bishop, I fell in love with the country and had an experience that many would qualify as “authentic.” This was mostly because our class was designed to immerse us in the culture and allowed us to dwell in it like a local would.

But here’s the thing: I was looking at and experiencing all these amazing things through the lens of a twenty-year-old kid. For me, the astonishment came because I was drinking legally

for the first time, because my blond hair, pale skin, and blue eyes were considered “exotic” by Brazilian standards, because I was discovering more about myself. I didn’t really think about the sprawling geography, the boundless agriculture, the racial divides, or the machismo culture. And although I met so many Brazilian people—I slept on their sofas, shared secrets with them, and even kissed one of them on numerous occasions—I didn’t think about who they were in the context of their culture and their vast, complex history and society. I was too young and enamored with the idea of travel to actually peel back the layers of the place.

This in no way meant that the journey was pointless or wasted on me. I was having a truly profound experience, but it was all personal and surface-level—sensory and visceral and exhilarating, but lacking depth and insight about anything or anyone other than myself. These things can only come with age.

Which is what happened over the next few years as I put my passport to work and became a more seasoned traveler. Throughout my twenties, I made my way through Central Europe, various Mediterranean countries, and the Caribbean. But in all of these places, I was simply experiencing more and more white, Western culture. Other than Istanbul, which my husband and I visited for only two days, the experiences were memorable and beautiful, but the places all smacked of a certain familiarity. There were no chances to learn, to be the minority, to be humbled.

But I got my chance in 2018, when my friend Megan and I planned an adventure to Mexico and Belize. I was unacquainted with Central America and I didn’t know any Spanish. However, Megan lived in Mexico for several years and considers it her second home, especially because she has many friends who still reside there. Due to her familiarity with the place and her fluent Spanish, we were going to do this trip her way. That meant planning an itinerary of cities

where her friends could meet up with us, packing only what we could carry on our backs, taking public transportation, and staying in hostels. Megan rejected hotels as overpriced and fake, and a rental car was out of the question. How could she show me this country that she loves if we were separated from it? Trusting her completely, I put myself in her capable hands.

I'm glad I did. If I'd insisted that we stay in a resort, declared that I didn't feel safe taking public busses, or been too whiny to walk everywhere, I would've missed so much. If we'd stayed in the grotesque hotel zone of Cancun rather than a tiny hostel by the bus station, we never would have ducked into a hole-in-the-wall taqueria for ceviche tostadas and witnessed Mexico's shocking group round victory over Germany in the 2018 World Cup. No tourist attraction could rival that exhilarating moment of pure national pride—high fiving and singing with Mexican men and women on their lunch breaks, absolute joy ricocheting off the tightly packed, open-air stucco walls.

If we'd rented a car, we wouldn't have taken a long-haul cab ride from Xpujil to Escarcega (because no buses ran between those cities) and met our talkative cab driver José. We had an open dialogue about Donald Trump and how Mexican people feel about him—he was *not* a fan—and learned so much about Mexico's current political situation. He voiced his disgust for corrupt politicians of his country, his support of the Morena Party, and his hope for a new regime that prioritizes the people. It was the most informative cab ride I've ever taken.

If we had gone to only the most popular Mayan ruins like Chichen Itza or Tikal, we never would have met a group of archaeologists working at the massive, under visited site of Calakmul in Campeche state. Dense jungle surrounds this once-enormous city, so excavation work is very slow. When Megan randomly approached these workers, they told us that the seasonal window for conducting archaeological work in Mexico is very tight (due to the rains) and strictly

mandated (due to the fragile and crumbly nature of the limestone). So these men must be away from their families for long stretches of time while they work around the clock to uncover the opulent stone structures camouflaged like sleeping jaguars in thick green trees. Do most tourists think about who liberated El Castillo from the jungle's grasp or who maintains the delicate facial expressions of stelae? Probably not.

If we'd stuck to the beaches or the towns with the "safest" travel routes, we never would have witnessed a political rally in San Cristobal. The voting public squeezed into a shady square usually reserved for day picnics and mariachi bands. Although black folding chairs were set up, the crowd overflowed into the streets surrounding the stage. People sang the infectious "Morena" rally song as they waved their red, white, and green flags in the air and proclaimed the voice of the people. I'd never been in another country on the eve of its national elections, and certainly not a place that was so full of renewed hope and belief in the potential candidates. We spent our last night in Mexico listening to triumphant fireworks exploding throughout the city, celebrating the victories of the Morena party and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

In every instance, it was about the people and the culture, not about us or our American needs. Admittedly, we did visit some tourist sites, like the ruins of Palenque and the beaches of Tulum. And the lack of air conditioners and the requirement to throw soiled toilet paper in the trash did take a couple days to get used to. But no matter the physical comfort or location, we adopted a learning mindset, listened to the people, and tried to immerse ourselves in Mexico.

Overall, I'd say we succeeded. With every new city or town, different perspectives shifted into place and unique configurations took shape. Realizations about travel were swirling and blossoming in ways that I'd never really thought about as a young person. The people were

individuals with names. The food was distinctive to the region. The songs had slightly different variations. And the colors were definitely brighter.

This slowly unfolding kaleidoscope burst into full tessellation in Belize, the *only* country in Central America that Megan had never been to. Therefore, it required internet research, as we did not have any insider knowledge. After learning about the many different attractions, we decided that diving and sailing around the resort-laden Cays was not for us. Just like Mexico, we wanted to dig deeper, which meant going inland to San Ignacio, Belize—the central hub of the Cayo district. Known for its eco-tourism, rustic geography, and generally laidback vibe, we knew it was the destination for us. This required us to get off in Belize City in order to board new transportation on a three-hour bus ride into the interior.

The final leg of our journey changed my entire perspective on being a traveler.

When our ADO land cruiser pulled into the Belize City bus terminal on a swelteringly hot Monday afternoon, a bit of a culture shock ensued. Sure, we knew the basics: its official language (English), varied geography (beaches, caves, and tropical forests), currency (the Belizean dollar exchanges 2:1 with the American dollar), its strong native past (Mayan civilization and tribes), and its colonial history (formerly a British colony). But we didn't realize how different Belize was going to be from Mexico.

I had just gotten used to being surrounded by Spanish speaking people who mostly appeared Indigenous and Latino. But here, it was primarily black people, like the West Indian populations I had seen on the Virgin Islands. The languages swirling around included not just Spanish, but also English, indiscernible native tongues, and something that sounded like the Creole I'd heard in New Orleans or the Pidgin English of Hawaii. And the city itself was packed with colonial architecture, full of post-supported verandas and elaborate ironwork rather than the

practical concrete and stucco of Mexico. Although our pesos were now useless, vendors accepted our American dollars, or currency windows exchanged them for Belizean dollars. And the food was less Mexican and much more Caribbean—they sold meat pies in the station!

To wait for our bus, we sweated on one of the rough wooden benches in the outdoor embarkation area—a concrete pad covered by a tin roof and surrounded by chain-link fencing. As I looked around, I noticed that Megan and I were the only ones with luggage. Our hulking backpacks looked gigantic next to the small parcels, purses, and bags people carried. Then it hit us: 5:30pm is right in the middle of rush hour. These were all commuters leaving the city to return home from work and school, and a commuter bus meant no more fancy-schmancy, air-conditioned land cruisers like the ones we'd been luxuriating in when travelling around Mexico. Instead, our chariot was an ancient American school bus with rust flakes chipping off the faded green paint and dents in both fenders—the elusive “chicken bus” Megan had told me about. No seatbelts, no air-conditioning, and no regulated stops because people hopped on and off at will. And although there weren't any chickens on this one, based upon the number of people gathering, I figured we were the chickens, ready to be packed into our rickety crate.

After we got on, we asked a woman wearing a red blazer and a checkered headscarf if we were on the right bus. Once she verified—in perfect English—that it was, I asked about all the different languages we'd been hearing. She chortled about how there were so many, sometimes she got confused. Apparently, even though she was speaking English, her primary language was Belizean Kriol, a mix between English, indigenous Miskito, and various West African dialects. Spanish was also widespread as well as a bunch of Mayan dialects she could never really remember. According to her, Belize is full of people switching between three languages within a single conversation! With pride she told us that if we kept our ears open, we would hear them all.

While people continued to board the bus, we told her about our adventures in Mexico and marveled over how different Belize City is from where we'd been. Like a wise social studies teacher, she told us how Belize City is Belize's biggest town and best place for employment. It's the jumping-off point for water taxis and boats to all the immaculate Cays destinations along the coast. As a result, many people who live inland come into Belize City for work and have to take the buses back out at the end of the day. My mind was reeling from all the information. Shortly after she finished our cultural lesson and wished us well, she pulled out a cloth fan and cooled herself as she looked out the window.

I was super jealous of that fan because it was *hot!* Beads of sweat collected on my arms, and the air in the bus was thick with moisture, hanging heavily like a soaked towel on a laundry line. The old windows wouldn't open all the way, and the amount of people continuing to pile onto the bus did not help the temperature. More and more sticky bodies filled up the seats until they overflowed into the aisle, but it didn't stop there. The wave of standing people pressed together and swelled up bigger and bigger, until they were a wall of bodies. I tried inhaling through the crack in the window, but the air outside was so blistering that it didn't do any good.

This kaleidoscope was not yet turning. The thick blobs of color were present, but stagnant—tightly packed together and not quite ready to move. But thankfully, at least the bus was, although our snail's pace didn't make a huge difference in air quality. As we pulled into the busy traffic, the hot sun roasted the top of the bus. Rolling through the congested streets of Belize City seemed to take hours because we stopped at pretty much every street corner. But all that slow-going provided a chance for my gaze to linger over the details of everyday life. Food vendors in ratty patio chairs selling water and chicken wings under rainbow golf umbrellas. Storefronts packed with an assortment of white Filas, graphic t-shirts, and aviator sunglasses.

Squat structures with tin-roofs and old, two-story colonial buildings, their walls crumbling with time but their colors of pastel yellow, blue, and pink still vibrant and imposing. Battered jalopies from the 1980s pattering alongside sparkling new Audi sedans and Volkswagen hatchbacks. Congested roundabouts with modern sculptures and lush greenery emerging from the centers. Rather than zipping straight to the coast or hopping on a ferry, we got a complete tour of various parts of the city. Colors materialized and motion commenced, slowly revealing different views, different perspectives.

With every stop, more people climbed aboard, most of them black Caribbean Islanders. Megan and I were the only white people on the bus. Being a white, middle-class teacher who grew up in the suburbs of the Midwest, I haven't had a lot of experiences where I was the racial minority. It's pathetic, but if you know anything about the segregation that envelopes the Midwest, in urban and rural areas alike, it's not necessarily surprising. I'm ashamed of my lack of experience with such situations, and, quite frankly, pissed that I hadn't put myself in such a position sooner.

There was nothing particularly special about the actual moment. I wasn't uncomfortable. No one looked at me like I was "different." I even exchanged some likeminded smiles with other women who, like me, were admiring a muscular man whose slip of a girlfriend perched on his knee and held her elegant neck like a queen. But it did open my eyes to the lack of social diversity in my life and forced me to know what it's like to *not* be the dominant skin tone in the room. I'm pretty sure a lot of white Americans (especially my fellow Midwesterners) have never known that feeling. I am aware that simply sitting amongst people is not a remarkable accomplishment, nor does it make me brave or special. But the shift it initiated within my mind

was seismic, for I was beginning to see the balance of colors more accurately, able to recognize the patterns and identify the disparities more plainly.

As our vehicle finally exited the city and picked up speed, the air in and around the bus shifted. It raced past my face and shot through the throngs of bodies swaying in the aisles and in the seats. That's when the hopping on and off *really* picked up. School children in white oxford shirts, navy-blue canvas shorts, and plaid skirts danced in the aisle. They spoke loudly in Kriol while adults rolled their eyes at them. Hotel workers wearing turquoise and coral polo shirts with hotel logos emblazoned on them stopped the bus to walk down long dirt roads leading into thick swaths of trees.

When I asked Megan if she thought there were towns off these roads, a voice over our shoulder interjected. That's when we met Joshua, a twenty-something young man with a pleasant smile and wildly gesticulating hands. He told us that every day he takes three different busses—including a water taxi—for about two hours each way to work at a resort in the Cays. Talking to him, we learned that he made a lot more money at the resort than he would closer to home in a shop or restaurant. But he didn't mind the commute because living with his family was way better than renting some crappy apartment in the city.

He also asked us in his best salesman voice why we weren't visiting the Cays. They're so picturesque! So serene! So blue! We shared that we weren't really into the touristy things and insisted that we weren't like those people who came to Belize just to see the Cays. Thinking we were so special, like we had somehow bonded with him over our alternative travel choices, we asked him what he *really* thought of all the tourists he waited on at the resort. Surprisingly, he gushed about the Brits, Aussies, and even Americans he encountered, pointing out that the

economy of Belize is strong because of tourism. Plus, they could go anywhere, but they chose to come to Belize because it was so scenic and welcoming, which made him really proud.

Whoops! Here I was disdaining all things touristy when a local appreciated the tourists, not only for their money, but also because their choice to come to Belize instilled a sense of pride in his country. Once again, I was thrown for a loop. Joshua's friendly voice and assertive opinions turned my kaleidoscope on its head. Things were shifting, pixilating, exploding—my view was far more complex than when I'd boarded the bus. When Joshua hopped off at his stop, he wished us a wonderful time in San Ignacio and encouraged us to watch some futbol games in bars. It was the World Cup, after all!

As the next hour stretched on, fewer people got on while more got off. Because the aisle was no longer packed, the air on the bus thinned out a bit. Now able to look out both windows, I watched the landscape whiz by. There wasn't a whole lot to see. Stretches of flat yellow grasses pressed against a cloudless azure sky. Dark green and burnt brown copses of trees dotted the scrubby, dry land in all directions. Hastily assembled fruit stands along the side of the road advertised mangoes, cashews, and Coca-Colas as dust floated around the stalls. Half-finished houses and rusty manufacturing buildings rose alongside shabby, decrepit wooden ranches. This was the part of Belize that didn't appear in pictures—not the lush jungle or the sparkling blue Cays. This was merely a throughway to somewhere else. But there was something splendid in this unexpected and entirely real landscape—a part of the country that visitors rarely see.

When we stopped in Belmopan, the capital of Belize, I observed that the racial makeup of the bus had broadened. Some of the Caribbean Islanders and Mestizos had been replaced by Latino and Mayan people. Since we were getting closer to the Guatemala border, this made sense. The further inland we went, the more we saw the diverse population of Belize. This

included a Mayan woman and her adorable little boy who sat in front of us. Peering over his mother's shoulder, the boy stared at me and Megan with wide eyes and round cheeks. Megan made faces at him, causing giggles to gurgle through his lips.

When his mother noticed, she turned around and smiled as well. Megan gave a Spanish greeting and asked her where she was from. After we established that she only spoke Spanish and Mayan, the two of them proceeded to talk about how the woman and her son were coming back from the hospital in Belmopan because the little boy had an operation a few months back and needed a follow up. Although Megan translated for me and verified that he was all better, it was hard to grasp the flow of conversation. Every now and then the woman would say a phrase in broken English for me to understand, and I would nod awkwardly, but I wasn't really part of their interaction. Instead, I half listened, able to catch a word here and there, and focused my attention on the boy, who wasn't old enough to talk anyway.

But he could play, and every child is fluent in the universal language of peekaboo. Every time I ducked below the back of the seat and revealed myself with great enthusiasm, he squealed like a dolphin. Sometimes he hid behind his own hands, as if they provided a cloak of invisibility, and when they burst open, his baby-toothed smile rang with laughter. As the sun set, we kept at it, the little boy's face brightening the rapidly darkening atmosphere. The Spanish from Megan and his mother trickled over us like music, and our wordless merriment provided a bassline to their words. It didn't matter that the boy and I understood different languages, were completely different ages, and weren't from the same country. We could still have fun together. Silliness and play have no borders.

When the woman and her son departed into the dusk of another village, Megan explained that we were only about thirty minutes away from San Ignacio. It had been a long ride, so we

spent the last moments in silence. Looking out the window, I watched the daylight fade behind a hill big enough to be a mountain.

There were mountains in Belize?

That's when I noticed just how much the landscape had changed from the dusty plains of earlier. Here, the last rays of sunlight teased a faint pink glow from the red clay soil. Tall stands of upright pine trees climbed the hillsides, throwing a crisp scent of Christmas into the air. The hills to the south rose and fell into peaks and valleys like a roller coaster. Clouds of light mist and fog settled over the trees, undulating with the gentle breeze that blew through the sky. As we climbed higher in elevation, the air grew cooler. It swirled around me, entered me, sank into my skin, filled up my nose—stimulating my nerves. It was as if a mountain spirit was beckoning me to gallop through the hills with it.

I felt like I had entered another world—of Belize and of myself.

A riot of sensations and patterns exploded outside the bus and inside of me. Exciting, sensual, and visceral, but also profound and bone-seeping. If I were a young person, I might have remained on the surface of this moment, called it an unfathomable experience and moved on to the next thing. But I wasn't a kid. I was an adult, able to fathom the depth of the event, to know that the people and landscape dwelt at the bottom of these depths.

As we crossed the concrete bridge over the Makal River, the bright, rainbow letters of SAN IGNACIO greeted us. It was then that I knew what Elizabeth Bishop meant in so many of her poems—about really immersing yourself, about peeling back the folds of a creature or a place to uncover the hidden layers of magic and power wiggling underneath. On this bus ride, I had observed, and, at its end, I dove into the river and surfaced with a new vision, a new way of looking at the world. I was the medicine man in “The River Dolphin” swimming alongside

Luandinha; I was the bus rider in “The Moose” haunted by the great, hulking creature’s smell; I was the speaker in “The Fish” staring at her prize. And now, coming out on the other side with the reds, blues, greens, and yellows of SAN IGNACIO beckoning to me, “everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!” And, rather than letting this miraculous catch go, I packed it into my soul’s suitcase, ready to carry it with me on future travels.