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Juneau: Notes From the Bus

A senior project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts
in Humanities and Cultural Studies

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Abstract

This creative writing project is about a week I spent alone in Juneau, Alaska. All time and travel was spent on foot, bus and boat. Alone, I had many different experiences, and every time I interacted with a new person, that isolation became a shared experience, if even for a minute. Each day started out a blank slate, and eventually wrote itself into a story with a unique identity of its own as each day does as we travel through seconds and minutes that build up into completed days. Social interactions with so many different people turns them from strangers into someone you've met before, but will most likely never meet again. You leave a little piece of yourself with them, as they do with you. This paper is about those interactions, on a ground level, through my experience.

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Introduction

From a distance, it is easy to sit down and pick up a book, and read about someone else's adventures whether fiction, fantasy or journal. Traveling through pages, eyes bouncing along the words, sparking imagination and stimulating emotions is a predestined route by way of characters printed on paper. From the comfort of our own living rooms and at our own time and pace, we can immerse ourselves with the turn of each page, and imagine walking in the shoes of the author. Chances are, our imaginations will not allow us to feel the cold or the fear, anxiety or relief the author faced at certain points throughout the story. It is the equivalent of boarding a roller coaster, with a given starting and ending point, and we trust we will make it through safely.

Romanticizing someone else's experience is the luxury of reading, and the beauty of escaping into a story. Knowing there is already a beginning and an end to the tale is also a comfort afforded by the pages bound by a binding; in short, it is a very safe and vicarious way to travel, which may or may not have been the case for the author.

What we are missing is the feeling of the unpredictable nature of traveling and exploration. By the time the words make it to the page, the mystery is already over and we bask in the luxury of the author's memory and hindsight. It is good to keep in mind

that there was a point in time before every story was written, a time before turning every corner on the journey, when the moment was suspended in uncertainty, until the accumulation of such moments played themselves out and could be written chronologically into a story. We can only write about our past with certainty, and we can only read about someone else's. We invest a lot of trust in the author's words.

I decided to write my senior paper about my week in Juneau, Alaska from a very personal perspective, and quickly discovered that using one's heart to tell the story is very revealing, not only to the reader but to oneself. After reading *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Matsuo Basho, I decided to continue writing past the minimum page requirement, and embellish the story with personal photos, influenced by his simple and honest style, and his haiku. Unlike the traveler, haiku are subject to simple and predictable boundaries, which makes them fun and easy to manage, while the traveler

is at the mercy of the environment and circumstance. Basho's casual yet emotional style helped me tap into a new way of thinking while writing. Neither of us are writing to impress the reader with extensive vocabularies or mind-bending thoughts. Mark Twain quotes about travel also provided plenty of inspiration and clarity about why I felt the way I did while I was there. His influence has a way of turning my thoughts and emotions into clearly defined

“a-ha!” moments that help solidify the whole process verbally. I went there on a whim, driven strictly by curiosity, with no real intentions to form a type of sociological observation worth writing about for my senior paper two years later. Resurrecting the photographs unleashed a flood of memories and emotions I was unaware I retained, and I enjoyed the process of reliving the whole week over during the course of time it has taken me to write this paper. Memories make great escape mechanisms, but they do carry heavy side effects, like smiles and tears.

Communicating a story or a message using a simplistic yet intelligent method puts the mind at ease for both the reader and the author, and makes the whole process more enjoyable. Throughout the story, you’ll find some simple haiku here and there, like little decorations or places to stop and rest before continuing on the journey. It is important to take the time out to pause and reflect before moving on, even if it is through a memory.

Ultimately, I have discovered that there are many people who deeply value travel, not only for leisure purposes but for expanding their human and environmental awareness. Meeting new people is a privilege and also a necessity, whether a five-minute talk on the bus, or a four-hour ride on the ferry. Traveling with a partner is safe, and teamwork is priceless, but traveling alone leaves the whole world open to you, and you are open to the world. Travel is usually temporary, as we are forced to return home like retractable cords, and sometimes we discover a deeper appreciation of home after reaching out to different parts of the world. A truly nomadic person lives in that permanent state of openness, and lives without that security of having a place to call

home. Being alone also forces one to think for oneself, to be “self-ish.” Making every decision is often a luxury and often a challenge. It is also the way to learn to be alone and comfortable with that feeling; it is truly the best way to get to know yourself.

Juneau: Notes From the Bus

The desire to travel is a well that springs most powerfully in the minds of those who become restless when standing still. To fill the vacant and expansive spaces in the mind that are reserved for spiritual expansion, it is imperative to cast fear and insecurity aside. Independence and a willingness to be simultaneously alone while being a part of everyone leads to a stronger sense of self. The following is a memoir of my experience of doing just that, in the town of Juneau, Alaska, on the bus.

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.” - - Mark Twain

It was late in the afternoon in early May, the beginning of dusk, when I found myself contemplating how the impending summer was going to structure itself. June and July lay victim to plans hovering around like flies, looking for a place to land within the confines of a calendar on a computer screen. Each day was represented by a blank white box, beside the day of the month in bold black type. These boxes served no other purpose than to organize a future reality, when I had some time off, leaving blank squares where they were usually crammed with unfulfilling demands. Almost eight weeks of beautiful, blank white boxes were just waiting to be consumed by me, eager to have the upper hand at filling them with self-interest, and a burning desire to escape the stranglehold and confines of daily life.

As I laid out some tentative demands that had already weaseled their way into my future, I noticed an eight-day overlap when both of my children would be away, and I would be left blissfully alone. I took a deep breath and a step back, and decided that although the Fifty States of North America were at my mercy, I'd always wanted to visit Alaska. It didn't matter where in Alaska, as long as it was outside of the big cities, and I could experience the "last frontier" first-hand, on my own terms. I like big things, big landscapes, big ideas, dreams, water, music. Alaska seemed like the right place. After minimal internet research, an affordable package deal was laid out before me in Juneau. My hand rested on the mouse, the cursor hovered over the word "submit," I took a breath and clicked. For an instant, I was breathless, and the excitement grew as the weeks passed.

"The gods seemed to have possessed my soul and turned it inside out, and roadside images seemed to invite me from every corner, so that it was impossible for me to stay idle at home" (Basho 97).

On a drizzly, overcast June afternoon, my plane landed and delivered me to the northern area of Juneau. There are no roads into Alaska's capital city due to the water surroundings and the rugged terrain. Juneau has been the capital since 1906, and it can only be entered and exited by air or water. According to the United States Census Bureau, with a population 32,756 (in 2015), it is the second largest city in the United States by area (2,716.7 square miles of it is land, and 538.3 square miles of it is water), and it is the only U.S. state capital to border another country (U.S. Department of Commerce).

Tucked away by land

There's nothing like mountains

To keep roads away

When I booked my room, I was told by the hotel that upon my arrival, I would be greeted by the hotel shuttle driver in a red van. I could not find him and called the front desk of the Super 8. The lady replied in a slow, relaxed voice, "He'll be there sooner or later, ma'am, don't you worry. It says Super 8 on the side of the red van, don't you worry!" About fifteen minutes later, a Chevy Astro van rolled up. This was a late model van, 1980s was my guess, missing a headlight and dented from all sides and angles, with no visible Super 8 logo. The driver's side door opened slowly with a high-pitched groan, and a middle-aged man hopped out of the driver's seat. He extinguished his cigarette on the ground with the twist of his boot, right outside the door. I was a bit surprised, but I also didn't mind because his arrival brought shelter from the rain, and relief from worry. He greeted me with a smile, hair thin and balding pulled back in a ponytail, and he was missing a tooth or two, but he was smiling and firmly shook my hand. I always return a firm handshake with another; this often surprises people, especially men. By this simple gesture, though, he decided he liked me, and I liked him. He was surprised to hear this was my first time in Alaska and asked what I'd like to do most. I said I wanted to go fishing, to which he replied, "I have a boat! Call me if you wanna go out there, I'm off on Mondays." He handed me a wrinkled, homemade business card, helped me out with my suitcase, and left me at the Super 8, five miles

out of the main town. I never found the time to go fishing, but always remembered the gesture.

Curiosity and a love of fishing inspired me to learn more about the state's dependence on commercial fishing and processing. The salmon hatcheries and a cold storage facility contribute to over two million pounds of halibut, black cod, salmon and king crab annually (Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Juneau). I wondered how, and if, it affects a solo fisherman. I wish I'd experienced his side, I wish we could have spent a full day talking and fishing. To have taken him up on his offer would have been an honor, and I regret not making the time to do so.

Upon arrival at the dingy, run-down motel room, I threw my luggage on the bed and decided to waste no time. The first step was to study the routes and times of the next bus downtown.

The layout of the town seemed relatively simple and easy to navigate, and I knew that I could ask for help. I discovered that my stop was located across a battered parking lot of an almost-abandoned mall called The Nugget. It was a quarter mile from the Super 8, my home away from home. I put on my backpack and coat, pocketed my wallet, headphones, laced up my walking boots, and set out for my first adventure.

Courage from the ground

My feet are pointed westward

Backpack facing east

The Nugget Mall was barely clinging to life, with an Office Max, a Flying Squirrel espresso coffee stand with two cute girls in low cut tops, serving custom drinks in a run-down portable, a Payless Shoe Source, and a Joann Fabric store. The main doors stayed open only to provide a shortcut through the building to the other side, where the bus stop was located. It was quiet and cold, and felt haunted by other people's memories of it being new and exciting. As I ventured cautiously inside, I noticed the rolling gates pulled down over the faces of empty store fronts, safe from the threat of vandalism by drunkards or bored teenagers. I wondered if it had ever been vibrant, and if so, for how long? Was this a reflection of the current economy? Where were the people shopping now, and what became of the people once employed there?

About half of Juneau's working population is employed by state, local and federal government, with the the majority employed by the U.S. Forest Service, National Parks Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Postal Service, and U.S. Coast Guard. In 2013, the number of people employed by federal and state government agencies was 17,105 (Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development). This means that roughly half of Juneau's population is dependent on the Federal government for employment, and the other half is dependent on government employees. It's estimated that for every government employee, one private sector job is needed for support services, and the

private sector is fueled by tourism, with estimates of over 800,000 visitors per year keeping the industry alive. From my vantage point in that particular place, tourism was not evident, and I walked through quickly, keenly aware that my footsteps were echoing off the walls and the battered brown-tiled floors. Someone else might hear them too, maybe a ghost. There was no noise to compete with.

When I finally reached the bus stop, littered with cigarette butts and food wrappers, I realized it was "getting off time," and one by one, a worker would show up in an orange safety vest and with a lunch-sized cooler. They were tall, bulky men. They all looked tired and worn down, smoking cigarettes. They all greeted me with the same puzzled look, or a semi-territorial nod. I wondered where they were coming from and how they'd spent their day; were they miners? Construction workers?

Alaska is heavily dependent on the mining industries. In fact, Kennecott Greens Creek Mine, on Admiralty Island near the city, produces gold, silver, lead, and zinc, and is one of the largest silver mines in North America. It is the second largest private employer in terms of payroll in the City & Borough of Juneau (Alaska Miners Association). Expansion of that mine is projected to create up to 250 more jobs. Construction projects, especially initiated by the Kensington Gold Mine, promise an economic boom, as it is a 100% pure gold mine, and now employs up to 350 people 45 miles north of Juneau.

Hail the worker who

Has no time for childhood dreams

Under these gray skies

Bell's ringin', shift change

Sound of freedom, "go home boys!"

See you tomorrow

Only a couple of hours into my stay, I realized that everything is much larger in Alaska, because there is room to be big. It took my eyes and my mind a while to adjust to the scale of my surroundings. The relative size of everything compared to California is born of necessity, opportunity, and physical space. I noticed every vehicle that passed on the road was an oversized Ford diesel truck. When I see people driving them in California, I think "ridiculous," but here I thought "necessary." People of standard size and stature in Alaska would have appeared giant in California. For the first time in my life, I felt small, and I kept quiet, avoiding eye contact or even casual conversation. Fifteen nervous minutes later, the bus arrived. I felt a mild sense of safety, confirming my route with the driver, who said the ride should take about 30 minutes.

The map showed a predetermined route that took on the shape of a distorted circle with a tail, from the outskirts of Juneau through downtown and back. About three stops in, a very young Tlingit girl stepped on the bus, holding an infant and a stroller that seemed better suited for a child's play doll. I helped

her with the stroller as she situated herself, although she didn't really need me. She was a Native girl with a nervous but grateful smile, and as I stole a look or two, I realized that

Alaskan Natives still look exactly like their ancestors, but dressed in affordable American clothing. It was striking. It was also evident that if she donned native clothing, she would look like they had never been displaced. Just as casually as it should be, before the baby even began to fuss, she pulled up her shirt and breastfed the child without a second thought, and no one gave her a second look, either. I'll never forget the way I felt in that moment; there was such a fine line between the way things should be, opposed to the way they are. The bus people of Juneau weren't even aware of the power of that moment, because it was natural to them. I held back a tear, as my emotional reaction even took me by surprise.

The sun was on its way down, and the bus made its way down a road thick with trees and houses. The first thing I noticed was that the houses were severely worn down and some were buckling in the middle, or at the sides like broken arms. Each of the yards was piled high with retired cars and household appliances, dismantled bicycles and countless white plastic bags filled with trash. Lights were on, and the land was green, but not even giant Alaskan trees could hide the conditions of those living spaces. I thought I'd seen poverty during my time on the road, but I'd never seen anything like that. If I had to compare it to another memory I carry, it was reminiscent of the disparity in Honolulu, HI, that I witnessed from the window of a bus.

Half a block down, I noticed through the trees a large building surrounded by a chain link fence and menacing spiral barbed wire. The yellow floodlights were also visible, signaling dusk, one highlighting the sign for the Lemon Creek Correctional

Facility from below. I extinguished fear with a shot of reality that I was safe on the bus, and really, nothing was going to happen to me.

Unfortunately

The safety of iron bars

Outweighed sound judgement

The Lemon Creek Correctional Facility was built in 1893 and serves as a state prison in Alaska's capital. Approximately 80% of the inmates are convicted felons and the remaining are in pre-trial status. Since there are no federal prisons in Alaska, those inmates are held in state facilities and then usually shipped to Oregon. The prison offers many different programs for inmates to work and thrive, including a culturally based program for Natives and Blacks, in which they are given the opportunity to raise money to fund institutional and community-based projects. Another program of interest, called the Close-Up Program, offers the following: "Selected inmates and staff meet each spring with high school aged youths from all over the State of Alaska. Once a week, for six weeks, staff and inmates tell children about prison life and the value of an education and staying out of trouble" (Alaska Department of Corrections).

Give people a chance

Opportunity is key

Let them contribute

No one got on or off the bus at that stop. As we backtracked through the neighborhood, the driver announced that the next stop would be the local hospital. As we headed there, the sounds of the signal bell being pushed indicated we'd definitely be

stopping. I wondered what type of services they offered, and secretly hoped it wasn't a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, but it was. The day shift workers and the people from the outpatient day programs were waiting at the bus stop.

Everyone looked irritated and impatient. I sat still in my seat and observed behind sunglasses, while trying to look like I wasn't. The bus quickly filled with people from this stop, mostly employees, I guessed, by the nursing scrub pants, floral tops, and the unique smells that follow people home from the hospital. The chattering and complaining of the day's pressures and disappointments rang through the air as they decompressed together after another long work day. Even discontent seems lighthearted when shared amongst friends.

The Bartlett Regional Hospital serves Juneau in multiple capacities, including emergency and trauma services, and standard hospital care. They also offer a specialized program for addiction treatment services called the Rainforest Recovery Center. Alaskan Indians have a disproportionately high number of alcohol and drug abusers, and "In 2010, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) estimated that the percentage of American Indian/Alaskan Natives adults in need of substance abuse treatment in the past year was higher than the national average" (Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality). Almost half of those were referred to rehab through the criminal justice system.

At that stop, a young Caucasian man hopped onto the bus using crutches, and I cleared a space next to me, an unspoken invitation to sit. I noticed quickly that the reason for the crutches was that his right leg had been very recently amputated below

the knee, and what was visible was a twisted mass of clean white bandages. I asked him casually what was going on with his leg, and all he said was, "diabetes." I am a nurse; it really gets the questions firing when presented with an unusual case. He was happy to divulge his medical history, but it just seemed so strange that someone so young would suffer the sequential effects of a disease that don't typically show up until much later. As he went on, he confessed to being a heavy alcohol and drug user, which really complicated things in terms of his disease process. He was quite literally falling apart, but still in decent spirits. It was alarming, and I couldn't believe he was on the bus in that condition. He continued with his story for about three more stops until it was his time to ring the bell. I was glad he confided in me and not once did he ever complain.

As if switching places, a young man with big dark eyes and closely shaved dark hair entered the bus around this time. He looked nervous and defensive. He had a hot and tough look about him, with a white "wife beater" tank, beige Dickies pants, and black Converse hi-tops. He had an air of frail confidence as he scanned the bus for

potential threats; I noticed he stopped briefly when he saw me, raised an eyebrow, and then sat down. His face was lit by the glow of his cell phone screen, highlighting the signature, beautifully defined Native cheekbones, and he tuned out. About ten minutes later, as he stopped to exit the bus, he turned back and looked right at me, as though he wanted to

memorize my face, the way a crow memorizes faces when it wants to keep tabs on someone.

The youth are watching

They're even listening too

Though it seems they're not

I watched people give up their seats for the elderly, and the pregnant, without being asked. I watched groups of teenagers explode onto the bus with raucous laughter and gossip, and get off two stops later. I witnessed the second half of the daily routine of so many people in that single ride and felt privileged, and also a little invasive. One of the most impressive themes I witnessed was that of politeness and courtesy; there was not one time when people exiting the bus didn't thank the driver. Also, if exiting from the back door, they always yelled loud enough for the driver to hear their verbal token of gratitude, "Thank you!"

This was all on my first ride into town, all in less than half an hour. I was already switching into a different mindframe upon realization that this place was very different, and yet also very much the same as where I'd boarded the plane in San Francisco. I stepped off the bus at the central station and opened my eyes to Juneau.

Downtown was about what someone would expect, full of tiny gift shops, some city central buildings, hotels and bars. I thought I'd stop in to the Triangle Club because it had the best reviews for being the friendliest place to grab a bite to eat. This bit of their historical statement also pulled me in: "The club's diverse clientele has included everybody from governors to carpetbaggers, making it an inviting 'watering hole' to

exchange tall tales and solve the world's problems." Feeling optimistic, I opened the door and felt that the whole place suddenly went quiet, with the exception of the juke box playing country music. In that moment, I felt as if I couldn't go in, and I also couldn't turn around and leave. The faces of maybe twenty-five older white men slowly turned my way with hard stares, and I know I looked like a deer in the headlights (in a bar) in that moment. I felt I'd temporarily turned to stone and forgot to breathe.

They were all hunched over the bar, mugs full of pale beer and red and white disposable food trays full of pretzels, peanuts and stale Gardetto's snacks. I quickly tried to gauge if the vibe was predatory or hostile, and just in time I heard a female voice yell from across the room with a wild waving hand, "Heyyyyyyy lady! There's one other lady in here, come over and sit with me!" I'd never felt such relief as I sat down, ordered a wrinkled hot dog off the hot rolling grill machine, and made a friend in Stephanie that I will cherish for life. We hit it off as though we were long-lost sisters, and had so many parallels in life, it was mind blowing, far beyond simple coincidence. I made sure I thanked God two times that night for that single moment. As for the men, we were quickly dismissed as they turned back to their beer and conversation, supporting the catchy phrase, "a quaint little drinking town with a fishing problem."

Two anchored women

Throw our heads back when we laugh

And stay till we're done

As beer and conversation made the time fly, I realized the last bus back was quickly approaching, so I ran back to the central station again. Feeling lost, nervous,

and breathless because it was now dark, I handed over my pack of smokes to some local boys in their twenties, who were looking for cigarettes, and asked them which route I should take. I silently prayed they wouldn't steer me wrong, and they didn't. The night ride back was quiet and somber, and the passengers were mostly solo. We all stared out the bus windows, quiet and contemplative, faces illuminated periodically by the passing street lights.

Finding yourself lost

A town where you have no name

And no direction

The closest convenience market was just across the street from the Super 8, called the Breeze-In Grocery. This was a great place to interact with the real locals, as it seemed to be the central convenience spot for that small region of Juneau, and was open 24 blessed hours. It was a real Godsend in many ways. In addition to the standard selections one might expect, there was also a large section of home-made options which surprised me because back in California, if it's not made in a factory, it's not approved for sale. I

found this very comforting and had the privilege of choosing from everything from bagels and cream cheese to salads, homemade soups and sandwiches, lovingly crafted

by someone I'd never know. After choosing a salad and a bagel to cover me for the next morning, I found myself walking around the store, unable to find the beer section, which was a little distressing. I waited patiently in line as the people in front of me obviously knew the man behind the counter, and each took the opportunity to catch up on the day's events and local gossip.

When it was my turn, I put my groceries and my elbow on the counter and felt self-conscious about having to ask where they kept the beer, so I did it in a casual, quiet and somewhat humorous tone: "Say, where'd you keep the cold ones around this place?" He replied, "You want beer? Come with me, I'll show you." He grabbed a ring full of keys and had me follow him, jingling down a narrow corridor behind the store. He opened a small door and bam! It was like the lights of Heaven shone down. I swear I heard a chorus of angels as an additional warehouse was opened before me, and there were a handful of other tired people already in there for the same thing. There were refrigerators everywhere, cases and boxes and displays, and I was shocked. It wasn't only the type of spirits that were positive; it was also watching and listening to the way people spoke to each other. There was such genuine kindness among friends and acquaintances, and even the grievances seemed lighthearted. So as not to cast a false impression that everyone is happy in Juneau, it was the way they addressed each other that was striking to me, and seemed to be the dominant social tone. In reality, they looked worn-out and pale, and the reason I knew that many were missing teeth was because they still managed to smile.

I don't know your name

But I like you and your bike

And it's dark out here

The Native population in Juneau is no stranger to the ill and far-reaching effects of alcohol, poverty, and depression. The disconnect from cultural heritage that any group experiences usually ends up in this particular rut. All of Alaska is reported to have higher rates of alcohol and drug-related deaths, and the Native population has a 50% higher incidence of abusing both with a corresponding lifetime dependency. In response to these numbers, many villages and towns have experimented with adopting policies making theirs a “dry” town, alcohol-free. In 2003, more than 100 Alaskan communities enforced alcohol restrictions, with some going “damp,” meaning they could import alcohol but could not sell it. Some opted to regulate alcohol via licenses in stores, but they have no bars in town. As time went on, and some communities reconsidered their regulations, requests for a referendum were granted, and the consequences were drastic and profound. The town of Pilot Station, for example, reported the following:

“That new freedom came with a cost,” said Abe Kelly, the Pilot Station postmaster and City Council member. “Some parents were drinking up the family's food budget,” he said, “and teenagers went to community functions drunk. The village public safety officer quit because so many people were calling for help. Two tribal village police officers were fired for drinking on the job.”

The number of sexual assault cases rose from “maybe one or less a month to sometimes three in a week,” said Alaska State Trooper Brian Miller. “Fights and beatings increased as well, as people from surrounding dry villages came to Pilot Station for booze.” (The Associate Press)

In Juneau, as an independent city, restrictions are as follows: packaged alcoholic beverages may be sold between 8:00 a.m. and 1:00 a.m., Sunday through Thursday, and between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 a.m., Friday and Saturday.

People draw the line

Can we be here and grow strong

So close to quicksand?

I wanted to know so much more about the behavior and the poverty of this enchanting area, which begins with digging into the local history for reference, especially regarding the Tlingit. "Our story starts during the last great ice age in North America over 60,000 years ago. Four Tlingit women swam under a Dangerous Glacier Ice Cavern for their people and helped found Southeast Alaska's Tlingit Nation. Our home since the beginning of human history and time has always been North America" Shoowee Ka' Eagle/Wolf Clan (Drucker).

On the south central coast near Juneau and off shore islands live the Tlingit tribe, with an estimated 10,000 members. They are still there, they are present, and they definitely contribute to society. At the same time, they are forced into finding ways to support their culture and ancestral visions in the face of American progress. Programs

such as Sealaska are helping Natives (especially the youth) to reclaim their heritage and also move forward in a world that barely supports or respects them as First People.

Day 2: I headed up the other direction to the Mendenhall Glacier. Not much to report on the locals, but I did meet a family at the bus stop while we were all stranded waiting for a broken-down bus in the rain. Under the small overhang, there sat a woman in her late fifties with her three grown children, all in their twenties. They took up the whole bench, and I resigned to the wet weather and the drive to seek some sort of rain shelter and just stood there soaked, but still up for a chat. They told me they had come all the way from Washington and California to visit her, and she was in turn bringing them to a place where they were to take the bus and hike five miles up a ridge to a cabin with no amenities. It was their version of a family reunion, and the son admitted to me that they were there mostly out of love and concern for her well-being, alone there in Juneau. The family love and concern I witnessed that day is universal, and I really enjoyed seeing them band together to care for her, and also for a shared experience. After a while, although I was wet, the conversation ran dry, and I just ended up walking on down the road.

Let's be together

And make our way up the hill

We'll take our time too

“When I reached the village of Soka in the evening, my bony shoulders were sore because of the load I had carried, which had consisted of a paper coat to keep me warm at night, a light cotton gown to wear after the bath, scanty protection against the rain, writing equipment, and gifts from certain friends of mine. I wanted to travel light of course, but there were always certain things I could not throw away for either practical or sentimental reasons” (Basho 99).

Day 3: Haines, AK, via the Alaska Marine Highway

I met Stephanie again in Haines after a four-hour ferry ride mixed with locals, college students, and tourists. Some had been on that ferry for days, starting in Bellingham, WA. There were bicycles, tents, sleeping bags, and just about every kind of person one could imagine. The really interesting people were the ones who were

working on the ferry, and a lonely college student who latched on to me via our mutual appreciation for the band Rush. He was so excited, he made me feel as if I were the only person he'd ever met with this common interest. He must have taken fifteen pictures of me, and of us together.

He also showed me multiple photos of his CD collection; it was great. I was never approached by a tourist for anything other than asking me to take pictures of them and their families, for which I almost always asked for one in return. It is a sort of unspoken traveler exchange, and maybe even Mom can be in the group photo if you ask a

stranger to take it for you. Every time I see a picture of myself from that trip, I try to remember who took it and the photos I took in return. People in general traveled in

groups of two or more, and were focused in their own family's direction. I learned very quickly that when locals see a lone lady traveler, they seize the opportunity to talk and be heard. They'll tell you everything you never really needed to know. Still, it was times like these and the variety of each situation that made these days especially memorable, in addition to the unbelievable scenery.

Haines is a peculiar little town, and I didn't know what to expect as we cruised in slowly and respectfully on the boat. I saw huge snow capped mountains and a small town dotted at the base, with a few houses among the trees. Stephanie picked me up in her rental car, and we planned to go "moosing" (driving around looking for moose) but decided to hit the tiny town first.

With a population of 2,534, the largest Haines ethnic groups are White (80.8%)

followed by two or more races (7.1%) and American Indian (6.9%); 5.1% of Haines residents live in poverty, and the median age for Haines residents is 45.6 years (Cubit Planning, Inc.). There is no cell phone service, and there are no stop lights. When the summer ends and the tourists go home, the residents are left to fend for themselves. It's

a tight-knit community, and we really felt that in the atmosphere as we visited a couple of saloons for a burger and a beer. The young girl working the bar was also seating people and helping with the cooking at times, although the place never got too crowded. No one was in a hurry, and no one was concerned about perfection or complaining. Very casual and also very friendly, the walls were covered in neon beer signs and plastered with comedic bumper stickers creating a wallpaper of dirty one liners and sticker jokes. The people who did come in while we were there addressed each other by first name. They also removed their hats when they entered the place. I believe the sun came out that day.

Visiting Chilkoot Lake with Stephanie was another highlight of many for the day in Haines. The eagles “were like pigeons,” my own father would say, gliding from tree to tree, making the most unimpressive squawking sounds. Serenity best describes the feeling there, and Stephanie caught me in a photo, during an abbreviated version of reckoning with God. After that one-sided conversation, we decided it would be a good time to go visit the Port Chilkoot Distillery, and headed back into town.

I walked to the shore

My hands were like two diamonds

In primal waters

I wondered, with such a small population, what does raising a family look like in Haines? They have everything available: school district, sports calendar with basketball games, and a spring break, just like everyone else. In the short time I spent there, I definitely experienced what a true tight-knit community feels like energetically. According to Christy Tengs Fowler from Haines, “Making it through the winter with your cohorts, I think there’s something to that. We feel that camaraderie” (Carlson). It’s also known for turning out large amounts of world- renowned art, and claims its very own spirits distillery, in a tiny wooden building with a tasting room. Haines is also home to the American Bald Eagle Foundation. For a tiny town, there was a lot going on. It was very much alive.

Catching the last ferry back to Juneau was an ordeal since the dock had some structural issues, and it seemed completely covered in orange plastic netting. Too tired to be concerned, I waited patiently for a long time in line with everyone else, as Stephanie left me there and continued her journey in her rental car. A small group of long-bearded, older men spent their day fishing, and entertained the line by showing us their catch in giant Coleman coolers. Exhausted and satisfied, I boarded the ferry on foot and waited for the cars to do the same on wheels. I found a seat and waited for the boat to leave the dock. The energy of the bustle was different than the morning, highlighting the difference between groups of people beginning their day as opposed to people at the end.

As the sun began to set, the great Alaskan scenery was too beautiful to view through chipped and dirty windows, and I decided to go out to the deck for an

unobstructed view. That lasted about five minutes before another ferry deck-hand pulled me aside in conversation, but outside in the blasting wind. He wanted to vent about the perils of raising teenagers and also the politics of being in that job, and an eighty-four-hour work week. He was intense and had leathery skin from the toll of years of the Alaskan elements. He could have come across as angry, but I sensed it was situational, and he treated me as though I were a temporary source of comfort in his cold and industrial day. Our voices were raised to high volumes in strong competition with the rumble of the engines, and the wind was fierce as the sun was setting, *and* we were on a huge ferry on a marine highway. Even in that wind, I caught a glimpse of the welling up of tears in his heavy eyes as he reflected on his loved ones in the not-too-distant past. He had two sons who had both been in and out of jail, but both were enrolled now in the local college. The older one turned out to find his inner strength in mathematics, the other in the beginning stages of raising a family. I finally signed off, as I was wind-whipped and my hair was never going to forgive me for going outside in those conditions. Yet, I felt honored that he confided in me, and the conversation was worth the chill. I went back inside the boat with a renewed sense of hope for my own struggling family.

Inside the cabin, I joined the line of people wanting something for

dinner. The giant sizzling grill was working at full capacity and was attended to by three

oversized cooks covered in white aprons, acne, and sweat. I remember thinking that this scene was something straight out of a 1980s John Hughes movie, but in real life. I kept my order simple and deep fried (because hot oil will kill anything) and ordered large fries and chocolate milk. The dining area was packed, and I was beginning to feel sad because I was low on energy and couldn't find a place to sit, or any ketchup for my fries. An older lady walked past with a hamburger, and I decided to ask her where the ketchup was. She kindly led me there and offered me a seat at the table where she and her husband were sitting.

Her name was Eileen, and she and her husband Jim were just returning from some extended trip and were relieved to be returning home to Juneau. She was petite, and her appearance was very tidy, with a lovely, dainty smile. Jim's demeanor and style reminded me of Bob Barker, well-groomed, good style with a slight air of arrogance. His teeth were as white and groomed as his hair, and when he smiled, it was hard to focus on what he was saying. I imagined them as a model couple from 1950s TV show. We started up a casual conversation about our travels, and Eileen was shocked that I was traveling alone. She became fiercely inquisitive over a short span of time. Jim was polite but clearly disinterested in my story, and I was glad about that. However, Eileen wanted to know every detail of my stay, including how many times I checked in with my own mother over the course of my trip, and who knew my constant whereabouts. She wanted to know where I was staying, what time I would get there, and when I would be leaving. I was so tired at this point that I just answered all her questions one by one, without reservation, and in doing so, she became very worried for my safety. She tried

convincing me to stay with them, and pestered Jim about taking me up over the glacier in his single-engine plane. He kept telling her no, but she wasn't listening, and Jim became a little frustrated. I was flattered but also beginning to feel a little crowded by her concern, so I agreed to exchange cell phone numbers with Eileen, and check in via text message when I arrived here and there for the remainder of my stay. It was reminiscent of the scene in the movie *Into the Wild*, when Chris McCandless meets "Ronald Franz." I thanked them for the space they provided and signed off and found an empty seat on the second deck, indoors. My head felt heavy.

"With this poem to commemorate my departure, I walked forth on my journey, but lingering thoughts made my steps heavy. My friends stood in a line and waved goodbye as long as they could see my back" (Basho 99).

Thank you for the chair

I'm sorry you are lonely

I am alone too

Four hours later, the ferry delivered me back to Juneau, where I got back on the bus and reached the Nugget stop. I slowly made my way across the dark parking lot back to the Super 8, but not before a quick stop at the Breeze-In for a quick chat with my buddy at the register with the giant ring of keys. As it turned out, he had taken me in the back way to the beer warehouse the first time, but the main entrance was easily accessible to the public from the back side of the building, deflating my sense of being privy to some underground Juneau secret. I grabbed some chili from the homemade section and two tall cans of Old Speckled Hen, and made my way back to my room. I

checked in with my mom, I checked in with Eileen, and I checked in with Facebook, as I found it very grounding to be so close but so far from friends. It was one of the most expansive days of my life.

The next day was devoted to moving slowly and keeping the energy levels low. I decided to really take in my surroundings and come to some conclusions about what people seem to value in Juneau. I put on my backpack, headed for the Nugget as if it were second nature, and caught the bus again with a different mindset. By this time, people around recognized me, which earned me a smile, a nod, or nothing.

Repetition is the cure for suspicion, I learned. The girls at the Flying Squirrel learned that I was a good tipper and like to crack jokes. As a result, my drinks kept getting better, with extra whipped cream or an extra shot of espresso.

“Here, for the first time, my mind was able to gain a certain balance and composure, no longer a victim to pestering anxiety, so it was with a mild sense of detachment that I thought about the ancient traveller who had passed through this gate with a burning desire to write home” (Basho 105).

From a bus window, one sees that a muck boot sale, for example, or some very heavy duty carpeting could make a big difference in that environment.

As far as ammo, I don't know what they were shooting up there, and decided it was best to leave that a mystery. There wasn't much activity in this area, and the busiest stops were at the Walmart and also the Fred Meyer Grocery, where each place offered more than enough of everything. I decided that Fred Meyer would be my best bet for one-stop shopping for the few things I was running low on.

That morning I'd received a check-in call from Eileen. She wondered how I was doing for food, and if I'd checked in with my family. I told her that I'd take care of my needs at Fred Meyer, which was kind of a mistake, since she insisted that I call her once I arrived there. I called her and waited about twenty minutes for her to arrive. When she finally did, we ended up walking around the store together while she shopped. I think she just wanted the company. I repeatedly refused her offers to buy me extra food because I didn't really want to carry a half gallon of milk on my back all day. There was still a lot of walking to do. I helped her to the car with her groceries, gave her a hug, made promises of safety and common sense, and headed back to the bus stop.

This time was more intense. There were quite a few men there; one was missing parts of his face, including his nose, and a couple of others were passed out and propped up either on the bus shelter or on a billboard post close by. I realized it was still early in the day and that waking up for them might be a hard continuation of the night before. An older couple hobbled up to the stop, and I gave them the seat, leaving me closer and more vulnerable to the others. It was about this time that I realized the value of (a.) sunglasses, (b.) noise-cancelling earbuds and (c.) eating individually wrapped candy or pistachios makes you look busy. The man with the missing nose woke up

slowly and hopped to his feet with an intense aggression and looked around as though there was a span of time missing from his memory that he was trying desperately to reclaim. He became agitated, and due to his physical appearance, I figured his temper had led to dire consequences in the past. He was about 6'3", solid, a Native man with jet black wavy hair, but his face scared me, and I knew it was time to leave. I was a stranger there and felt very aware of it. I scanned the other people at the stop to judge their fear level based on their facial expressions, but nothing; no one even looked his way. They just looked on as if the best thing were to avoid engaging with him. The other two sleepers were also slowly arousing to the sun, and the energy changed. I decided that I'd walk a large section of that trip between bus stops instead. This turned out to be a better option because I crossed the bridge on foot and looked over to see the salmon, walked slowly past the hanging gardens instead of paying \$30 to go in, and also spotted

an Alaskan dog walker, dutifully obeying the speed limit.

I was no longer feeling as light-hearted about my surroundings, as the weight of people and experience was beginning to cling to me through my recent memories, weighing me down. I was still enthusiastic and happy, but when reality strikes while one is on "vacation," there is definitely a set of mixed emotions called into play.

I ventured into town to play the tourist role for the day, buying gifts, visiting the Alaskan Brewery to buy t-shirts and pint glasses. “Buy our gifts, not made in China! made by local legends, handcrafts made by local natives, whale bone, real seal fur, family owned, happy hour, boat tours, fresh fish, Russian dumplings, fjord cruises...” the persuasive list of purchasing options went on and on.

Convincing the merchants here and there that I *didn't* just get off one of the cruise ships was challenging, but earned me the privilege of eye contact and bonus conversation: “You’re staying at the Super 8? Why? You’re by *yourself*? Why?” I kept

wondering why everyone seemed so afraid, which also caused me to wonder why I wasn't afraid. I just wasn't; it never seemed like an option.

I was very hungry, so I walked back down to the dock to a Russian hole-in-the-wall consisting of five tables and two giant kettles from which I could order potato or beef dumplings, a free slice of rye bread and a soda. It was truly one of the best things I've ever eaten, in a styrofoam container with a plastic spoon. I decided to text Stephanie and check in with her.

Stephanie was back in Juneau from Haines for the day, and we decided to meet up one last time. I was very happy about that, since the solitude was beginning to grow loud in my head. We walked along the dock and witnessed the wondrous procession of a cruise ship entering the harbor, and the spilling of people flooding out of the exits, reminding me of an ant colony disturbed by water. The day walk on the dock, the smell

of sulfur, tar, and fishermen are things I still remember vividly. A sea of wide-eyed and confused-looking tourists emerged from the back and front as they took over the town like a slow impending mudslide. An eagle, perched high on a pole, was watching them

too.

As we leaned over the rail of the dock, we stared at the fishermen giving a sly wink, as if we were local gals. “You ladies from the boat?”

“Nope, we just wanted to check out your fish!”

“Nothin’ today, ladies, come back tomorrow!” and

we casually made our way back to the street and tried our best to disassociate ourselves from the flood of real tourists the locals would barely nod at. We were having fun and being a little snotty due to bypassing the deluxe life of the cruise experience. In between the ships, Stephanie and I walked along the dock, curious about what might be at the end. There was a restaurant there but we took one look at the menu and the prices and turned around to head back to the Red Dog Saloon for a cold beer and a warm laugh. That was the last time I saw her. I have always been so thankful for that shared experience; even though I went there alone, so did she. I believe the stars and her wild waving hand brought us together. Time is a bittersweet miracle.

Appreciation?

Still searching for the right words

A simple thank you

I decided to head back, and caught the bus at the main terminal. This one had more tourists on it, probably heading to and from the glacier from the ship. As the sun was going down, and the bus was beginning to empty, I noticed a young person was passed out on one of the triple seats reserved for the disabled. No one was helping; they just looked on. Upon closer look, I recognized him as the young Native boy who'd stared me down on the first day. I got up and sat next to him and shook his shoulder until he awoke. "Hey, man. Hey, wake up, you're gonna miss your stop." At this point, I had no idea what his reaction would be to me, of all people, being the one to prop him up, but something inside told me to do exactly what I was doing. As he awoke and opened his eyes and saw me, there was a quick moment of, "Uh oh, what do I do? Is he going to hit me or what?" Instead, he smiled at me in a daze, with a sense of vague familiarity, and heroin I guessed. I said he could lean on me until his stop. We did not speak, I simply propped him up, and he stumbled off the bus four stops later. We never spoke a word. Like a local, I didn't allow myself to worry about him. I did what I could.

I got off the bus and went straight to my room. My boots had done their job for the day and were rubbing my feet the wrong way. About an hour later, I developed a fierce craving for french fries, and the closest option to the Super 8 just happened to be a McDonalds. I gathered myself together, waited in an extremely long line, and walked out with my food. I was headed to the Breeze-In for refreshments when I saw my Native friend again, sitting on a parking curb with his face in his hands. I said, "You want some food or something? I'll buy you a burger." He shook his head no. His only response

through bloodshot and swollen eyes was, “Can you give me a ride into town?” To which I replied, “Man, I met you on the *bus*.”

The Last Day: I was bound and determined to make my last day a big one, so I decided, based on the name, that I’d conquer the Perseverance Trail. I visited the Super 8 breakfast extravaganza that had faithfully served me every morning, continental style. Since it was the last day, it was also the last morning that I’d be catching the bus outside of the Nugget. The sun even came out for a minute as if to sign off with me, then disappeared behind the safety of the clouds again. I looked down at the pavement with a strange familiarity and fondness at the same cigarette butts that had greeted me on my first day, and the McDonalds cups that had been repeatedly flattened in the road by passing cars. Nothing had traveled very far.

I decided I would take the bus to the foot of the Perseverance Trail right outside of downtown. With only a phone screenshot to pull me in that direction, I checked in with a few locals to get a real sense of what I was headed for. The distance on the map was only three and a half miles one way, but was also graded “strenuous.” I decided to go

for it in spite of warnings that some summer rain had washed away parts of the trail, making it moderately dangerous. “We lost a traveler off one of the cliffs just last week!” a convenience store clerk casually warned me. “I wouldn’t recommend it, but if you go,

it'll be worth the climb." I calculated that from the bus stop and back, the total trip would be about 11 miles, which seems fine when you're not in a hurry, and it's your last day in Alaska.

Among the majestic landscape and all the breathtaking beauty the trail had to offer, the constant rain was something to contend with, but I brought a decent rain jacket. About halfway up, there was the Last Chance Mining Museum perched high on the hill. It was large and dimly lit, tucked away in the green mountainside. I was surprised to find a glowing red and blue neon sign in the old window, "OPEN." I was wet and hoping for a little shelter in which I could regroup and carry on. I approached the main door, but not before facing off with the guard dog. He looked at me once out of the corner of his eye, gave me a muffled and half-hearted "grumpf" sound, and turned away, as though he were off-duty and couldn't be bothered by trespassers. I told him, out loud through a chuckle, "Pfft, you don't scare me!" and walked on past. I considered him a local too.

The museum was empty. In fact, I hadn't seen anyone so far on the trail at all. I yelled, "Hello!" and listened to my voice ricochet off the walls and old rusted mining equipment. After about three tries, a woman about my age came down the wooden stairs from a makeshift office area, wrapped in

an oversized brown sweater. She looked as though I'd awoken her from hibernation. She appeared old for her age and a little annoyed. I kept thinking how striking it was that this lady and that dog spent their days up here in isolation, and wondered if she chose that life because she disliked people. I said, "I just wanted to let you know I am here, so I didn't surprise you." She gave me a nod and parked herself at the counter in case I wanted to buy anything. I took a stroll around the museum and familiarized myself with the history and plight of the Alaskan miner, and really enjoyed their poetry and songs. I could also sense that she really wanted to go back upstairs, so I cut my visit short and headed for the end of the trail where I knew there was a bridge.

"Have you seen the bridge?

I ain't seen the bridge!

*Where's that confounded bridge?"*¹

There was only one problem: the "confounded bridge" was underwater.

Left foot chases right

Because my feet know the way

My mind can wander

As a person who believes that just about everything is a sign, I surrendered to that fact that even though I was already pretty soaked

¹ Led Zeppelin - "The Crunge"

from the waist down, crossing the bridge was going to result in being colder and more wet, so with a loud sigh I made my way back down the hill...but not before a quick selfie at the top.

As I slowly made my way back down, I stopped along the way to pick berries and look for fish in the stream, and do silly things like that. Feeling my fingers

touch the leaves and the dirt and the trees, I imagined that Native hands 10,000 years ago felt the same textures and tasted the same fruit. I imagined the sounds I was hearing at that moment had also been heard by ancient ears as part of the soundscape of daily life, not through the ears of a woman who was unknowingly in the process of self-discovery through their environment.

When I made it down to the main parking lot where people could park and catch the trail halfway up, I took my shoes off, sat on a fallen tree, and had a good cry. I remember texting Stephanie to let her know that I was having a rough time, just in case she was having one too. The place was empty anyway, and all I could hear were thousands of birds singing at the top of their tiny lungs as soon as the rain let up, and the constant, thunderous pounding of waterfalls and rushing streams. I didn't *want* the rain to stop. I didn't *want* to go home where everything seems so gagged and bound by rules, so compressed and chaotic. I knew just as well that the time had come to say goodbye to the trail and go back to the hard

road, because the contrast is what makes each one unique and special. My logical self kicked in and shoved the emotional self to the side, inner tantrum subsided.

Cheeks red, eyes red too

Tears are the salt of the earth

They water her roots

I didn't meet anyone new that day; I didn't count the museum lady. I'm sure that energetically I lacked the capacity to take on another new conversation with a stranger; my tank was empty. I headed into a dark Irish-themed bar, and sat alone at a two-person table under a neon lucky clover in the back corner, and did some processing over a couple of pints of Guinness. There never seems to be a table for less than two people; otherwise they sit you in a line at the bar where no one faces each other.

I walked back to the main bus terminal without a second thought, made my way back to the Nugget, and made one last stop at the Breeze-In. I didn't officially sign off with the clerk, but I did in my mind. I went back to the Super 8 and packed my bags early since my flight shuttle was expecting me at 4 AM.

The shuttle was delayed a bit since three men had won the fishing derby and had huge boxes of frozen halibut to be loaded into the van. It was a nice distraction from the fact that I was leaving. The flight itself consisted of Hunter S. Thompson journals to keep my mind distracted by dark humor, and free Cokes and pretzels. It also helped that the arrival plan included picking up my car in Oakland and driving to San Jose to meet my sister for the Rush 40-year anniversary tour concert. That was a very big day for me, one I'll never forget.

Upon reflection, it's interesting how many people assumed that since we met, we should stay in touch and continue the journey together somehow. Dave from Flagstaff on the fjord cruise, who complained about the lack of fresh fruit, was on my mind as I remember avoiding his text messages while I was walking through Fred Meyer. He felt like a weight at a time when I was supposed to feel weightless. Compelled by manners to respond, my final text to him included this photo from the grocery section, accompanied by a polite sign-off. Sorry Dave, I'd be gone before any fresh produce made it to Juneau.

Every new person you meet opens a new part of you, whether big or small. These experiences take residence in your memory if you're willing to be a good listener. It also takes a lot of energy and you have to protect yourself from dead weights and negativity, because people come in all flavors. Discernment is the most useful tool a person can utilize in these circumstances.

In a world filled with land, sea, history, culture and people, the best way to feed the desire to learn about the beautiful diversity of humanity is to fully immerse oneself in various environments. Take the opportunity to breathe the same air, feel the same heat, feel the same wind, witness the same sunrise and sunset, and hear the voices of different people. In return, they'll benefit from meeting you too.

Stephanie and I at Chilkoot Lake, Haines, AK

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