

El Ombligo del Mundo

Everyday life in the navel of the world

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Te Pito O Te Henua

The story goes something like this. Long ago, upon the realization that their native island Hiva was drowning, king Hotu Matu'a convened his people to tell them they would leave their land in search of a safer future. That same night, adviser to the king Hau Maka had a dream of a faraway, fertile land, a remote paradise that was to be their people's new residence. The adviser was so convincing that Hotu Matu'a sent his two sons and five other explorers to search the Pacific for this promised land.

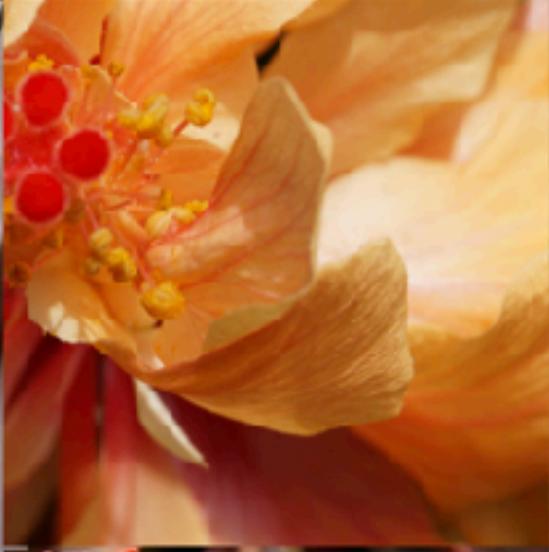
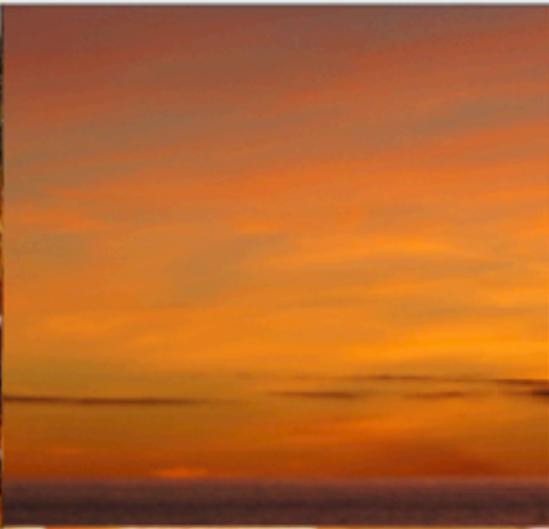
Following the flight of birds, the ocean currents and their ancestors' whispers, they sailed for weeks against the wind. One morning, after sailing thousands of kilometers, the seven explorers found Rapa Nui, the remotest island in the world. Barely at the edge of what we now call Polynesia, it was a paradise that promised a new beginning. It perfectly matched Hau Maka's dream, so they sailed back to Hiva to gather their people and belongings. When they returned to Rapa Nui and settled this uninhabited land, they couldn't but nickname it *Te Pito O Te Henua*—the navel of the world.

Apparently, Rapa Nui is not the only remote island to have picked this nickname. But it is factually the remotest inhabited island in the world. There only two connecting flights to it, one from Santiago de Chile (Chile) and one from Papeete (Tahiti)—both around 4000km away. It takes weeks for a cargo ship to arrive to the island. The only visible firm land from the island is the moon.

The name is exquisitely appropriate, descriptive both of geographical facts and physical experiences in the island. For my birthday, I was gifted a book that taught me Rapa Nui is located within the South Pacific Subtropical Gyre. This is a circled ocean current that runs counterclockwise in the lower Pacific Ocean. The gyre is made up of four great ocean currents, which respond to the general circulation of surface winds in the region. It looks like a circle. Rapa Nui is at its very center.

One morning I was sharing some coast-wind and sunlight with a friend. We noticed that the clouds above seemed to be in the midst of a great migration. Small and bigger souls floated north, cloud families of adults and children and grandchildren, differing only in size and closeness to one another. As I started drifting, I turned my head and realized that the clouds did not keep north forever. Instead, they later circled east, and then south, and then west. And then north again. The prodigious exodus was circular. And we were at its center.

Everyday, as I walk through the street *Te Pito O Te Henua*, I dream of tying a balloon to my backpack and floating up and above. I wonder how long it would take for the navel to disappear, how long it would take me to see anything that wasn't blue.



Blush

My very first day in the island, the sunset was magical. It was so intensely pink-orange beautiful that it made me blush. I felt myself *literally* blush, my flesh attempting to emulate the splendor it witnessed. It was as if the sunset was a gift from someone I suspected to be in love with me or I with them. My suspicion of being happy-in love with life got stronger, as did the suspicion that the feeling could be mutual.

I have not worn any blush since I got to the island. I did not bring any, to be sure, but the price tag of anything within the only pharmacy of the island ensured I wouldn't. Everything is extremely expensive here, which makes sense given that we are so remote. The cost of cargoship transportation makes even the smallest of things, like razors, triple in cost compared to the continent. In many ways, this is a hardship. But in many others, it works wonders. I have washed my short hair with soap for months now and I don't even have to brush it.

I made an early commitment to watching the sunset every day I could, over the water. I certainly did not keep the commitment, but I have been trying to go to the east coast as much as possible to do so. Not everyday is as pink-orange beautiful as that first time, but from time to time it is. And, regardless, everyday the clouds are different and they set up the stage differently for the final piece of the sun's dance each day.

One day, I was in *Anakai Tangata*, a cave known and popular for its mysterious name and stories surrounding cannibalism, and I saw the most interesting of the sunsets. From this viewpoint about 30 meters above sea level, I watched the sun slowly descend. And when it was about 5 minutes away from the cover of the sea, a raging storm fell upon me. The sun over the horizon was still intact. In the next 4 minutes, the storm shifted to my right and front so that it hovered in the line of the horizon, to the right of the sunset. What ensued was a mind blowing separation of color. An intangible yet visible line separated the yellows and oranges and pinks and blues of the sea on the left, sharply from a black and white facsimile that replaced the sun with a curtain of rain.



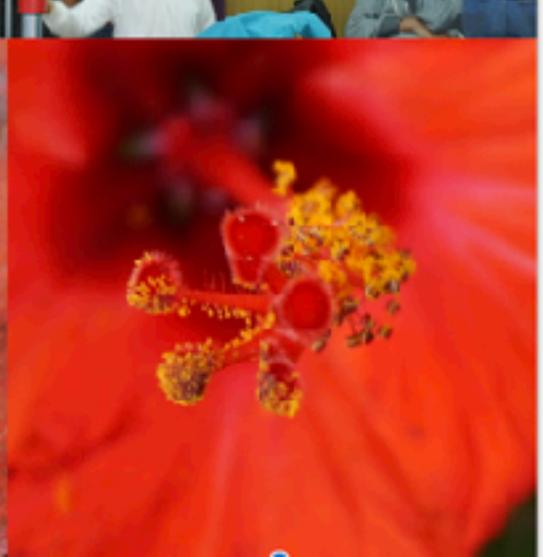
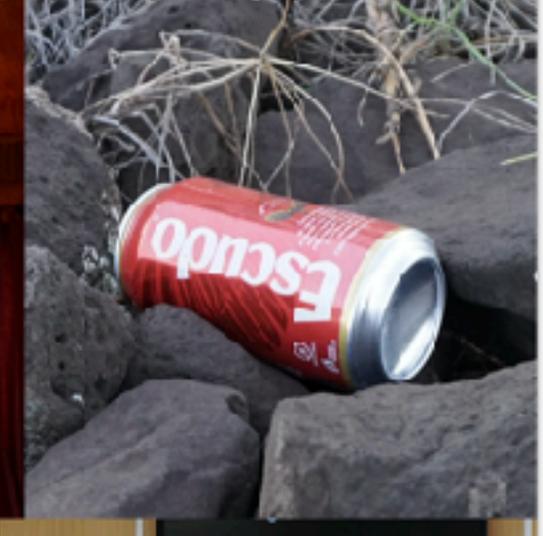
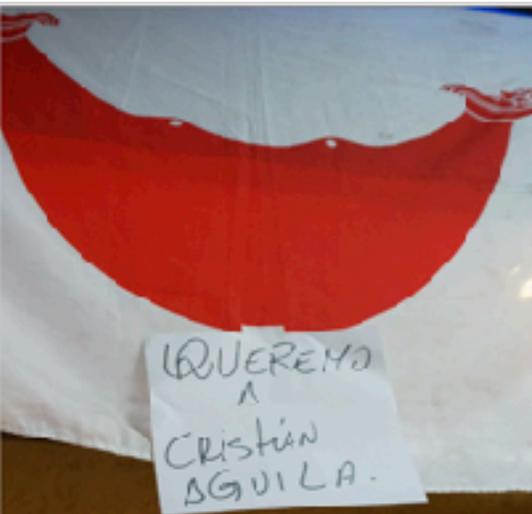
\$100

During my first weeks in the island, as I searched for a place to live, I came across a woman by the name of Jackeline Rapu Tuki. Her face was sprinkled with wrinkles, the kind that only a cherished few acquire from too much smiling. Her face shape was traditionally Rapa Nui—polynesian lines strengthened with a specific ratio from the nose to the corners of the mouth—but her skin tone and eyebrows betrayed the Nordic genes left by a Norwegian adventurer in the 60s.

When I first met Jackeline, I noticed a perfectly placed hundred dollar bill peeking from the center of her colorful bra. The one-zero-zero in that immediately recognizable, mighty American green was the only visible part of the paper growing out of her breast. I thought it was a social cue signaling power, or class. And her demeanor was that of a matriarch. The combination intimidated me. Maybe this was an ornament linked to some kind of mafia. That day, I approached her with nervous deference.

I told her I was interested in learning about Rapa Nui contemporary art and culture, especially in relation to the February Tapati festival preparations. I had heard that her family was one of the ‘artistic’ families of the island. She was elated; she told me her clan was indeed the one that championed the ancestral Rapanui arts most passionately, and her family had won the Tapati every year for decades now. But her excitement was fueled even more because she was in need of help—she was the mother of Vai, one of the two female candidates for *Uka*, or queen, of the Tapati 2018. Her house had already become a workshop and central hub for all that the Tapati entailed, even though the competition was more than 5 months away. This, I learned, was standard Rapanui timing for preparations to start gathering full force. Both families had started working on preparations, including costumes, sculptures, original songs, and dances, in March, right after the previous Tapati finished.

The day of that first encounter, she invited me to stay for lunch at her *taupea*, outside of her house, along with about 15 of her relatives and friends. I ate in silence as, when I attempted to make a contribution or two, they were not successful. My native Spanish was perfectly functional. But for much of the conversation the rhythm of the jokes and dialogues was still too foreign for me to converse at ease. After lunch, I was guided to the *pae pae*, the workshop next to her house where the costumes for the Tapati were made. A makeshift structure, made out of tree trunks and tin sheets as roof, it was decorated with purple sheets and with fake soccer field grass and children's carpets (with animals and shapes and colors) as floors. Little did I know that this *pae pae* would become the center of my world, the backdrop of most of my laughter and cries as I sailed the cosmos on a tiny island in the Pacific. When I left the *pae pae* that day, all I could think of was the magnificent placement of that 100 dollar bill.



Untitled

In Spanish, the expression “se mira el ombligo” is a descriptor for someone who is self-obsessed. It literally translates into “navel-watcher.” A navel-watcher is so obsessed with themselves that they can’t see past their own navel. Chileans’ descriptions of Rapanui people sometimes closely resemble this negative descriptor. Even Chileans who live in the island are frequently heard saying that Rapanui people tend to be self-centered, selfish, always protesting and trying to rip off the Chilean government; “Rapas” only focused on themselves.

Most Rapanui people in the island feel a real pride for being Rapanui. They refer to themselves as a *cultura vivida*, a “lived” culture, tangible in the way people communicate, celebrate, and mourn. Many Rapanui people have told me theirs is the best culture in the world: the wisest, the most beautiful, the most special. The way they express and value themselves is perhaps most visible during the Tapati, during which all kinds of ancestral and modern Rapanui customs, artforms, and wisdom is shared. Every year, people from all over Polynesia and the world fly to the island to witness this mega-scale show. It is supposed to be a global stage for Rapanui values.

A Rapanui concept with no translation in Spanish or English, *umanga* is a word that encapsulates concepts such as 'love', 'solidarity', 'community', and 'power' without really meaning any of these. It basically describes the opposite of individualism, and the inherent power in it. I guess you could say it is "the power of acting in community", but it is much more complex than that. It's something as simple as a neighbor going up the volcano to cut up wood to be able to cook, and bringing down enough for the whole block. I experience *umanga* with the family that I live with, especially as we prepared the 1000s of costumes, sculptures, artifacts for the Tapati. The extended family and community would come over everyday to help out, with no more incentive than hanging and helping out, sharing coffee and conversation.

Funerals in the island provide a stage for *umanga*, with every family in the community bringing food and decorations to throw a days-long feast celebrating the life and power of the deceased. During the funeral of Tío Marcos, Jackeline’s brother, the focus was on remembrance and unity. While there was a time for grief and tears, the point was to provide Marcos’ family and the community with the kind of energy that he was known for—ancestral, jubilant, artistic, proud. Hundreds of people brought food, flowers and pictures to adorn Marcos’ coffin and grave. Dozens more brought musical instruments and speakers, and there was music, including songs that Marcos had written, playing for the entirety of the day. People were comforting each other, feeding each other, holding each other, singing to each other, dancing with each other.

Umanga is most palpable everytime there is a *curanto* - a traditional Rapanui way of celebrating events, consisting of a barbeque-style banquet, in which the meat is cooked in a hole in the ground, over which plantain leaves and hot stones are laid. Sometimes island-wide *curantos* are thrown by a single family, and these feasts are open to everyone, literally everyone, in the island—including Rapanuis, Chileans, tourists—all of whom are fed humongous pieces of meat and potatoes and plantains and sweets completely for free. I have seen one family feed around 5000 people, and do it gracefully and gratefully. Chileans *love* curantos.



E • Arreglar.
 F • País de América del Sur.
 G • Natural de Lorena, provincia de Francia.
 H • Claridad en el razonamiento y en las expresiones.
 I • Que vive modestamente.
 J • Imputará a uno algún delito.
 K • Miembros de la masonería.
 L • Ciudad de Venezuela, capital del estado Aragua.
 M • Pieza saliente en la proa de las embarcaciones.
 N • Cerros de combate.
 O • Alemán, germano.
 P • Estereofónico.
 Q • Araña grande para alumbrar. **LA-TEU**
 R • Rompimiento de relaciones.



Meremereando

Mere mere is a crucial task for a family that wants to win the Tapati. Separating the chicken feathers, once already washed and dried, is done by size. This is an arduous job. To do it well, one has to grab a handful of feathers, spread it across a table and then use one's trained eyes and hands to match similarly sized ones. One can use the length of the stems of the feathers as a guide. The matched feathers will later be tied around strings to make *maro*, parts of women's skirts which flow around women like waves as they move their waists. While separating the feathers, one also has to be considerate for the future and group those that are too small in their own container, as well as those that are too big for the task at hand. Both the bigger and the smaller could and will probably be used in future costumes or accessories.

The *mere mere* process was the first I was asked/allowed to participate in, and it was a pleasantly repetitive one. After a few weeks, my eyesight was sharpened for the job, and it became easier to quickly group the feathers. It felt similar to playing i-spy as a kid. I fantasized for a couple days of coming up with an engineering solution, something taking advantage of gravity and the slight differences in weight to shorten the amount of time it took. I also fantasized with getting an engineering degree. But then I realized that A) somehow the essence of *mere mere* as a Rapanui tradition included the detail-orientation and the dedication inherent in handling each of the potential feathers one by one, and choosing which ones would make it to the stage, also one by one; and that B) I was dreaming of coming up with a solution, not dreaming about solutions, and thus came up with no solutions.

Mere mere is considered a more "beginner" skill than making *maro* is. Each *maro* is made of a string, to which concentric circles of feathers from the *mere mere* process are tied, one by one. Each *maro* has hundreds of feathers. Each skirt takes between 10 and 16 *maro*, depending on waist size. Most people take about 30-40 minutes to make one *maro*. The most skilled and fastest *maro*-making woman I met, nicknamed "La Máquina" ("The Machine") had a record of 12 minutes.

I first witnessed *maro*-making as I fed my *mere mere* to La Máquina. I watched in silence but with great attention. Some of the women around her relished on their final products, and on their own record times. Others, older women, lamented that they never moved up from the *mere mere* stage, and that only their older sisters had good enough fine motricity to be trusted with the *maro*.

After a week of doing *mere mere*, the women allowed me to do a *maro* to try out my luck. It turned out that I was actually quite good at it; my almost neurotic detail-orientation and my pride for doing things well and fast got their attention and they celebrated my first *maro* almost as if it had been a first-born child. From then on, I did *maro* every single day for five months. Sometimes, I would be paired with La Máquina on a table so that we could motivate each other to see who made more *maro* in less time. She won almost every time; I was the one getting the coffee. That was the beginning of my immersion into a universe of chicken feathers, Tapati gossip, family drama, food, and Turkish telenovelas.

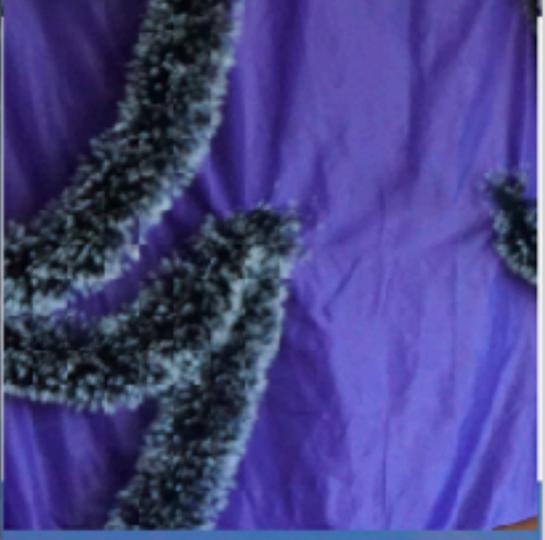


The Passage of Time

Before I left to Rapa Nui, I wanted to get a watch. There were weeks when I day-dreamt of a self-designed wooden one, whose fine needles would be comforting and compassionate as they pillowed anxieties and reminded me that the length of the second stays the same no matter how nice or horrific I could feel. I forgot to get it, and landed on the island watch-less.

Living in the island without a watch turned out to be a non-issue, as I became used to other parameters of constancy. The crowing of the hens and cocks every morning has been the opening number of my days, which usually end with a barking match by the neighborhood dogs at around 12.30am. I can generally tell its either 10am or 1pm when I hear or see the daily plane. Throughout the day, the church bells—which can be heard from anywhere in town— clearly remind me that time is passing, and that I could have been confessed and saved during the last 60 minutes.

Every evening, at around 7pm I begin to hear the orchestra of drums, slightly distant but sharp. The *kari kari* show, “the cultural ballet of Rapa Nui”, plays on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at 8pm, a couple of houses away. I was already acquainted with the schedule of their drum show before I finally went to see it 2 months after arriving— I had cooked countless dinners to its soundtrack. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays a different show, *Varu’a O*, plays their pieces, also elevated by drums. On Sundays I don't know who it is that plays, but some spirits bang around those drums 7 days a week. At first I would sharply notice the drums and wonder if I would be able to concentrate on anything until the show was done. But after a few weeks the beat started to blend into the collective familiarity that enveloped me without having to acknowledge it. After watching the show and seeing those beautiful people move their bodies to the sound I had dwelled in superficially before, I came to hear the beating as more in tune with my heart’s.



Jackeline

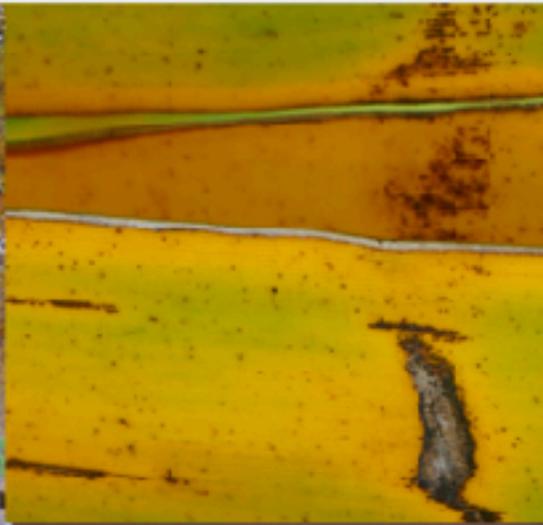
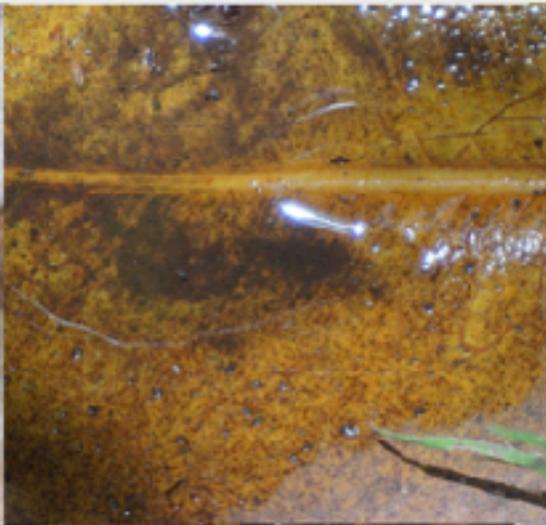
I have developed a very close friendship with Jaqueline. She is in her 60s, and she jokes with people that I am her adoptive daughter, the final addition to her 7-kid family. I moved to a little cabin she has on her lot. We do all kinds of things together. I help her communicate in English with tourists that stay in her other cabins, and used to invite them to share in the Tapati preparations. I use my computer to help her type up all kinds of educational materials in Rapanui. (She used to be the Principal of the island's elementary school, and at one point the Head of Education in the island. Then she got in a fight with the Mayor because she didn't want to go out with him, so he fired her). I teach her how to use Airbnb and Booking, and she teaches me about the way the island was when she grew up, when no plane had ever landed in the remotest place on earth. Sometimes we fold sheets and clean bathrooms side by side, and plan trips to Tahiti together which will never take place.

We laugh at the absurdities of life. We take tourists to the disco at night. We gossip about how her partner is jealous of her dog. We laugh to the point of tears when we finally agree that we can still claim to be dieting if we eat up to five fried dough pastries, but without the caramel topping.

Jaqueline Rapu is the least manipulative person I have ever met. This makes her naive at times. But it also makes her most lovable. Her idiosyncrasies include that she repeats what other people say immediately after they say it. She forgets too many things, including tourists at the airport, rice in the pot, and her youngest kid at the hospital. When I asked her what she loved most (so I could get her a nice birthday present) she told me that she loves "life and dancing and singing and people and church and flowers and colors and making things and building houses and painting walls and her grandchildren." She is the definition of "una persona dispersa" (a dispersed person). She's late to basically everything. She is an extremely hard worker. She hates weed. She can sleep for 4 hours and be ready for a full day of cleaning and attending and dancing and cooking and moving tables and refrigerators. Her hair changes from broom-like to stylishly church-done and back in the span of a few hours.

Six months after our initial encounter where I thought I had to be careful around her because of a possible mafia connection, Jaqueline has become an example for me of Fromm's notion that loving is an art, and that someone who loves gives "that which is alive in him; he gives him of his joy, of his interest, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humor, of his sadness". In her giving of her aliveness, Jackeline enriches people's lives by enhancing their sense of life.

One time I read that, in response to a fan letter asking him about bringing a baby into a world that seemed to be falling apart, Vonnegut replied that what made being alive almost worthwhile was the saints he had met. By saints, he meant people who kept their decency in the midst of a strikingly indecent situations or societies. Jackeline also keeps her impeccable sense of humor.



A Day In The Life

It was a Saturday, so that meant that the whole extended family would be coming over the plot to make *maro*, clean plantain trunks, and eat. This meant that if I opened the curtains of the single window in my cabin, I would be signaling my presence. I had woken up feeling off — intrusive yet wanted, unneeded yet expected, accepted yet disconcerting. I spent the morning clearing my self-made guilts by creating a very sweet video from the pictures, videos, and audio I had gathered at the funeral of Tío Marcos. I thought it was still the morning until I went outside to ask for his birthdate and realized that it was 4pm. I hadn't joined them for lunch, hadn't joined them for *maro*, for conversation, or drama, like I had done every other Saturday. I went in to the *pae pae* and nervously showed the video. They really liked it and told me that my pictures were wonderful and that I had a “good eye”. But then, unsurprisingly, Vai was upset and others were commenting on it, and surprisingly, one of the dogs seemed to have eaten poison and was being given milk and the other dogs were howling as everyone tried to figure out who the culprit was.

It was the usual amount of stimuli but too much for me that day, so I walked into the wife of Jackeline's house to finish and export the video. The internet was working well for the first time in weeks, so I found myself spending hours looking at undergraduate and graduate programs for engineering in Buenos Aires. This didn't make much sense but came out of the illusion that engineers “are presented with problems, solve them on their own, and then present their solutions” — the illusion of easy and clean social interactions (how naive!). I came back to my cabin at 7pm to find myself writing down every single topic in one of the classes of the first year of the undergraduate engineering program. I wanted to see if in a distant future when I lived in Buenos Aires and studied engineering I could possibly be excused from taking certain classes. I spent more than an hour doing that. I then found a 10 page document in my computer from my high school AP chemistry class, from 7 years ago, and I sat and read it until I had understood everything that it said. It felt fulfilling and challenging, the perfect remedy for too much social stimuli. Then I kept cleaning my computer and found my friend Austin Mueller's thesis on the political unconscious in revolutionary Cuba from a Lacanian perspective, started reading it, caught sight of some of the absurdity in my life. Just another day, filled with funeral chants, explanations, discomforts, wifi hunting, chemistry learning, Lacan and Marx, drums, barking and dying dogs.

Closer to the Tapati, things got much more intense. One day I spent close to 7 hours doing *varu varu kakaka*, the cleaning of plantain tree trunks into thin sheets that can be later be used as fabric for clothes, carpets, hats, purses, and more. My wrist almost cracked. It is an exhausting task. The job was to cut and clean the plantain trunks, starting by doing a vertical slit on the outermost layer of the trunk. Successively, each layer of the trunk had to be cut and taken out to be later thinned and dried. The thinning process was done with a spoon, which we used to scrape (*varu varu*) the plantain (*kakaka*) trunk, so as to get rid of most of its fiber and water. The 1-cm thick material was, in this way, thinned down to the thickness of an onion slice. After thinning the meters-long trunk, we folded it in circles and tied it to ropes for it to dry. The result was perfect plantain sheets, *kakaka*. The next day, I thought I would rest but I was tasked with creating a 25-meter braid out of this *kakaka* for one of the competitions. It came out beautiful.

So
ve
Hie



Silent Defeat

But we lost. The strongest evidence of the defeat is encircling: sepulchral silence resting over our homes. Today, February 16th, is the last day of the Tapati and the coronation of the *Uka* and *'Aito*, and the crowns will land on our opponents' heads. Today half of the island will be bacchanalian in celebration, the other half—ours—in mourning.

As I sit in my cabin, I realize that for months I have been in the sonic center of a seemingly endless party, huddled in the corner of an acoustic pandora box. For six months, I have lived at the core of Tapati preparations, adopted as a Rapu Tuki. For six months, I woke up to and went to sleep lulled by a mix of chainsaws, chicken crows, guitar playing, children's laughter and cries, radio songs—ranging from 70s disco, to 90s feel-good songs, to ancestral Rapa nui chants, to modern Tahitian electronic music— and unfaltering dog barking matches. It was an inexhaustible and exhausting feast also including food and friends and fiascos and family drama.

Today, I woke up confused and lost. There was no conversation in Rapanui from the next door neighbors—my morning compass as I exited the land of dreams and entered the navel of the world. Today, there was no chainsaw— confirmation that the sculptors were not working on their tree trunks, ceasing to be the bane of my existence on mornings and afternoons when a migraine would set in. There were no cries or laughter from infants or adults, no singing or yelling or fighting. Even the dogs understood that today was different. The Tapati is done, and for the first time in decades, the Rapu Tuki family has lost. Only the birds sing as usual.

Addendum: Tú Eres Importante (You Matter)

[Son las 10 de la mañana, hace casi 30 grados Celsius, no corre brisa. Delfina y Jackeline están en la cocina de la cabaña *Moa*, apuradas limpiando porque el avión de los turistas ya aterrizó y todavía hay que limpiar el baño y barrer las últimas cucarachas.]

[It's 10am, it's almost 30 degrees Celsius, there's no breeze. Delfina and Jackeline are in the kitchen of the cabin "Moa," cleaning hurriedly because the plane the tourists are coming in already landed, and they still have to clean the bathroom and sweep the last cockroaches off the floor.]

Delfina (Barriendo el piso con fuerza pero usando el mango como apoyo) [exhala]
Delfina (Sweeping the floor with might but using the stick as support) [exhales]

Jackeline: Cansada?
Jackeline: Tired?

Delfina: Un poco. (Barre más fuerte). Te puse ese vestido sobre tu cama así no se arruina o desaparece.
Delfina: A bit. (Sweeps even harder). I put that dress over your bed so that it doesn't get ruined or disappears.

Jackeline: Ya. Gracias. Oye, Finita. Hay que entrar en Booking y marcar como "no show."
Jackeline: Ok. Thanks. Hey, Finita. We have to get into Booking and put they were a "no show."

Delfina: La reserva ya esta cancelada, no te preocupes.
Delfina: The reservation is already canceled, don't worry.

Jackeline: Ya, pero igual hay que poner para Booking.
Jackeline: Ok, but we still have to put it in Booking.

Delfina: La reserva ya está cancelada, entonces no se puede ni tenemos que hacer nada más.
Delfina: The reservation is already canceled, so we can't and don't have to do anything else.

Jackeline: Ya.
Jackeline: Ok.

(Siguen limpiando en silencio, Jackeline se saca la cresta limpiando. Pasan los minutos, terminan la cocina y queda sólo la parte de afuera. Delfina está pálida y tiene todo el cuerpo sudado. Una camisa 5 tallas más grande, blanca, la cubre pero bajo ella solo hay un gruesa capa de sudor.)

(They keep cleaning in silence, Jackeline cleans like there is no tomorrow. Minutes pass, they finish the kitchen and there's only the outside patio left. Delfina's face loses color and her body is covered in sweat. A shirt 5 sizes bigger than her body, white, covers her but under it there's a thick layer of sweat.)

Delfina (Para, se agarra del trapeador, y mira a Jackeline): No me siento bien.
Delfina (Stops, holds on by the broomstick, and looks to Jackeline): I don't feel good.

Jackeline (Deja todo y se acerca, preocupada): Qué pasa, mi amor?
Jackeline (Drops everything and approaches her, worried): What's wrong, my dear?

Delfina (al borde del llanto): No me siento bien. (Llanto asomándose por los ojos) Estoy toda su sudada y me siento mal.
Delfina (at the edge of tears): I don't feel good. (Tears coming out of her eyes) I'm very sweaty and I feel bad.

Jackeline: Sí, yo sé, yo noté que no te veías bien. (Abraza fuerte a Delfina y la aleja de la escoba) Ven, deja eso.
Jackeline: I see, I could tell you didn't look good. (Hugs Delfina very tightly and pulls her away from the broom). Come, leave that.

Delfina: No, está bien, ya terminamos.
Delfina: No, it's fine, we're almost done.

Jackeline: Para. Esto no es importante! Tú eres importante. Esto no es importante. Tú eres importante.
Jackeline: Stop. This does not matter! You matter. This does not matter. You matter.

Delfina: (Sonríe pero llora abrazada por Jackeline)
Delfina: (Smiles but cries a bit in Jackeline's hug)

Jackeline: Tú eres importante. Esto no es importante. Tú eres importante.
Jackeline: You matter. This does not matter. You matter.

Addendum 2: Note on visual compilation

The visual component came to me as a defense/last chance opportunity when I thought maybe I would apply to architecture school after leaving the island. The only thing I actually knew about architecture was that its disciples wore black—I had walked through the streets and buildings of the Harvard GSD, comforted by my belief that no serious cult could choose turtlenecks as their uniform.

I thought there was a chance that a future me could, too, succumb. Except maybe for tiny colorful treasures that I could carry on the insides of my blackened outfits, such as marbles or seashells or shiny rocks. I decided that, should future me pretend to be a champion of monochrome, it was my responsibility to remember the range and vitality of colors that had once enveloped my body and mind. I realized I would need a palette even if I didn't become a painter.