

SPRINGS

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STEP AWAY

Kata Beilin

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The time of hard-earned success had arrived, and Eve was receiving more invitations to give presentations than she could possibly accept. Her salary had increased, affording her a certain ease, and yet her beauty and allure had not abandoned her. She had money, men, and recognition. She had never desired family, so she was happy to be free. Still, something was missing.



Perhaps her personal sense of dissatisfaction stemmed from the academic language that imprisoned her, from the expectations of a field she followed faithfully but without full conviction. Perhaps it was simply tiredness—endless meetings, reports, teaching the same course for the tenth time, confusing student names that changed each semester.

Each day, the same plane seemed to cross the sky above her beautiful garden. The same squirrel ran along the wires as though time itself had ceased to move forward and instead spun in loops. Sometimes, Eve felt that everything followed the same infinitely repeated script and that she had no way out—as if a barrier of still air separated her from the real life, she longed for but could not quite reach.

As a renowned scholar of environmental law, often invited to present her research, she traveled frequently all around the world, despite her fear of flying. She hated airports—the security checks, the noise, the wearying sameness of it all. She adapted by shielding herself with tranquilizers and music streaming through her cutting-edge headset, masking her eyes with soft blindfolds and her face with a cloth cover. In this way, she withdrew from her surroundings. She listened to audiobooks that lulled her to sleep with images of forests on distant planets.

All the hotels where the large conferences were held looked the same. The cards that substituted keys to the rooms never worked, and the windows did not open. Sometimes the venues had exotic names and were bordered by forests or oceans. Eve knew that half an hour's drive could take her to a natural paradise, but there was never time to step away. Sightseeing was never possible, except from above when she flew over green bodies of the few remaining forests or turquoise-colored waters.

Years of navigating academia had taught her that good work alone was not enough. Success depended, above all, on relationships. Conferences became marathons of smiles and compliments. She channeled her energy into listening intently, responding insightfully, cracking subtle jokes, giving the impression of knowing more than she said.

She went out for drinks and luxurious dinners, dropped hints that she had the resources to reciprocate favors. At day's end, alone in her hotel room, depleted, she would collapse onto a large bed fully clothed, reaching for an ibuprofen to ease the tension in her muscles from all those forced smiles.

A friend recommended meditation exercise, which helped to maintain equilibrium in midst of stress and hectic schedules. Eve set her yoga mat in the garden and gently stretched her paining neck looking at the trees, while the deep masculine voice on her phone seductively convinced her that her sense of self was an illusion, and that it would become easy to see if she distanced herself from the expectations of the others, stepping away from her thoughts.

She practiced meditation every day. Even during the conferences, she got up early to start the day with this voice that slowly began to hold a strange power over her.

By October, it was too cold to meditate in the garden. Eve spread her mat in the bedroom, closed her eyes and imagined, as instructed by the voice, the world in place of her head. She was no longer there. Instead, she was everywhere, her awareness participating in the consciousness of the world that thought through her. She reacted with slight irritation to the message that interrupted her morning ritual. It was an invitation to yet another conference.

But the seminar on the legal empowerment of Indigenous populations, held at a small intercultural center in the middle of the Ecuadorian Amazon, promised to be different.

On the flight from Miami to Quito, she was seated next to a lawyer headed to the same destination—one who refused to acknowledge Eve's clear signals of detachment, ignoring her headset and blindfold, and insisted on talking without pause.

Her name was Ené. She was traveling between the US and Ecuador to gather support for President Rafael Correa's initiative to raise international funds in lieu of drilling in Yasuni National Park. She was driven—on a mission, even in the sky.

"Colonial exploitation and unfair trade tariffs created our poverty. Your country profits. You owe a debt. If you help repay it, we might save Yasuni and the people who live there—my people. I am Waorani."

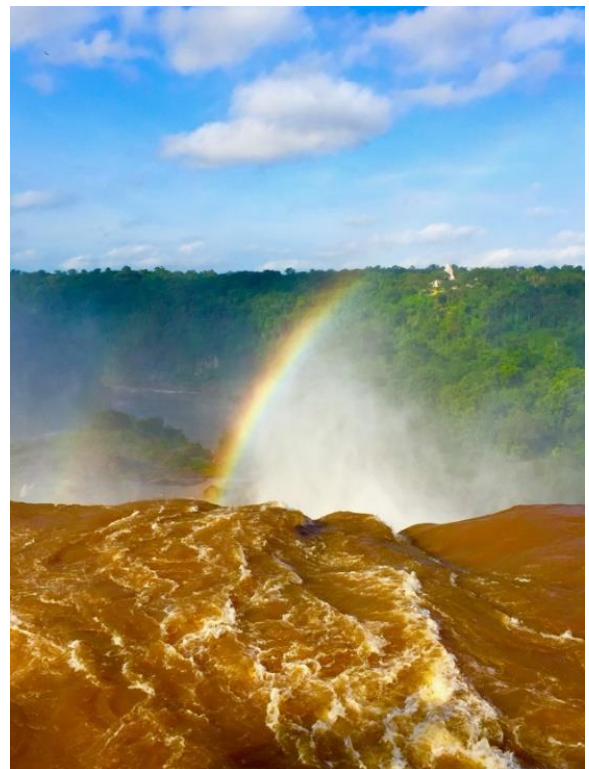
"Are you?" Eve's initial irritation suddenly gave way to curiosity. She had read about the environmental conflicts involving Waoranis since they had first been contacted by the missionaries in the late fifties. She put away her headset and began to listen.

As the plane began to slowly descend, Ené pointed to the window with excitement. A mesmerizing dark green extended all the way to the horizon.

"My forest. My home," she said. "It is still there."

They talked until landing, eventually deciding to share the ride to Tena.

A cool, gray rain greeted them in Quito. Mist and clouds covered everything. The road led them slowly



and steadily down the slopes of the Andes. The peaks remained hidden, but now and then the fog opened just enough to reveal jagged rock faces, ribbons of forest, and, on rare occasions, a sliver of blue sky pierced by a single ray of sunlight. Reality appeared fragment by fragment, like a giant puzzle materializing out of vapor. As they turned south toward Tena, the sky opened completely, and spanning the road was a double rainbow.

The center was perched on a high bank of the Napo River, precisely where it rejoined itself after splitting into two parallel channels. The waters surged there, forming rapids. Eve saw in the river's shape an echo of the rainbow: two becoming one. The water ran deep brown, with a rusted tint. Framed by dark-green forest and veiled in mist, the scene had a compelling gravity.

Here, nothing started on time. Presentations ran long, interrupted by locals unafraid to ask questions mid-lecture, which quickly transformed into dialogues and debates. Eve realized she was an outsider. The other speakers seemed unbothered by academic status or prestige. Ené painted her face with *achiote* as Waoranis do, and delivered a passionate speech, calling for scholarly support in contesting a local court's approval of a recent consultation about drilling in her tribal territory adjacent to Yasuni. The consultation had been conducted in Spanish, which few locals understood, and it was hurried. It had ignored Waorani customs that required a revelatory dream and community consensus before any decision is made and any vote is cast.

"In dreams we become spirits, and understand what the forest wants," she said as other natives nodded, and some publicly recalled their personal dreams that made them understand better their connection to the forest.

In contrast, Eve's academic presentation felt strangely inadequate. No one interrupted her, as though her legal concepts and arguments were irrelevant. Her gaze kept drifting to the river, so close to the terrace where the seminarists gathered. During a break, she walked down to touch the water, needing to confirm that it was real. On the other side, tropical forest stood quiet and inviting.

That night, she had an unpleasant dream of flying home, which revealed to her how much she enjoyed being close to the forest. Then she thought that the time to leave would really come soon.

She was already on board, equipped with headset and blindfold, carefully arranging her bag of documents and backpack within the limited space. The plane taxied, sped up, and took off—but she did not. Or at least, part of her. Her panicked-and-pained self suddenly transformed, quieted down, and resisted, remaining on the ground. She saw herself again at the gate, without her ID, money, laptop, phone, suitcase, and without . . . Eve who flew back. She ran to a flight attendant and tried to explain what had happened. The attendant checked her tablet.

"All passengers are accounted for on board," she said, giving Eve a wary glance.

"Can I see your ID, madam?"

Eve realized she was in trouble. Without another word, she turned and walked out of the airport, trying not to draw attention.

Ené was already waiting in a car outside.

"I have nothing left," Eve said. "Not even to buy food."

"I'll take you home," Ené replied. "You'll see my forest. There you do not need anything."

After five hours on the road, they saw oil towers rising above the trees and, soon after, men working outside the plant.

"This place is called Shell," Ené said.



Ten minutes later, they reached a bridge over a small river. From there, they would continue by boat. The boat's owner greeted them. His name was Komi, and he would take them to Ené's village.

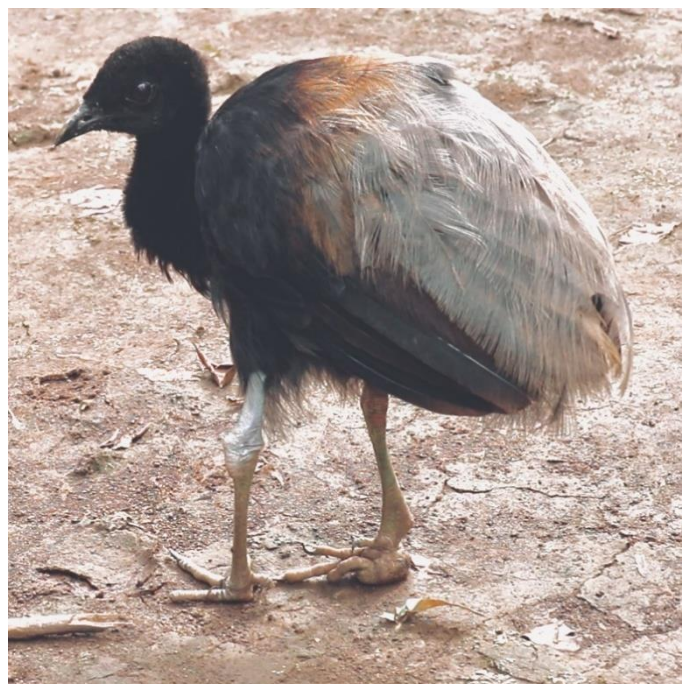
The river journey lasted the rest of the day. The boat moved slowly against the current, carefully avoiding shallow areas. The abundant fauna Eve had expected to see was largely absent. From time to time, a brightly colored bird flew across the river in front of them or perched silently on a tree branch. Komi pointed them out, naming each one with quiet pride. As the afternoon deepened, the world became a symphony of insect sounds. Untouched by hunting, the insects still reigned over the rainforest.

She began to lose her sense of separation from the world around her. She felt a deepening closeness to her new companion, and she began to perceive the world through Ené's eyes—as if they were Siamese twins, sharing not just space but states of mind. In the forest, Ené's face had softened and opened, in the way people's expressions do when they are with someone they love.

After a bend, Komi announced their arrival and steered toward a small beach. On the embankment above, twenty people stood, watching with curiosity.

As they climbed the slope to the settlement, a navy-blue bird with a long neck and chicken-like legs approached them. It limped. A child explained that it had a tumor on its right foot.

"We brought him here to heal, from our aunt's house near Shell."



They slept in hammocks under roofed but wall-less homes. The jungle, absorbed by exchanges of fluids, matter, and sound, felt like a never-ending orgasm—threatening at first, but slowly calming and pulling into sleep, and then waking her once again. “Becoming a part of this thinking substance would be a form of nirvana,” she thought attempting to surrender to the night. But, despite tiredness, she was unable to fall asleep.

Early in the morning Ené leaned over her hammock. She had painted her face with achiote again, and she had decorated her hair with a colorful feather, leaving behind her lawyerly appearance. They would venture further into the jungle.

“So that you can really dissolve in it,” Ené laughed.

She followed her friend as if in a dream. She felt they were walking through a vast artery of some sentient organism, acutely aware of its own functioning yet still attentive to their presence. Birds sang as they bathed; ants marched with bright green leaves like a jubilant parade; howler monkeys roared with excitement. They walked for a long time. She was indeed dissolving into sweat and dew, which she usually hated, but she didn’t mind it this time. She didn’t want to turn back, feeling a compulsion to immerse herself deeper.

Ené stopped where a web of lianas floated in the shifting white mist. The air carried a faint acidic sting. Beneath the fog, a massive, rotting trunk pulsed with the seething life of worms, insects, and fungi. As their eyes adjusted, strange shapes began to emerge—not solid but ghostly outlines, like holograms or flickering film frames: microscope images of cells, faces of animals, buildings, and vehicles. The figures blurred and transformed, assembling and dissolving in an ever-shifting puzzle.

“There!” She pointed. “That looks like my house!”

Ené nodded and placed her hands gently on her shoulders.

“The forest defends itself from those who come to destroy it,” Ené said solemnly, gesturing at the phantoms—“this is the Forest Lab, a place of transformation where new species emerge. Our wise men and women, the *pikenani*, come here to turn into animals when they are ready to become one with the forest.”

A sound of buzzing that radiated from the trunk intensified. As the air vibrated around them, the two women embraced. A dark cloud of insects hovered in front of them. A bee’s enormous eyes met hers, seductive and sweet. A dissolving mix of attraction and terror swept through her.

Then everything happened at once. The bee darted forward and stung her temple. She staggered, eyes closed, knees buckling. She would have collapsed, but Ené’s arms held her firm.

As her sense of self unraveled, she knew she had found it—an ecstatic connection to reality, not as thought but as sensation, heat, throbbing, energy. From above, she watched her body become a pulsing mass of flesh, the venom rippling through it, dividing it into shimmering patches of plasma that were absorbed by the bees, by the forest, and by Ené.

With the final flicker of consciousness, she reached toward the floating contours of her house in the mist—and entered. She felt an embrace as the house disappeared into the forest. For the first time in her life, nothing was missing.



It was still dark when Ené awoke to the shrill cry of a small monkey, scampering under the thatched roof where her hammock hung. There was work to do. Food needed preparing. Seating needed arranging. She got up lightly and ran to the common kitchen where the fire was already lit.

That afternoon, the Waorani leaders and the *pikenani*—those who know how to transform—gathered by the river, along with the lawyers. An old woman with long black hair, so dark it shimmered green, raised her hand and spoke:

"This forest will disappear if together we do not find a way to defend it. Spears are not enough anymore. We need to understand our enemy and learn their ways."

Ené nodded while she circled around serving monkey meat with broth in coconut bowls to all the participants. Though she had worked for many hours, she did not feel tired.



Kata Beilin is a former RCC Fellow and a professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She specializes in the environmental humanities and Indigenous studies in the Hispanic world. Her current project, "The Return of the Maya Moment," funded by a Fulbright Fellowship, explores the Yucatec Maya resistance as nourished by their philosophy of nature. Previously, she conducted research in Argentina, Paraguay, and Ecuador, where she met Waorani People.



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