



Michael Hugentobler

# Tierra del Fuego

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## Outline

### **The true, world-spanning story of an extraordinary book**

Two men, two centuries – bound together by one extraordinary book. Thomas Bridges, the author, grows up as the foster son of a British missionary at the end of the world, in Tierra del Fuego, among the children of the Yaghan tribe. Fascinated by the rich world and language of this indigenous tribe, Thomas begins to obsessively collect their words – words like *tūmūhaimana*, which means “disappearing into the depths of the water like a stone”.

He never leaves Tierra del Fuego but his book is stolen from him, and, decades later, it falls into the hands of Münster-based ethnologist Ferdinand Hestermann. Hestermann suspects that he has found a unique treasure. He, too, devotes his life to it, hides it during the 1930s from the Nazis who come to loot, rescuing an entire library in the process.

- During his 13-year world tour, Michael Hugentobler learned about this dictionary and its author in the depths of Patagonia; this served as the basis of his enlightening novel about the unconditional determination to preserve a culture - whether in South America or in a country and at a time in which books are being burned.
- For readers of Cees Nooteboom

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### Sample Translation and commentary

by Rachel Reynolds

#### Commentary

As for the interest in the English markets, language preservation and indigenous languages are topics of interest in the US, Canada, and Australia. Efforts to preserve and promote endangered languages are receiving increased interest these days, and here in the US, we now have our first Native American Director of the Department of the Interior. (Even in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, cultural minority identity and languages possess a special place of meaning.) The history of the dictionary's creation will strike a chord with those who aren't just interested in language in general, but in indigenous language preservation specifically. Also, the further bridging to Germany during WWII and the censorship and plundering efforts of the Nazis adds a different and interesting twist to the long-exhausted topic of WWII in Europe. All in all, in my opinion, this historical novel feels unusual, and I think that some of the publishers who focus on this genre would be interested in considering it for their catalogs.

#### Sample Translation

1.

He watched the man sitting on the bench and drew closer to him from behind. Reaching out his arm, he wanted to tap the man on the shoulder - but right before his fingers brushed against the other man's shoulder, his hand found itself passing through nothingness.

The man leaned forward and stood up. He was wrapped in a black coat, its collar flipped up, and a black bowler was sitting on his head. As the man strode off, his shadow slipping behind him, sunbeams illuminated a book with a blue-and-red marbled cover.

The book was just sitting there on the green bench, all alone now, while people swirled around it. There were people everywhere, their shoes clattering and the metal ends of their walking sticks rattling.

He called after the man, waved wildly, shouted, but the bowler blended into the other bowlers, and the last thing he saw was the flash of a black coat hem among a grid of pant legs, before it vanished.

A thief might materialize and steal the book, he thought, so he hurried around the bench and sat down. After all, the owner was bound to soon realize his mistake and return. But he waited and waited and waited.

As he gazed down at the blue-and-red marbled cover once more, he was overcome with a longing to touch it. He resisted the pull for perhaps five, perhaps ten, minutes, but then he set his hand down gently on the bench and touched the cover with his little finger. The ring finger followed, the middle finger, then the entire hand with which he patted the cover as he would have the head of an abandoned child. He felt so close to the book, as if he were its new owner.

At that moment, he woke up. He was lying on his stomach, and his back ached. After opening his eyes, he blinked several times because it was so bright. He had shoved his right hand under his pillow. Now he pulled it out. And as his hand appeared so did the blue-and-red marbled book that he had caressed in his dream.

4.

Hestermann combed his hair vigorously.

He smoked one cigarette after the other.

The L52, the train from London to Munich, jerked its way through the hilly landscape, through gloomy forests, and over murky streams; they had passed through Brussels two hours ago, and they would soon reach the German border. Excepting the Belgian locomotive, the train was a German fabrication, and like everything else from Germany, it too was clean and neat.

Hestermann was sitting in the dining car, and his eyes were drifting over the upholstered chairs, the folding tables made of reinforced oak, the sliding glass doors with brass handles, the pressed napkins, the table lamps with cloth shades, the golden bananas on the silver plates, the machine-printed menus (veal tenderloin, Brussel sprouts and roasted potatoes for two Reichsmarks, but Hestermann wasn't hungry), the cut-glass salt shakers with polished caps, the silver holders for the white beer bottles, the shining shoes of the conductor, the slicked-down hair on the heads of both men and women, the stiff hats and the stiff collars and the stiff spines.

Hestermann ordered another cup of coffee, which was ornamented with a golden swastika. Fingers trembling, he lifted it from its saucer, and everything struck him as horrible, completely repulsive. He felt scared.

Several years had passed since his father's death, but now, on his way back to pristine German, the memory of a time he had felt similarly afraid forced its way into his mind, and this memory led him back to his father of all people, or more specifically to his bedside cabinet in a room in which light never shone, one with Biedermeier wallpaper, covered with stains and spiderwebs, across which the same cherry blossom-pink bird of paradise paraded in endless repetition.

Hestermann could still see a childish version of his fingers closing around the drawer knob and opening the drawer before lifting up its double bottom. And he saw the pale yellow card on which a young woman was pictured, surrounded by ferns and branches, and wearing nothing except underwear and stilettos. With a drawn bow and arrow grasped in her hands, her left leg was bent, while her right one was straight, and in this pose, she was a forest huntress who had just heard the sound of her prey. Askew atop her head was a flower wreath, and her face reflected a mixture of amazement and exhilaration.

Hestermann had felt seriously aroused by this woman, and he took every opportunity he could find to slip into the gloomy room, study the picture, and marvel at his pants, under which a bulge always emerged.

Father's absences were difficult to estimate. As a manservant and day laborer, he worked all over the place, and one morning, he unexpectedly returned home shortly after he had left the house

and strode into the room with the Biedermeier wallpaper. It was raining outside, and water dripped down from Father’s hat. He was holding his nail-studded walking stick in the shape of deer antlers, and above all this, there was a clattering and clanging from his mother washing the dishes in the kitchen. Without even a hint of hesitation, Father lifted this walking stick and beat Ferdinand with such force that it felt to the boy as if he were being hurled out of his body. All of a sudden, he was no longer Ferdinand, but an uninvolved spectator, gazing with astonishment into this child’s face, which had been sliced in a split second by the stag’s antlers as if it were a piece of meat which had been transformed into a grotesque grimace. Its eyes weren’t even visible anymore since they, too, had filled with blood.

After a long period of recuperation, Father was moved by his unshakable faith in the love of Jesus to place his son in the care of Catholic priests, so that in the company of the Steyl missionaries the little boy could learn to keep his impulses in check. Hestermann would never forget his mother’s reproachful look, her hands folded in prayer, as he left his parents’ home on Easter Sunday, a feeling of panic at being alone in this world filling his chest.

Hestermann ran the tip of his thumb over the golden swastika. His eyes were closed when someone touched his shoulder. He lifted his head and saw a man in uniform.

He let out a stifled cry.

The uniformed man wished him “Good evening,” and asked Hestermann to relocate to his own compartment.

He was afraid that his knees would buckle under his weight, so he braced himself for a moment on the back of his chair. He felt the hand of the man in uniform on the small of his back, very gently at first, but gradually the hand urged more than it guided, which made Hestermann feel as if he were being led to an interrogation. They walked single-file past the kitchen, through clouds of hot steam, through the sluggishly swaying train. Hestermann attempted to infuse some dignity into his gait, but he could sense the gravity in his shoulders and neck, and felt like a submissive subject.

In his compartment, he dropped down in the seat by the door and immediately lit a cigarette, inhaled noisily, and leaned back his head. At that moment, he noticed the sign over the door which bore the words “Non-Smoking Compartment.” He took three or four quick drags, one after the other, until the end of his cigarette turned into a long, glowing cone. He snuffed it out with a sigh, reached into his back pocket, and dragged his comb through his hair. In a luggage net attached near the carriage ceiling, he caught sight of a telescoping umbrella. With its brown fabric, the umbrella was just barely visible against the paneled wall. Hestermann admired the almost chameleon-like appearance of the object, which was more ornamental than utilitarian, like a wisely selected prop on a stage set that was so perfectly placed it seemed invisible.

A border guard jerked open the compartment door. He sported a Wilhelminian twirled mustache in the middle of a hippopotamus face with drooping cheeks. He wore an olive green jacket, and though he moved rather languidly, he was brimming with obscene vigor.

“Passport, please,” he said.

Hestermann handed his passport to the man, along with his travel permit, his expired visa for England, his guest professor lecture permit, his certificate of employment from the University of Münster, and his foreign currency voucher for the ten Reichsmarks in his bag.

Standing wide-legged in the doorway that he filled completely, the man checked every one of his documents, one after the other. As he inspected each one, he ran his index finger over his lower lip and then rubbed his finger over the tip of his thumb before turning the next page.

He rolled the documents into a tube, slapped them into Hestermann’s limp hands, and clicked his heels together.

“Approved,” he declared.

He turned away, and then Hestermann saw the bulges in the other man’s neck that were reminiscent of a plowed field. The man pushed the compartment door shut, but it didn’t close completely, and as Hestermann lowered his head, he noticed movement on the threshold. He leaned closer and caught sight of a firebug. Hestermann stretched out a finger, and the bug crawled onto his hand. He closed his fist around it as the train crossed the border.

At Aachen, the first town on German soil, they had a fifteen-minute stopover. Hestermann climbed out of the carriage, bug in hand, and set the insect down on a small wall, before stretching his legs a little and lighting a cigarette. The fresh air did him good. At the front of the train, the Belgian locomotive, a clanking beast ravaged by rust, was unhitched, then along came the German locomotive with its tender at the front. It looked like a gigantic furnace on wheels, and as it hissed and steamed and stamped its way out of the darkness, Hestermann felt as if the mere sight of it would crush him.

He gripped his bag tightly and dashed back to his carriage, passing by a group of men. They were wearing uniforms and were all quite tall. Standing in a circle, they were bent over a small, cowering person, whose forehead glistened and whose thin hair was plastered to his skull. He was whimpering. His face shimmered bluish white like moonshine.

The tall men pulled papers out of the little man’s pocket as if they were undressing him, and a roll of parchment, not much longer than a wine bottle, came to light. It was unrolled, and in the nighttime glow of the lamp posts, something appeared fleetingly that reminded Hestermann of a child’s awkward drawing of an angel with green stars around it. The tall men didn’t say a word, but seemed to communicate through glances, passing the parchment back and forth, shaking their heads, sometimes murmuring, sometimes clearing their throats. As if on cue, they simultaneously grabbed the shoulders, the arms, the legs, the feet of the whimpering man and lifted him up. He barely moved, only turned his head very slightly, and at that moment, he gazed into Hestermann’s eyes. There was something inexplicable in his gaze, almost as if he were asking: *Have you all gone insane?*

“He was trying to run away,” croaked a stooped woman from underneath a flowered headscarf.  
“Wanted to leave the country with a sack full of money, but they caught him.”

Hestermann ducked into the darkness, climbed aboard the train carriage, and sat down in his compartment. As he was about to light a cigarette, he noticed that his fingers were trembling again.

Thinking back to the botanical garden in London, the encounter with the little man under the black pine tree now struck him as extremely odd, and Hestermann wondered if all of it was perhaps part of a larger plan, a plan in which the only thing that counted was nations and not individuals. Had the little man merely pretended to be a scientist? Could he have been a spy? Hestermann’s sight grew blurry, and he shook his head absentmindedly.

A jolt vibrated down the train, the engine accelerated at breathtaking speed, and Hestermann felt as if he were being pressed back into his seat. With his fingertips, he touched a wallpaper tack in the upholstery and felt the swastika embossed on its head. Outside, the blast furnaces of the ironworks blew thick clouds into the sky. Hestermann shivered, longing to feel two warm arms wrapped around his neck.

Once again, the man with the twirly mustache walked along the carriage corridors, glancing into each compartment and nodding to the passengers.

"Welcome to beautiful Germany," he said.

Hestermann felt nauseous.

15.

The coast of England materialized on the horizon. Thomas Bridges closed his sea chest full of scraps of paper, left the cabin, climbed the steel staircase to the deck over steps made of perforated metal, leaned against the railing at the top, and watched the muddy brown streak in the haze that was gradually approaching. He once again recalled the phrases he would soon be uttering to the missionary society, and he felt more convinced than ever that he would soon have plenty of money in his pocket with which he could travel back across this sea to South America to purchase a large tract of land that could accommodate all the remaining Yamana.

Raindrops glistened on his tweed coat. A sailor walked up to him, bringing an umbrella that was a strange pale blue color, like the sky... so much so that the umbrella looked like it was melting into the background. The sailor turned away and propped his elbows on the railing, which caused his back to bend slightly. Through the holes in his blue virgin wool sweater, two strong shoulder blades bulged. His eyelids were half-closed, and yet he seemed to still be tracking the coastline. There was something ascetic about him: his face was yellow, his cheeks sunken, his lips chapped.

"This place, too," he said, "was once the home of no one but barbarians."

Startled, Bridges studied the sailor, wanting to say something in reply. For the first time on this voyage, it felt like he had encountered someone he would have liked to talk to, even if this person looked as if he had recently crossed paths with the devil. But Bridges was too startled to reply quickly, and by the next moment, the sailor was gone.

Bridges stood in the rain until the city of Liverpool took shape in the distance, and he caught sight of the tower of the Church of Our Lady and Saint Nicholas, which looked like a paper cutting silhouetted against the pale background. He folded up the umbrella, picked up his luggage, and left the ship.

That same evening, he reached London. A carriage conveyed him to Hackney, to a white-washed corner building whose four steps led to a black front door with inset glass.

Thomas Bridges wiped a drop of blood from his lower lip with a moistened thumb and asked the coachman for assistance in carrying his sea chest. Together they lugged the crate up the four steps. Bridges pushed open the door, and the two men set the crate down in the hallway.

A young woman wearing a purple sari and gold earrings informed them that they could place the box in the broom closet, but Bridges said he wouldn't part with it under any circumstances. Wherever he went, that box would go with him.

"What's in it?" the woman asked.

"Dying words," Bridges said.

The woman leaned forward as if she were going to sniff it. She said, "Reverend Right is expecting you."

The coachman had already left. Bridges folded the handle of the box back out again, lifted it to one side, hauled it over to the staircase, and then up. It rumbled over the stair treads. Bridges gasped, and in the middle of the flight, he paused to clear his throat. He pulled out his handkerchief, and a coughing fit shook his body. He sank down on the stairs, holding the box with his left hand as his right hand pressed the handkerchief to his lips.

"Do you need assistance?" someone asked from the second floor.

"I'm fine," Bridges said.

Nonetheless, Reverend Right came down the four or five steps, and he and Bridges hoisted the box up to the second floor. Bridges wiped his mouth and extended his hand in greeting.

Right was a slender man with a neck curved like a pelican. He wore rimless glasses, and his gaze resembled that of a kindly grandfather. As a wholly unknown young missionary, he had set out many years ago for faraway Essequibo, where he had persuaded a group of forest people not only to parrot the Ten Commandments back to him, but also to discuss, for the first time in their earthly existence, philosophical topics. Out of friendliness toward the white man, they had acted as if these thoughts about the meaning of existence were completely new to them. Since then, Reverend Right had been firmly convinced that there was salvation for all savages. However, he was saddened by the seemingly endless number of unbelievers, and thus, he limited his focus to only the most promising of subjects.

Bridges entered a room in which there was nothing but a large table surrounded by wicker chairs. In one of the chairs sat a young man with large ears, whose eyelids were twitching and who Bridges thought was probably a secretary in training. Across from him sat a man who exuded the aura of an accountant. He flaunted an enormous stomach, and from his chin dangled a flap of skin that Bridges wished he could touch because it looked so supple. In front of the man stood a canning jar as tall and bulbous as a tea kettle. Its bluish label was printed with the word *Humbug*, and the jar was filled to the brim with cylindrical black-and-red-striped candies. The man opened it and extracted a piece of candy, before popping it in his mouth and chewing it.

Bridges said, "The Yamana are dying out," as he took off his tweed coat, tossed it over his crate, rolled up his shirt sleeves, and sat down in a wicker chair. "It is high time, that we act," and after this sentence, he looked each of those present in the eye for a few seconds.

Reverend Right leaned back and twirled a pencil around his thumb a couple of times.

"How are your wife and children doing?" he said.

Bridges slowly extended his head, his neck lengthening as if he were a curious turtle.

"Wife and children?" he asked.

The men nodded in strange synchrony.

The fat man's teeth had already moved on to crunching another piece of candy.

"You're trying to distract me from my subject," Bridges said, but he quickly shared that his children were alive and well again, after weeks of being stuck in bed with the feverish sweats from the measles, covered from head to toe with tiny lumps. However, he didn't elaborate further, but held out his hand as if to make an oath. He counted off on his fingers the points of fact. Namely that, first, the population of the Yamana tribe had decreased by eighty percent, that this had led, second, to a massive loss of vocabulary, and that such a loss of language was, third, always accompanied by cultural attrition. Would anyone like to hear his other points?

"How many Christians are there by now?" asked Right.

"Tisn't a question of faith," Bridges said.

He was amazed at how easily the answer had come to his lips. Of course, he had never stopped quoting the Bible over and over again, in the hopes of baptizing a Yamana or two. Naturally, he had explained to them the concept of agriculture, which could be used to influence the future, so that you didn't have to rely on accidentally stranded whales. And of course, he had felt ashamed of his moderate success. But he had never turned bitter about it, because something had always smoldered in his heart: a fascination - an amazement - that never dried up as if it were a continuous trickling out of an imaginary drip above his head. This glimmering had occasionally felt almost like a pull, which he would have gladly given in to. However, it would have taken him in a direction that would have led away from Jesus and the cross, and this was reflected in his response.

Right twirled his pencil once more, the young man leaned servilely over his steno pad, the fat man reached for his jar. Bridges, whose voice was beginning to get a little scratchy at the end of the sentences and who feared he was about to have a coughing fit, explained that the issue at hand concerned neither tools nor vehicles, nor the replication of a thing or an idea, but human beings.

Under the table, he fished his handkerchief out of his pocket and clenched it in his fist, wrestling down the scratchiness in his throat.

Right gnawed on his pencil as if he were seriously considering the matter, his brow furrowed in thought as he gazed out of the window at the misty walls of London, now sinking into darkness.

Once again, the teeth of the fat man emitted a crunching sound.

Bridges explained that Ushuaia had recently become Argentinian territory, and a penal colony had been constructed near his house. The country was overrun with bearded men with shovels and picks, who eagerly snatched gold pans out of each other's hands. Now this epidemic was also picking off the natives. The only thing that could save the survivors was their own bit of land where they wouldn't be bothered, a kind of commune with strict boundaries.

"What do you have in mind?" asked Right.

Bridges waved this off. "Something the size of Rutland County would be more than sufficient," he said.

"Rutland!" exclaimed the fat man with the flappy chin.

The young man with the big ears chuckled, then sank abruptly into seriousness as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and scribbled something on his pad.

"It's no secret," Right said, "that you are spending the majority of your time learning this language."

"It also came to our attention," the fat man said as he munched, "that your health is not at its best."

Bridges kept his head down and fiddled with his tie.

"Just so I'm clear," he said without lifting his eyes, "this matter is very important to me - so important that I'm willing to resign my post for it."

"Oh, that would be a pity," Right exclaimed.

"Quite, quite," said the fat man, his chin wobbling.

The young man nodded and continued writing.

"Rutland, right?" said Right.

Bridges nodded, murmuring that what they were discussing was the history of humanity, a fraction of it to be granted, but this was a unique opportunity, a window into the past, an opportunity to time travel into the forgotten period of our species. He watched the fat man's fingers reach for the jar, shuddering at the thought of the impending crunch.

Right also gazed in the fat man's direction and shot him a questioning look. The fat man swiveled his head very slightly once to the left and once to the right, before putting the candy on his thumbnail and flipping it into the air. The candy flew upward, turned sideways, and dove downward. Shortly before it shattered across the tabletop, the fat man thrust his jaw forward (at that moment, he looked like a toad) and caught the candy between his teeth.

"Unfortunately, such an undertaking is beyond our financial capabilities," Right said.

Bridges looked up.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"Unfortunately, such an undertaking is beyond our financial capabilities," Right repeated.

"You can't be serious," Bridges said.

"Unfortunately, I am," Right said.

Bridges slammed his fist on the table and shouted, "You have exactly two seconds to change your mind."

The fat man stared demonstratively out the window. The secretary scribbled so vigorously that his pencil point broke. Right folded his hands in prayer.

It wasn't two seconds, to be sure, but about thirty or forty seconds later, Bridges hauled the sea chest across the threshold, and the house seemed to shake with deafening rumbles and thumps as the box crashed down the steps. Bridges was at the handle, like a snarling locomotive dragging a coal car behind him.

30.

*Most Holy Father Pope Pius,*

*As the Vicar of Jesus Christ on Earth, as the Librarian of the heart, and, last but not least, as a faithful friend, I am sending you an urgent request. Since our last meeting, the signs have once again rapidly deteriorated. I now have little doubt that the Germans will soon invade our Austria. In such a scenario, our work is threatened with ruin.*

*Practically every day, I receive letters from concerned German colleagues who fear that their books will be confiscated. Demands just like this have apparently been received throughout Germany. However, it seems that they are not exclusive to the field of ethnology. I know of collectors of Communist, Masonic and Jewish literature who have also received such letters, as well as jurists, even philosophers! A looting of all of Germany's libraries seems to be looming on the horizon. A very dear colleague of mine expressed the suspicion that the stockpiling of this knowledge would serve the sole purpose of winnowing out foreign ideas in order to study them, so that, after a war, their inferiority could be proven and every atrocity could be justified. Should this insanity and should Germany ever expand into France or even England, the memory of the Old World would quickly be practically obliterated.*

*In these difficult times, however, an angel is now visiting us. He is no stranger, and even though his heart may not be thoroughly with Jesus Christ, our former Father Hestermann is also a bibliophile. He will do everything he can to protect our anthropological collection. I even dare to say that he would give his life for it. He*

*is currently in Fribourg, awaiting instructions. Details can be found in the enclosed contract of purchase for the property in Switzerland.*

*Let my personal messenger, to whom I am affectionately attached, rest for a few hours. He is a conscientious worker, in spite of all the dangers. Give him your answer when he is ready to depart for home. May God preserve his life.*

*With all due respect, your ever devoted,*

*P. Wilhelm Schmidt, S. V. D.*

*Saint Gabriel College*

*Mödling near Vienna*

*Austria*

31.

*My dear Father Schmidt,*

*I see from your letter that, despite the adverse circumstances, you are in the best of health, and that pleases me.*

*With regard to your matter, I understand everything and approve of your decision, even though I consider it to be madness. What is at stake here is nothing less than the undermining of the spiritual and ideological upbringing of a dictator, and such an operation is tantamount to treason. But I know you as a man of mature deliberation and foresight. And we have hesitated too long and made hypocritical pacts for which we will have to pay. As librarians and as Christians, we must do all we can to prevent the scenario you describe. I will do my part to see that your wish is granted, since your wish is also mine. As for the funds, I sent them to Switzerland as soon as I received your letter.*

*I am entrusting this letter to you with my faithful Frater Pietro. He has some experience as a refugee agent and will personally take care of the transport of the goods. I also urge you to accompany Pietro on one of his errands.*

*May the Lord be with you,*

*Pius XI*

*Palazzo Apostolico*

*Città del Vaticano, Roma*

*Italia*

## Commentary on the Story

Many years ago, I sat on the balcony of a run-down old building in downtown Buenos Aires as I watched the collapse of a country. Retirees were being expelled from their apartments because they could no longer pay their mortgages. In the park across the street, men in suits and ties sat on suitcases, not knowing where they would sleep that night. Young people were hurling homemade firebombs at cars, and at one point, they tried to set on fire the obelisk a few streets away. It looked horrifying: a stone pillar engulfed flames and, in the background, a banner advertising Coca-Cola. People chanted slogans against the International Monetary Fund. They yelled *Colonialists!* through clouds of black smoke. Day after day, the value of the Argentinian peso declined, until I found myself paying the price of a European cup of coffee for one night in my room.

My landlords were two elderly brothers, who sat at a slanted wooden table in a marble hall and read out loud to each other the same story by an author named Pierre

Menard. Sometimes I would sit with them and listen for a while, until one brother had finished reading and, with the dignity of a high priest, handed the book across the table so that the other brother could start reading the story all over again.

When the summer heat in the city grew unbearable, the two of them recommended that I travel to the cool south of the country. I passed through towns bearing adventurous names, such as Bariloche, El Bolsón, Esquel. The public transportation system ended at Trevelin, and I hitchhiked after that point. Across the Chubut province, through a landscape of dust and stone, I rode alongside an old man with wrinkled skin and a hat full of holes. He stared straight ahead, except when the cassette in the car's stereo system clicked twice. At this, he would lower his eyes, press a button, pull out the cassette, flip it over, and shove it back in. The cassette contained Carlos Gardel's most famous songs, including "Mi Buenos Aires querido" in at least ten different versions. Whenever this song started, the old man would cry "My Argentina!" and the corners of his mouth would quiver.

In the province of Santa Cruz, he handed me over to an even older man, whose white hair hung from his head in long strands, which made him look like a kindly ghost. On the first day of our journey, we failed to reach any village in that desolate region before nightfall, and since the car's headlights were broken, we decided to spend the night on the side of the road. I had two cans of tuna fish with me, as well as some rice and cashew nuts. The old man fetched from his vehicle a dented tin cooking pot, and then we lit a fire and fixed the rice.

As we ate, I was afraid that we would soon start talking about the crisis, because everyone was talking about the crisis. There was no other topic in the entire country. People didn't even discuss soccer anymore. But the old man just smacked his lips. You could hear this smacking, the cracking of the nuts between his teeth, and the crackling of the fire, nothing else. All of a sudden, a gust of wind swept up, almost extinguishing our fire, whistling and whipping the embers along with it. Orange dots danced through the night. The wind was inexplicably cool, and it felt as if the chill penetrated all the way to my bones.

When it was quiet again, the old man tapped his temple, gazed in the direction in which the wind had gone, and said very kindly and calmly, "Have a good evening, Mr. Missionary."

I asked him what he meant by that, and he asked if I didn’t know the story. He said that what we had just experienced had been the ghost of the missionary who was chasing his book. "He's searching for his book," he said with a shrug, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

That was the moment I learned about Thomas Bridges and Ferdinand Hestermann, about the treacherous explorer and the man with the evil mouth. I had no doubt that this story was made up, from start to finish. But I still listened spellbound, because I was fascinated by the old man, by the way he sat on the other side of the campfire and spoke of vast libraries, of murderous regimes, of endless journeys, and of inevitable death. This story of victory and defeat, these two deceivers, was seared into my memory.

The next morning, the man drove me to El Espejismo, a collection of white-washed shacks with pale blue tin roofs. I climbed out of the car, went to the village hotel, requested a room with a table and a chair, and began to write down the story. This was a happy dreamer at work - the longer he wrote, the more unreal it all seemed to him. And when he reached the halfway point, the feeling crept over him that all this had flooded through his head during the night while his eyes were closed. He also started to doubt even the existence of the old man. After all, he had been convinced that the old man was a ghost when he had first met him.

This lasted almost two weeks, until I reached Rio Gallegos, the next city of size, where I had access to the internet and a computer. I managed to verify various details of the story. For example, I discovered that Thomas Bridges had been a real man, that he had been an orphan, and that he had written a dictionary for the Yamana language. In terms of Hestermann, I learned that he had been a disgraced priest, who had apparently run some kind of refugee aid organization during the war. However, I couldn't find out anything about a trip to Switzerland, nor could I ever establish a link between him and Bridges. As far as the book is concerned, it never seems to have left Patagonia after Bridges' death.

After I left Patagonia, other things took precedent in my life. A decade later, I started to think more regularly about this story again. During this time, I was a reporter in London, and I passed by the British Museum every morning. One day, I entered the building and was informed that the entire library collection had been transferred to the British Library back in the 1990s. So I asked there too. I never once expected to find what I was looking for, but I was proved wrong. The librarian asked: "Would you like me to bring the book out to you?" Thirty minutes later, he placed it in my hands. It was the very book that the ghostly man had described to me years before in that Patagonian night. My hands trembled. I took photographs of all the pages to prevent myself from later doubting my memory.

When I decided to write a biography about the Yamana dictionary, I started out trying to figure out the truth. But then I thought about the icy cold gusts of wind and about the marvelous reality that existed beyond truth and fiction, the one that was already written down in my notes. My own book would be a form of mimesis, a simulation of that night in Patagonia twenty years ago. And this became, for me, the only relevant story, since it was just as much a reality as it was a fairy tale.

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Hobart

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