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### Chaparral

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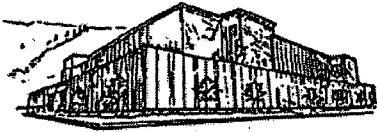
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**CHAPARRAL**

**(A dense impenetrable thicket of shrubs or dwarf trees, the chaparral biome is found on most continents – the west coast of the United States, the west coast of South America, the Cape Town area of South Africa, the western trip of Australia and the coastal areas of the Mediterranean)**

**by**

**Jeffrey Edward Kessler**

**B.A. Willamette University, 1998**

**presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements**

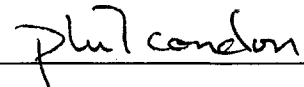
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**Master of Science**

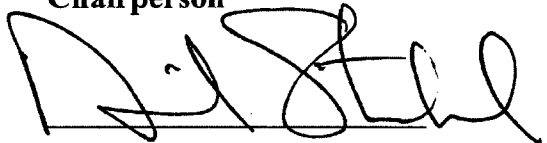
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**December 2004**

**Approved by:**

  
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Chaparral

Chairperson: Phil Condon *PC*

“Chaparral” is a collection of essays written about the last four years of my life. It begins in the chaparral ecosystem of southern California at a small, urban school above the city of Los Angeles. The collection finishes here in Missoula, Montana, once again at a school, this time set below Mt. Jumbo.

“Chaparral” spends time with people, places and animals on the margins of our society. The power structures of our society attempt to control both animals and people they do not understand with similar means. It also wants to keep them separate. The collection looks at this idea first in the United States in the essay “Going Home” and then moves south examining this idea in South America as I travel on and off the Gringo Trail.

This is not a political thesis, at least in the sense of pop-culture politics. Like September 11, the policies and politics of the Bush Administration were on my mind but rarely appear on the page. The goal of this collection of essays is to address issues that transcend politicians and legislation. These essays are about loss, love, and the promise of hope.

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## Taught by America: A Preface

Four years ago I was teaching 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in Altadena, California, during the final days of the Clinton Administration. I was living and working on the steep slopes of the San Gabriel Mountains, one block from Angeles National Forest.

I arrived there in 1998 fresh from college and a teacher-training program called “Teach for America.” The mission of that organization is to provide “all children in this nation the opportunity to obtain an excellent education.” You could say I was pretty optimistic then. “Teach for America” had instructed us to look professional and to be positive. My tie was gone by the end of the second week. Things were messy in the Pasadena Unified School District.

“Teach for America” gave me some skills and pumped me full of knowledge. It didn’t prepare me for a reality I knew existed but had only touched before in the rougher parts of Essex County, New Jersey, and the Lakota reservations of the Great Plains. I encountered life in Los Angeles. With life comes death. There has been a lot of death in the last four years. High above the city of Los Angeles I was taught by America.

It is important to know that blocks from where I was born planes brought buildings down. The vertical centerpiece of my youth disintegrated. Afterwards, I watched politicians hijack grief and fly us into wars. “Chaparral” was written with September 11 on my mind.

“Chaparral” spends time with people, places and animals on the margins of our society. The power structures of our society attempt to control both animals and people they do not understand with similar means. It also wants to keep them separate. The collection looks at this idea first in the United States in the essays “Jeanene” and “Root” and then moves south examining this idea in South America as I travel on and off the Gringo Trail.

Home is a theme that recurs throughout. Home takes the form of connections in “Chaparral.” A grizzly bear moving south towards Yellowstone, or an unfortunate Paraguayan rooster providing me with dinner, are examples of connections that lead me to a stronger sense of home.

The ideas of James Baldwin and Jack Turner resonate strongly in Chaparral. Baldwin was a black, homosexual expatriate who wrote about the United States from France. Turner is a self described “hermit” who writes from a cabin nestled into the folds of the Teton Range. The works of both of men wander the world of ideas, creating new ground to stand on.

In his first collection of essays, Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin penned an essay called “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” It advances the notion that his literary hero Richard Wright wrote from a place of rage and while justified, Wright’s anger offers nothing in the way of constructive solutions to the enormous inequality that existed in America in the 1940’s. This was a bold and daring statement for a young James Baldwin to make. I believe he would have a similar comment about many sentiments expressed in the first half of “Chaparral.” Bottoming out in Peru on an eco-tour in “In the Company of Condors,” I found myself turning to Turner for answers. Instead his



essay “Mountain Lions” provided a validation of rage. It is good to know you are not alone.

Second in the collection, “Root,” is an angry essay that suggests by extending love to all members of our community our culture might stop some of its destructive practices. Our society might begin to cease terrorizing the people, places, and animals it doesn’t understand. Wilderness might exist free from persecution. Deep Ecologists, philosophers and other academics refer to this as an extension of ethics. Baldwin just called it love. His novels Another Country and Tell Me How Long the Train Been Gone demonstrate the power of this idea. While I suggest the idea of love early in this thesis, it is not demonstrated until the last three essays. I wasn’t ready.

The problem with love is that it sets one up for loss. The last three essays explore my avenues to renewal. They are personal solutions to questions such as these: How to travel? How to eat? How to love? How to live in the shadows of loss? Writers such as Rick Bass, Tim Winton, and Leslie Marmon Silko influenced this part of the collection. There is a radical positive shift in tone in the last three essays. That is a reflection of a shift within myself.

Written in the last year, these final essays are an extension of my increased hopefulness and decreasing anger. “Three Days Off the Trail” examines how one might visit South America within the context of the inherent cultural erosion and environmental destruction that come with international travel. The last two pieces find me at my current station in life, settled into a place within a community of people I love, close to wild things and places.

After the election of November 2, 2004, a restoration of hope might seem idealistic, naïve, or just plain stupid. However, the last four years of protest, anger, and rage, combined with a sense of disenfranchisement and a lot of negativity, brought us four more years of the same. Richard Wright's character Bigger Thomas lived his life filled with these emotions. As Baldwin pointed out, they only led Thomas on a path to self-destruction.

This is not a political thesis, at least in the sense of pop-culture politics. Like September 11, the policies and politics of the Bush Administration were on my mind but rarely appear on the page. By looking at connections between nature and society, these essays address issues that transcend politicians and legislation. Chaparral is about loss, love, and the possibility of hope.

## Jeanene

The first thing I noticed about Jeanene were her shoes. Polished Doc Marten's. Sneakers were the footwear of choice at my little school overlooking Los Angeles. Some students wore third generation hand-me-downs peppered with holes, while others sported the latest tricked-out Nikes, made by poor Malaysian kids to be sold to poor black kids in the USA. In any case, Jeanene's footwear caught my eye.

"You've got Doc Marten's on," I said to her one late October day as a means of introduction.

"I know that," she said as if she was accustomed to adults pointing out the obvious.

"Not many kids have those around here," I said as she looked at me with brown eyes made larger by her round glasses, "What's your name?"

"Jeanene."

"Nice to meet you Jeanene, I'm Mr. Kessler."

"I know that too."

"Is today your first day?"

"Nope, second."

"Well, I like your shoes. A lot of my friends wore those in college. Where did you get those?" I asked, trying to pull some more words out of this shy, new fifth grader.

"Germany."

Now I was intrigued. Not many kids at Loma Alta had been to Santa Monica, much less Germany.

“Germany? What were you doing in Germany?”

“I lived there. My dad was in the military.”

“Really, that’s interesting, Jeanene. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“Hey, do you do that recycling thing with all the classes?” She asked with interest, referring to the fledgling environmental education program that I had just started that year.

“Yup, I’ll be in your class tomorrow.”

“It was nice to meet you too, Mr. Kessler.” She turned and walked away.

That was the first and last time Jeanene and I would speak about her father. However, Nini (my nickname for her) and I would speak often about a whole a lot of things, especially nature. Jeannie was my best naturalist.

Once a week I would leave my well-disciplined class and enter Jeanene’s homeroom for a lesson. Her class was an example of barely controlled chaos, but Jeanene would always be somewhere towards the back of the room, hand in the air, patiently waiting to inquire about the lesson. Jeanene would get annoyed with her friends who were less interested. Jeanene was sharp. She commanded respect.

Every Friday she would help me collect the recycling from all the classes. During those mad dashes around the school, we wouldn’t talk much. Both of us focused on a job that we knew was important. We both tried to convey its importance to the other conscripted recyclers who reluctantly helped us.

My students and I would often walk into the national forest just above the school, the thorny chaparral serving as their introduction to wild places. Dust, cacti, and rattlesnakes confirmed for some that they would rather go to the mall. Jeanene, however, was fascinated with native plants, and the people who used them in the past. Through the lenses of her glasses she saw the world a little differently than most kids at Loma Alta Elementary School. Once, a snake appeared on the trail in front of us. Most of the girls screamed, doing their best to freak out. The Latino boys shouted “*Matalo, Matalo!*” “Kill it, Kill it!” Jeanene noticed the patterns on the snake’s back and drew them in her journal. I had found a ten-year old full of grace.

Despite our “natural” connection I didn’t know Jeanene all that well. She wasn’t in my homeroom. My class of thirty-five students occupied me with their problems. Poverty, abuse, violence and sometimes academics slowly sucked the marrow of my idealism from my bones.

Jeanene and others like her provided hope. Jeanene was a rare exception in a place where dysfunction ruled. Once when I commented to a veteran sixth grade teacher about Jeanene’s remarkable nature, she looked me in the eye and said, “Good parents, the power of good parents.”

During my third year of teaching, the teacher’s union that I belonged to threatened to strike. Passions were ignited. The cause had my support, but it certainly didn’t have my heart. Kindergarten teachers in bad sweatsuits stormed school board meetings singing Twisted Sister’s “We’re not Gonna Take It!” Benefit packages, blue armbands, and sickouts dominated the discussion. I knew it was time to leave.

During my final year at the school, working part time, I rarely saw Jeanene. One day after class dismissed, we spoke for the last time in the school garden we had built together.

“You’re going to South America, Mr. Kessler?” She asked while fingering the sharp tips of the yucca she had planted.

“That’s right, Jeanene, next week. I am gonna miss you.”

“Yeah, Mr. Kessler me too.”

“I’ll be back this summer though. You better take care of our garden. I’ll be back to check on you.”

“I will.”

“Jeanene, let’s GO!” called one of her friends, “we gonna be late for drill team! Ms. Blanchard gonna have our butts!”

“I gotta go.”

“You be good to Mr. Ryan,” I said, referring to my replacement, “Don’t let the kids push him around too much.”

“OK, Mr. Kessler, see ya!” Then she was gone. I remember standing there in the middle of our garden: my creation, her creation, our creation. As I looked at rows of peas and lettuce withering in the blazing January sun, I wondered what would become of it. I had no doubts about Jeanene.

Four months later, on May 21, 2002, I was in La Paz, Bolivia, plotting the ascent of an 18,000-foot peak with the NBA playoffs blaring in the background. Four thousand miles north, Jeanene was watering our garden when her father picked her up

from school for a long weekend. Apparently, they were taking a trip to the desert. Her friends said she was excited.

On May 30<sup>th</sup>, the Butte County's Sheriff's department found the body of Joaquin "Jack" Garcia, Jeanene's father, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the temple. He was found in his truck in the woods near the tiny hamlet of Butte Meadows. The passenger door was locked. His body blocked the driver's door. Her things were in the cab. Jeanene was missing. So was I.

Everyone had hope. A search began. Jeanene was smart. Jeanene had outdoor skills. Perhaps she was out there in the wilds of Northern California finding her way back to a town. Everybody was wrong.

The Butte County Sheriff's department called the search off after a few days. Jeanene's mother started her own. She traced her daughter from Altadena across the high Mojave Desert east to Las Vegas. Then she followed the spine of the snowy Sierra north towards Chico. She handed out fliers along the way. It ended where it started: Butte Meadows.

They found her on June 5<sup>th</sup>, not far from her father's truck. The sheriff's department had already twice searched the area where they found her. Gunshot wound to the forehead. Point Blank. They needed dental records to make a positive identification. She had been there for over ten days. The animals and the elements had begun to return her to the earth.

The next day I checked my email from an olive farm in western Peru. I was sick that day and unable to work. A former colleague wrote me. I had no idea anything had happened. The people I loved in LA had been keeping me in the dark.

I descended into my journal and wrote:

I contemplate Jeanene's death and the absurdity of my life. As I wander through the South American continent free, rich and unencumbered by fear, Jeanene lies cold in the LA County morgue. It is not lost on me that I would have been her teacher this year. I would have known her father. I do not wish to engage in insincere feelings of guilt, or notions of heroics that would have saved her from her fate, but my choices have consequences. .... Once again, as after 9/11, I want to be transported to the place of injury. My own selfishness has taken me away from people I love in times when they need me most. ... Who puts me in Peru and Nini in the woods with holes in her head? No chance for justice either. Case closed. He got what he wanted; he's dead she's dead, her mother is alone, he ended it on his terms.

The local media paid some attention to Jeanene. By my count the *LA Times* wrote six articles about her: 2500 words. The national media didn't pay attention at all. Jeanene wasn't as marketable as Jon Benet Ramsey or Elizabeth Smart. She wasn't white or rich. She was a smart kid setting a positive example in a tough, urban school. She wasn't a Barbie Doll. Jeanene wouldn't have sold as many *People* magazines.

It turns out this all could have been prevented. Jeanene was smart enough to see a change in her father. This former military man had begun using drugs. He had become "temperamental" with Jeanene during the last year. Apparently a family court judge, Commissioner Ann Dobbs, dismissed a letter Jeanene wrote in September 2001, in which she expressed the fear that her father might kill her. The esteemed



Commissioner felt that the letter had a “tone suggesting that (Jeanene) didn’t write it.”

Jeanene was an excellent writer. She was taught to write with her audience in mind. I taught her that. She wrote letters to the Pasadena City Council addressing local environmental concerns. Jeanene was dead in part because she addressed the power structure in formal adult language, not expected from a mixed-race girl in a ghetto school. Black kids from lower-middle class neighborhoods don’t write well-crafted letters, right? Jeanene was unaware of the place society assumed for her. How beautiful.

Jeanene brought me hope. Jeanene showed me grace. Never in my life have I seen such waste.

I returned to Los Angeles after 155 days abroad on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002. Home? LAX was promptly evacuated as I collected my backpack from the conveyor belt. Helicopters hovered overhead. The media swarmed. Rumors spread: an Al Qaeda attack on the Israeli Airline. No. A disgruntled employee of El Al went postal. He hosed down the ticket counter with an automatic rifle. Eight people died. I returned to a country waiting for terror to come from abroad. No one was looking at the terror from within.

I couldn’t speak about Jeanene. I couldn’t stand LA any longer. I was rootless. I needed something new: Montana, graduate school, and detachment. I planned to stay in LA for four weeks that summer. I stayed four days.

My friend Ryan, who had replaced me at Loma Alta, drove me up the hill to the school. Jeanene embodied what we tried to accomplish there. Ryan was leaving too. I stood in the garden. I looked at the native plants: yucca, chokecherry, and prickly pear. Summer wildflowers were in full bloom. They all had taken root, grown and were thriving. I turned my back and left.

## Root

I used to sit in my house among the trees, on the lower slopes of the San Gabriel Mountains, and gaze over the huge megalopolis that stretched to the sea. I could see the lights of civilization snaking into every canyon below. I wondered why I had ended up teaching in a place that I had always judged so harshly and didn't want to be. My ideals of social justice had sunk in the quagmire of the Pasadena Public Schools. The soft, green valleys of Oregon, my college home, had slipped from memory. The reasons for my journey west were becoming clouded in the ever-present smog of Los Angeles.

Then the local coyote pack would start crying nearby, almost answering my question. Wildness, they said, was outside my door; I just had to go and look. Wildness hangs on in the American West, even in LA. Listening to them, I pretended that the sound of their cries carried down the canyons to the ocean, unhindered by urban noise.

The coyote is the ultimate survivor. Not very different from minorities in the United States, the coyote has withstood an onslaught of violence produced by human fear. He has persevered through at least a century of predator control and, despite that, was not largely eradicated like the wolf and grizzly bear. Instead the coyote has expanded his range. From the dusty canyons of Southern California, to the fields of Central Park, coyotes are flourishing wherever we have left some open space.

The coyote is a symbol of hope in a future that looks increasingly bleak. When I think of other species that have prospered in great numbers with human expansion, sheep and cows come to mind. I cannot draw strength from these domesticated animals. The coyote, however, has resisted the best efforts of predator control, adapted to human settlement, and is happily supplementing its diet of chokecherry and voles with the occasional domestic cat. I can draw strength from that.

I often imagine Los Angeles five hundred years ago and marvel at what a wonderful place it must have been when it was full of grizzly bears, cougars, eagles and humans, all coexisting in a beautiful coastal basin. It is a paradise lost, but the coyote is a part of that lost age that refuses to go away.

A huge male coyote lived in a canyon right above my tree house in Altadena, California. The first time I saw him I was shocked by his height and girth. I thought he was a wolf. Most coyotes I had seen before were small and scrawny. As I walked to school on days when the marine layer lapped against the chaparral slopes of the San Gabriel Mountains, he would appear out of the mist. With yellow eyes and tense shoulders he tracked me as I walked up the quiet street.

Once during sustained silent reading one of my designated “at risk” students burst into my quiet classroom and shouted, “Mr. Kessler, there’s a wolf outside!”

“Kedric,” I replied “There haven’t been wolves in California for fifty years, now sit down or it’s your recess until Monday!”

“Man, I ain’t playing with you, look!” He swung the door open and it slammed against the outer wall, shaking the classroom. I stormed towards him as he backed out of the room. I looked him in the eye and saw a fear on his face that I was incapable of producing. I turned around and there, not five feet away, was my early morning friend. He stared at us and Kedric grabbed my hand.

“What he gonna do?” Kedric asked in a frightened whisper.

“Shit, Kedric, he’s trying to go home.”

“Shit, Mr. Kessler you just swore, but where he live?”

“Here Kedric, he lives here. We’re just in the way.” We walked inside, stunned silent by what we had seen.

I remember many nights car camping in Joshua Tree National Park -- fleeing the stress of teaching -- drinking beer until the moon rose, and then scrambling to the top of the Eye or some other granite dome to watch the coyotes hunt and scavenge on the desert floor. In the bright light of the moon you could see them casually trotting into campgrounds, picking up after the untidy camper. One night I slept beside the picnic table and awoke later to a coyote on top of the table, cleaning a bowl. I looked at him and he at me. I settled back into my sleeping bag, and he continued with his dinner.

Many nature scientists argue that coyotes in campgrounds become dependent on people and subsequently get killed. Well, it’s true, especially of the coyotes that hang around waiting to be hand fed by some stupid tourist out for a “nature shot.”

However, those that sleep during the day and hunt at night are acting on instinct, living off the land that is theirs. We put the campgrounds in their homes. If we had any real intention of solving the problem, we would take the campgrounds out. We would close the roads that kill so many animals and decide to experience the wonders of Joshua Tree by walking.

I can already hear the cries of protest from climbers, bikers, RV users, biologists, and others. However, I would rather hear coyotes cry than people. I am aware of my contribution to the problem, as a climber, a car camper, and park user. My responsibility as a citizen of the planet, a participant in the desert ecosystem is to contribute to a solution. In a perfect world, we wouldn't be a part of the coyote's environment in such ridiculously large numbers. We certainly wouldn't need wildlife biologists and park rangers, with their radio collars, graphs and charts, telling us how to interact with them. They are creating distance. They are replacing our stories, our awe, and our connection to nature with science.

I know that there are great people involved in the sciences working to improve our standing with nature. I know that not all conservation biologists believe that all of their questions need to be answered. I know that not all wildlife biologists approve of the actions taken by Fish and Game to control predators. However, it seems to me that true knowledge of nature is gained through intimate contact and based on respect and reverence. Since the language of science is inherently reductive and grounded in a linear notion of progress, it will not provide the vehicle we need to reestablish an integrated relationship with the natural world. In the framework of science we are

divorced from our emotions. This positivist vision does not allow for mysteries of the unknown, mysteries of the wild.

Unfortunately, the biological sciences have become tools of the State. The state seeks to control our last wild places and beings. In The Abstract Wild Jack Turner writes,

All knowledge has its shadow. The advance of biological knowledge into what we call the natural world simultaneously advances the processes of normalization and control, forces that erode the wildness that arises from nature's own order, the very order, that is presumably the point of preservation. At the core of the present conjunction of preservation and biological science--the heritage of Leopold--lies a contradiction. We face a choice, a choice that is fundamentally moral. To ignore it is mere cowardice. Shall we remake nature according to biological theory? Shall we accept the wild?

I am tired of our society's need to measure everything quantitatively. I am tired of scientists telling me in numbers how many coyotes and mountain lions are needed on a parcel of land to control the deer population. I don't care how many there are or what number they have been assigned. I want predators. I want the coyote and the wolf. They'll take care of the populations. Let's leave the balance up to them.

If we manage wild places, count and tag their inhabitants, and use computers to determine how the wild should look, aren't we destroying the very thing we set out to save? Will our society ever develop a land ethic, if those whom we rely upon to study our great predators always reduce them to subjects in a grand experiment? Can we accept and respect true wildness within our borders? Or do we have to poke, prod, tag, log, develop and terrorize the wild until it disappears forever?

James Baldwin in 1978 -- a quarter century before we declared war on terror -  
- took a moment to define a terrorist. "A terrorist is called that only because he does  
not have the power of the State behind him--indeed, he has no State, which is why he  
is a terrorist. The State at the bottom, and when the chips are down, rules by means of  
terror made legal." Coyotes, wolves, mountain lions, and bears have all been labeled  
terrorists at one time or another. Their only crime is occasionally taking one of  
American society's chosen "locusts." The original inhabitants of North America, the  
native species, have been forced to the fringe. They have been replaced by  
domesticated animals from Europe, which have ravaged the landscape. Our large  
predators are under attack from an outdated pioneer mentality and a State attempting  
to control and subsequently destroy them by "terror made legal," thanks to scientific  
justification.

The United States has so much trouble accepting things that are foreign to our  
European Roots. In the American West we have reversed what is foreign and what is  
native. The American psyche, manifested in our institutions of control, treats  
predators as it treats minorities and impoverished populations. The dominant,  
homogenized, American culture understands neither and therefore seeks to control  
both.

It was a brilliant fall day during my sophomore year of high school. The  
leaves slowly drifted towards the ground, creating collages of orange, red, and gold.  
My girlfriend and I raked the collages in two huge piles. Then we lay down in them



as if they were beanbags. She lived in a borderland of sorts, between the affluence of the suburbs and the poverty of the inner city. As we smoked cigarettes, we heard sirens and a single horn circling the neighborhood. At first we ignored them, as they were a common occurrence on the edge of Newark, New Jersey. After almost an hour they stopped and I went home.

When I arrived, I found my family in a state of disarray. My mother had been mugged . . . assaulted really. She was dragged fifty feet by a motorized purse-snatcher. Thankfully, she was fine. Remarkably, my father, sixty-six at the time, was waiting for my mother in a car across the street and caught the guy after an hour-long car chase. It was his horn I had heard earlier.

Let me say this about my father. He is no bleeding heart. A veteran of WWII, who signed his first son up for Vietnam after an incident with drugs, my father does not often sympathize with the weak. While he is a good FDR Democrat (another endangered species), he is also a veteran of the Newark Riots (1968). He did not come away with a high opinion of those who set fire to the city of his birth.

The purse-snatcher was young, black, and poor. He was a year or two older than me, committing crimes in a stolen vehicle. When my father returned to the police station to give a statement, the cops requested that he join them in the bathroom. There he found his former adversary handcuffed and staring into a filthy porcelain bowl. One cop was repeatedly shoving the kid's head in to the toilet. "Just to wake him up," the cop told my dad. My father requested they stop, and they did. Then they asked my father if he wanted to take a "shot" at him (in the gut of course, because they couldn't go to court with the suspect all marked up). The police were shocked

when my dad declined to punch the boy as payback for assaulting my mom. My dad replied with “Jesus Christ, he is just a kid!” One of the cops responded with “No he’s not, he just an animal.” My dad came home, having to explain to my mother that they were going to drop the charges. I remember my father saying repeatedly, “he was just like you, just a kid.” The next day the incident was written up in the local paper with no mention of my father.

Growing up in the long, dark shadow of New York City, I watched my best friend dare to drive in white communities. Stopped many times for DWB (driving while black), his anger was infectious. We stopped standing for the Pledge of Allegiance during my senior year of high school. It certainly did not apply to Geoff, or to anyone conscious of the society we lived in. We endured the wrath of teachers and students alike. We didn’t really know what we were doing then. We rejected compromises. We didn’t realize the importance of our actions. We kept sitting. Even in the wake of September 11, when I was most vulnerable to lockstep patriotism, I could not raise my hand to my heart. Hypocrisy is insulting to the dead.

Later in high school, standing alone on a gas lit street in the wake of a broken party, I launched a beer bottle at a police cruiser disappearing in the darkness, and watched it shatter on the pavement. I knew that the America promised was different than the America delivered.

Ten years later as a teacher, I saw my students, Mexican and African American alike, grow up in well-defined ghettos, terrorized by the police, with the backing of the State, if they dared to cross the boundaries of their prison community.

As it does with the urban poor, our State seeks to control our predators. Grizzly bears and buffalo are shot if they dare wander outside of Yellowstone National Park. The rhetoric of control describes children as wolves and coyotes as gangsters. Wild children are doped on Ritalin while wild animals are executed everyday. Fear dominates America. Instead of facing that fear with love, we choose to wage war.

Will you tell me about the great gains made in Civil Rights in the last fifty years? Will you tell me to count the number of black CEO's in America? That there are more wolves, bears, coyotes and cougars now then eighty years ago? Will you tell me to count the predators? Let's remember that for the last one hundred and fifty years we have been slaughtering predators by the tens of thousands. Fifty years ago we were subjecting African-Americans to an unusually cruel system of apartheid, in which we promised them America without ever intending to let them have it. We must remember that the "freedoms" we so generously decided to give our minorities and a few wild predators within our borders have barely lifted us towards the surface of dignity. Our oppressed populations, human and non-human alike, have struggled, with their own blood, for every inch of freedom they have.

Our State, our government, backed by science and its greatest beneficiary, industry, has been waging a war of enormous proportions on the predators of the American West. The Humane Society, High Plains Predator Control (HPPC) and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) all report that an average of 85,000 coyotes were killed every year between 1991 and 2001. These organizations with wildly

different views on predators all reported the same statistics. Another 10,000 badgers, foxes, wolves, mountain lions, and bears were killed yearly during the same period, all in the name of predator control. They were slaughtered to protect cows and sheep even though the USDA also reports that only 9.1% of livestock losses can be attributed to predators. The vast majority of this killing occurred in the American West, on public lands, despite the fact that less than 3% of our beef comes from the western livestock industry. A “wildlife biologist” on the High Plains Predator Control website recommends hunting coyotes “when they're young and dumb.” The USDA spent 31.9 million tax dollars per year, ensuring that every American played a part in this genocide. The Humane Society tells us that 33% percent of all predators destroyed were shot from the air and another 28% were trapped. HPPC advertises cheap small plane rides where a “skilled hunter” could take two dozen coyotes in an hour.

Not only is this slaughter genocide of enormous portions, it is pointless when it comes to coyotes. They reproduce faster and more effectively than any other large North American predator biologists have studied. Feelings of nausea swept over me as I surfed the web looking for facts, and saw the same pictures of dead predators displayed by the HPPC and the Humane Society to appeal to their respective audiences. However, I was able to smile when I came across this quote from the Humane Society: “After intensive lethal control, surviving coyotes experience reduced competition for food. This means the coyote population will reproduce and rebound quickly.” Regardless of the high-tech weapons and aircraft used by

“hunters,” the traps set by “biologists,” and the bounties paid for by all of us, the coyotes will out-reproduce everybody in the end.

But wait, there will be no reprieve for the wild, for the coyote. It took over a century for those who are waging the war on predators to realize that slaughtering coyotes by the millions was not effective. So now, according to some biologists interviewed in the recent documentary Coyotes: America's Top Dog, the solution is sterilization. Under the new catch phrase of “non-lethal controls,” we will take away the coyote’s ability to reproduce. I am sorry, but as a descendant of Russian Jews, to me this smacks of the Final Solution. What did the Nazis do differently? These actions of mass extermination and sterilization are all aimed at ending a species, exterminating what we don’t understand. Our disconnected scientists, divorced from their emotions, are proposing sterilization and calling it “non-lethal.” Is this any less violent, any more acceptable?

I wonder to what depths our society is sinking when coyote populations are thinned because too many domestic cats aren’t coming home for dinner. As I live in Montana now and reflect on my life’s journey, I see connections everywhere. It seems we are all, human and non-human, living and non-living, bound by a State which seeks control. Do we realize that the paradigm of control that we apply to nature is the same destructive force that we apply to members of our human community that we fear?

For now coyotes may be able to withstand these vicious attacks on their populations. However, other large predators do not have the ability to reproduce as

quickly and thus are facing extinction. It makes me sick to think of Montana's Ninemile wolves trying desperately to restore order in a fragmented ecosystem, shot by the U.S. Government over a llama. The llama belongs on the Altiplano of South America, where it has evolved in an ecosystem without predators and plays a crucial role in the cultures of the Andes. The llama has no place in the landscape of the American West. This defenseless South American import is valued more by our government and its subjects than some of last wild wolves in the lower 48. Those called upon to kill the wolf, don't even have the decency to truly hunt the animal. Instead they hunt from helicopters, set ambushes, track them down with radio collars, and shoot them from the air.

Stealing an idea from Edward Abbey, let's allow the coyotes, wolves, bears and mountain lions to clean up the mess we have made out of the American West. They will bring the buffalo back. It took direct action by the oppressed during the Civil Rights Movement to begin to move society towards real change. Our oppressed predators are no different. Science, backed by government, will not get them home. We can not remake the wild. We must allow the wild the space to restore itself. The original inhabitants of the American West will restore order in their house, and you won't need a graph to understand the results.

The wolf murdered in the Ninemile valley was not unlike Amadou Diallo. A special unit of the NYPD shot this young African immigrant forty-one times on February 4, 1999, while he was standing on his doorstep. Some might take offense at comparing the murder of a wolf to the murder of a man. However, I see more

similarities then differences. As Jack Turner says so simply regarding a similar issue, “I refuse to see a difference in causation.” Both Diallo and the wolf were living, breathing souls who played important roles in their respective communities. Both Diallo and the wolf were trying to get home. Both were killed out of fear. Both had special government “units” monitoring them. Both were killed in the name of maintaining lifestyles. The killers of Diallo and the Ninemile wolf still roam society freely. Their respective populations are still terrorized because they are not understood and are feared by the state. Neither is accepted by society at large with love.

We have come to a place in time where everything -- even love -- must be supported, backed by examples, and finally proven, if it is to have credibility. Describing a human emotion is difficult. However, it is clearer, easier, to know that with whatever words, thoughts, emotions, you choose to describe love, it must be extended to all members of our community. From the humans that live north of 125th street in New York City, to the coyotes that wander alleyways and canyons, to the Ninemile wolves trying to get home, we must begin to truly love all of them if we are to make true progress as a society. The capacity is within us. I wonder if the quest for knowledge and our fear of the unknown will prevent us from getting there.

During the fall of 2002, a grizzly bear appeared in the Bitterroot Valley of Montana. It was the first grizzly bear to find its way there in several decades. Immediately the response from the local “Wildlife Manager” was to radio collar the

bear. He labeled the bear a “transient.” This is the exact language used by police to describe people who wander the streets without pragmatic purpose. We have separated ourselves from nature, but those who seek to control what they fear apply similar methods of domination to nature and humanity through language and practice. The storm is building to control the wild, control the impoverished, and control those who differ from us. We are building more prisons. We are building more “wildlife recovery zones.” We are building more walls. We are refusing to love.

Sitting on Eightmile Saddle on the crest of the Sapphire Range, in a cold October wind, not far from where that healthy male grizzly was sighted, I contemplate the land that surrounds me. The Sapphires have suffered the fate of most low elevation ranges: hacked to death by large timber corporations. I hunker down next to my truck and open my journal. The huge clearcut to my left on the boundary of the Welcome Creek Wilderness invites a rant, but I am tired today. I look west over the Bitterroot Valley and stare at the abundance of granite before me. I daydream about climbing, but soon my mind wanders back to the bear. The high peaks of Bitterroot Range mark the boundary of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. It is a wilderness without the grizzly. Despite the fact that when combined with the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, the Selway Bitterroot comprises part of the largest roadless area in the lower 48, it is still a pasteurized wilderness.

I wonder where that young male grizzly is. What would I do if he walked up behind me? I wonder if he is trying to find his way to Yellowstone. I wonder if he sees the obstacles in his path. I wonder if he knows of the terrors he will face on his journey. He has already crossed Interstate-90 somewhere, so he must know about



cars. I wonder if he senses the hostility that he'll face. I wonder how he might cross the populated valley and get home.

As the wind blows right through my overpriced Patagucci, I realize we have reversed the myth of the American West in 200 short years. Now instead of humans attempting to cross the wilderness, we have the wild running the gauntlet of civilization. The grizzly bear and wolf are trying to re-connect the vast wild areas of Canada (although they are disappearing there too) with those isolated pockets of wilderness left in the lower 48. They face a much harder task than we did 200 years ago.

We are armed and dangerous. We have a distorted sense of justice exemplified by the exoneration of murderers and the execution of the innocent. We actively court Armageddon with weapons of mass destruction. We destroy predator populations with high-tech weapons originally designed to destroy humans. We pay taxes that support destruction of predators, not to mention the destruction of their homes as well. I think of the Underground Railroad and I am tempted to shout into the icy wind, "Go back bear! Go back to Canada, get out of here before they tag you, collar you, torture you and reduce you to a number, a statistic, and call it science." However, I know my notions of a wild and free Canada are like opiates, and that I must with all of my heart, all of my words, and all of my soul support this bear on his journey south.

Perhaps our hope, our salvation, lies in unifying the forces that fight for nature with those who fight for human freedom. Perhaps it is time to realize what the powers of domination, the powers that have produced the largest prison in the world, powers

which have poisoned the wild wherever they roam, realized long ago: no true change will occur with a divided opposition. With love in our hearts we must step out of our narrow boxes, our individual causes, and understand that the branches of struggle against oppression grow from the same root.

## In the Company of Condors

By the time we reached the church a downpour had begun. I noticed the shackle around the condor's neck was thick steel. The black bird blended into the gray stone of the colonial structure, which melted into the heavy mist above. Several hours before, I had come across my first captive Andean condor inside this Peruvian national park. Now four chained birds later, my disgust and anger had transformed into frustration and helplessness.

Months earlier my partner and I had ascended golden granite for a week in the company of condors. As the only North Americans in the canyon, and mediocre climbers at best, in the presence of soaring condors and some of the best Argentine and Brazilian climbers in the world, we experienced an overwhelming feeling of humility. While we attempted to avoid climbing near the world class athletes, the birds were always present.

Throughout our five-month trip to the other America our sense of humility was pervasive. As citizens of the United States we were greeted in many different ways. From the climbers in Los Arenales who mockingly referred to us as the "American team," to the Chilean street vendor who empathized with the victims of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and most shockingly, to the Brazilian who asked seriously if our government was about to invade the Amazon over oil (and produced a news article detailing plans), opinions of the USA were as varied as the landscapes of the South

American continent. I felt it was my “patriotic” duty to present myself as something other than a war--waging, vengeful nationalist thirsty for black gold.

While opinions and cultures changed along the spine of the Andes, the condors remained constant. The Andean condor is not only an endangered species, but also a symbol of regional pride that transcends often contested national boundaries, appearing in ancient carvings or on beer labels. This pride stems from an ancient worship of the condor throughout the Andes. The largest flying scavenger in the world has inspired awe for millennia.

My closest encounter with condors occurred in the central highlands of Peru in a place called Colca Canyon. Over 9000 feet deep, it might be the deepest canyon in the world. Currently, there is a raging debate between Peruvian tour operators if Colca or the adjacent canyon is the deeper.

If you walk down La Merced in the Peruvian city of Arequipa, touts selling eco-tours accost you as you attempt to reach the Plaza de Armas. With conflicting prices and information they compete for your dollars. Claims of the deepest canyon and the best views fill your ears in a mixture of Spanish and English. Playing to the western need of having been to the deepest, the tallest, the biggest, the oldest, and the highest, the Peruvians attempt to sell their heritage and landscapes. Under these ridiculous sales tactics lies the ugly side of eco-tourism. Community members, natural allies, are pitted against one another over the dollars of westerners bent on having an authentic, cheap, and comfortable experience. During most of my time abroad, I avoided tours for this very reason. My companions and I preferred to rely on local contacts, advice from like-minded travelers, or just dumb luck to get us from

one place to another. However, near the end of the five-month journey, with my girlfriend in hand, I relented and tried an “eco-tour.”

Just running your finger down a relief map of the Andes gives you a sense of the narrow, steep terrain that characterizes the range. The Rio Colca, which continues to form the canyon that bares its name, carves a seam through the earth. Attempting to counter the force of the Nazca plate that juts the Andes upward, the Rio Colca slices westward through the highest mountain range in the Americas.

Starting on the dry Altiplano near the tremendous volcano El Misti, the Rio Colca provides water to hearty Quechua communities set at elevations close to 4000 meters. The upper canyon is home to the small towns of Chivay and Yanque. Here the canyon is broad and gentle and the river flows slowly. The Incas and their predecessors took advantage of this natural bowl and built some of the most extensive terracing in South America. To this day the locals use the ancient terracing to cultivate diverse potato crops.

A few miles closer to the Pacific, I found myself on the second day of the two-day “eco-tour” having a terrible time. We had left the colonial city of Arequipa with a bunch of yuppies from the Bay Area on a two-week vacation. When our group coalesced at the Arequipa Airport, differences became strikingly clear. Generally, they were looking for the westernized comforts at every turn, whereas I would rant against those same comforts constantly. They avoided local cuisine and sought out the “vegetarian” or “American” specials on every menu, thinking that it would keep them safe from the dreaded intestinal bugs. They were wrong. They ignored local advice and basic common sense and went from sea level to 16,000 feet in twenty-four

hours, relying on western pharmaceuticals to make up for the lack of time in their schedules. They were surprised when they subsequently fell ill. They made no attempt to speak Spanish and relied on others to facilitate their journey. Although fifty years younger, they acted in a manner similar to my parents. Our conceptions of travel were polar opposites.

However, as I stood at the Cruz del Condor on the rim of the Colca Canyon, my attitude began to change. The number and proximity of condors dumbfounded me. Details I had never noticed before became clear as the condors passed over our heads. Fingered wings tipped in silver, talons that reflected broken sunlight, and white ruffed necks gave me a joy I have only known when close to wild beings.

Though I was participating in my most hated form of tourism, the delight in seeing these magnificent creatures allowed me to forget that I was one of a hundred standing at this mirador. As I “bobbed and weaved” through hordes of my tourist brethren, the smiles were broad on everyone’s faces. Suddenly I bumped into an old Israeli acquaintance.

“Dove, how are you? Enjoying the birds?”

“They were better yesterday, closer, you missed the best day. How much did you pay for your tour? ” Typically, Dove wanted to assert that he had one upped me on price, and he skipped any pleasantries.

“120 Soles.”

“Ha, you Americans are always paying more than us Israelis. We paid sixty Soles. The guy was begging for our business.”

“You must be very *proud* of yourself, Dove. Headed to Ecuador soon?” My sarcasm passed him by.

“You remember my plans! Yes, Peru is too expensive and they are not friendly to Israelis here.”

“I can’t imagine why,” I replied. Considering that he paid twenty dollars for a three-day trip that included all meals, lodging, and transportation, I thought his attitude was absurd and mildly revolting.

“Perhaps it is because of all the violence in Israel right now.”

“Maybe.” I said, scanning for an escape route. Finding a hole in the crowd, I shouted, “Well, have a nice trip!” and disappeared into the mass of people before he could respond. I wandered away from the mirador in good spirits to enjoy the canyon and the spectacular, though claustrophobic, views it afforded.

I began to rethink my harsh, judgmental opinions of the fellow Americans I was traveling with. Compared to Dove they were a compassionate and intelligent bunch. Summertime had come to the United States and the folks on the tour were enjoying the measly fourteen vacation days our society had granted them.

During my five-month trip to South America we had encountered few citizens of the US. We prided ourselves on the fact that we were traveling for long periods of time like Europeans, or the South Americans we had met, and avoiding packaged tours. However, the elegance of the condors lightened my spirit. My faith in ecotourism, with the hordes of tourists it brings to impoverished South American nations, was temporarily restored. I gave a friendly wave to the stockbroker from Stanford, dangled my feet over the edge of the canyon, and imagined flying.

Not only did the presence of the condors open my heart to my traveling companions, it conveyed a sense of freedom far different than the doublespeak connotations of the word being tossed around the US media in the days leading up to the fourth of July, 2002. My home country still seemed in blind shock over the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and thus was unable to see through the warmongers in the Bush administration. From what I had gathered over the Internet, rampant nationalism and spastic flag waving were only checked by the fear factory of John Ashcroft and company. The black birds lifted the anger and confusion that had been building inside of me during my five months abroad and allowed me to breathe deeply again.

Despite the cold wind blowing out of the canyon at 13,000 feet, I was sad to leave my lofty perch. The sight of four backpackers descending into the Colca made me feel lazy and lame as I slowly walked backwards towards our van, hoping for a final glimpse of the wild, graceful scavengers. I wanted to find the deepest reaches of the canyon and see where the condors fed. My sense of exploration had been dampened by too many days in the bars, and I longed for another isolated trek in the Andes. My memory drifted south.

Weeks before in Bolivia, four friends and I had found a guide and some mules and departed towards the flanks of Ancohuma, the highest peak in the northern section of the Cordillera Real. Ancohuma, and her neighbor Illampu, scream 14,000 awesome feet above the small town of Sorata. The sub-tropical village was warm and green, a welcome change from the harsh, barren Altiplano we had fled. The white



glaciers that spill down the mountainsides were a blinding sight when framed against a perfect blue sky.

We hired our guide and mules from The Sorata Guides and Porters Association. The association is a cooperative that draws its members from surrounding countryside. The guides and porters divide the work among community members and generally lead a trek every three months. The cooperative ensures that all residents get an equal share of the income generated from their valley. For western trekkers and climbers, using the cooperative also ensures a measure of safety from bandits that have molested travelers since pre-Incan times. In the higher reaches of the valley no Spanish is spoken, and an ancient feeling pervades the place. Children would appear from behind trees, and voices echoed off the hillsides.

We trekked to the base of the glaciers. Even with our Aymara--speaking guide, I couldn't help but feel self-conscious. I was trespassing. When a bold child wearing a Phoenix Suns shirt approached us at a lunch stop and motioned at Paul's Walkman, I had to question our role in the cultural erosion spreading across the world. As the large Irishman, in typical good humor, allowed the kid to listen, others appeared from the fields we were crossing. Soon little brown children clamoring for a taste of western culture surrounded Paul. Inwardly I cringed, while admitting to a friend that the scene was undeniably cute. Would these children remember this day? Would they flee their mountain homes, abandon their traditional lifestyles for the promise of modernity, only to wind up living in the expansive El Alto slum of La Paz, as hundreds of thousands of other highland Bolivians had?

Like Colca Canyon, another ridiculous numerical debate surrounds Ancohuma, with enormous consequences for the mountain and the children who live in valley below it. Some British and Bolivian cartographers claim that Ancohuma at over 7,000 meters is the highest mountain in South America. People in a quest for the seven highest summits on each continent have flocked to what is currently the highest mountain in South America, Aconcagua. Decades of high impact “eco-tourism” on Aconcagua have turned parts of the mountain into trash piles.

Given the western desire for the highest peaks, if the claims of nationalistic Bolivians and self-interested climbers prove to be true, Ancohuma and the valleys below will be forever changed for the worse. I cringe at the thought of thousands of adventure tourists descending each climbing season on sleepy Sorata. I can imagine the small footpaths that climb towards the mountains becoming deep trenches. I wonder what would become of the high villages on the way to the glaciers as thousands of westerners streamed through them on quest to prove themselves on a mountain that is indifferent.

Memories of my trek in the highlands around Sorata slipped into the Colca Canyon as I prepared to rejoin my “eco-tour.” Although I felt like staying, my improved mood carried over into the van ride, and I smiled and nodded thoughtfully at the chatty law student who was reciting the virtues of the Miraflores district of Lima. He cited the McDonald’s, Blockbuster Video, and Tony Roma’s as reasons why he felt so at home.

Shortly afterwards as the van pulled to a halt near some vendors, my optimistic feelings were shattered by the sight of a condor chained to a rock at a rest stop. For a short time I had deluded myself into believing that the Andean condor, an endangered species, was actually protected in this Peruvian national reserve. The despicable reality became clear as I watched an ignorant German pose with the bird while its debased indigenous wool--peddling captor smiled at the pittance she received for enslaving what was once (and supposedly still is) a sacred animal to her people.

Like most things in our world, the protection of the condor is a commodity. When it is useful to Peru's booming eco-tourism industry, it is "protected." When it provides cash flow for impoverished people, the condor is shackled to a rock. Then good gringos smile, shoot pictures, drop a Sole into a hat, and pat themselves on the back for being "culturally sensitive" or "helpful." For thousands of years people lived in Colca Canyon without ever knowing that they were poor. Now thanks to the IMF, World Bank, and thousands of rich tourists like myself, these people are acutely aware of what they don't have. As a result wild nature and their culture suffers.

In order to qualify for loans and international aid, countries like Peru and Bolivia are forced to dam their rivers, spray their coca crops with DDT and sell their natural wonders to pasty people in dumb tee-shirts and Bermuda shorts with white socks pulled up to their knees. I stared at the chained wild bird, realized the knife in my pocket would be useless against its iron cuffs, and let my anger at the world slowly seep out of me on to the page.

I sat alone above that green valley and pressed my pen hard into my journal. As I looked out over the terraced terrain, worked for thousands of years, I felt comforted by the thought that the river, those mountains, and the sky above will be here long after we are gone. However, as the wind blew, the ironies of history left me cold. Five hundred years ago the Spanish arrived with iron shackles and blue steel and enslaved the people of the valley in a quest for precious metal. Now in our progressive modern world, filled with words like human rights and social justice, the enslaved people have enslaved their traditions and sacred symbols in the same quest for the precious green paper.

For the last five hundred years the native peoples of the Americas have survived under the brutality of western civilization. Despite biological, cultural, religious and economic assaults, many cultures, especially in Central and South America, have adapted to the demands of western imperialism and managed to survive. In Peru native Quechua and Aymara are still the primary languages in many regions, and ancient customs are still practiced. However, it seems that the greatest threat to the native cultures of the Americas is the slow infusion of American Culture into their lives. This dissemination of our culture hides itself in many forms, whether it be well meaning liberal economic development, destructive resource extraction, or the millions of tourists who descend upon them, hoping to experience something missing from our own lives: authenticity. In exchange for an authentic cultural experience or natural adventure we bring them the Chicago Bulls, TV, Coca-Cola, Burger King, Walmart, plastics, dams and DDT.

I have grown weary of making excuses for everybody and everything. Despite the meager economic benefit that the woman receives for imprisoning the condor, it is unacceptable. As visitors it is also unacceptable to participate and perpetuate this sort of tourism. I am uninterested in arguments based in Gross National Product, standards of living, economic development, social justice or any buzzword that shields global capitalism's exploitation of nature and culture in politically correct terms.

Our actions are inexcusable and the results amount to cultural and environmental genocide. The more we sit and talk with each other, our politicians, to find the most sensitive, politically correct, inoffensive way to implement change, the more is lost to the ever encroaching tide of progress. Andean people used to worship condors until they were replaced by the dollar and subsequently chained to rocks. Now they use them to take thirty cents from dumb western tourists who are exploiting the people and the condors without even realizing it. All the while economists, tour companies, politicians, and even environmental groups provide them with justification, proclaiming "sustainable tourism," "economic development," or "habitat conservation." The condors, like South American forests, rivers, and peoples are being quickly consumed by western appetites for raw materials, packaged vacations, lofty summits, tropical beaches, or just our own amusement. When our desires come with such drastic consequences, and few notice and fewer care, I at least am unable to walk in such exotic places without a sense of dread and complicity.

Perhaps this is inevitable. Who am I to argue that indigenous cultures should resist modernity? John Krakauer in *Into Thin Air* claims that since the Sherpa people

of Nepal have been exposed to western culture they have no desire to remain as “artifacts in an anthropological museum” for the pleasure of tourists. Perhaps the Quechua people of the Colca Canyon feel the same way. However, the sickening truths behind the neo-liberal myths are all too clear to me: we have replaced the good old-fashioned, bloody Latin American coup with a seemingly bloodless economic vise grip.

We are not offering these indigenous cultures a seat at our table of modern progress. Rather we are asking them to be servants for it. We are asking that they sacrifice their cultural and ecological assets for our benefit. We ask them to relocate because we need to flood the valley that they live in to bring electricity to the slums that our economy creates. We ask them to work in factories in miserable conditions for meager pay to produce basketball shoes. We ask them to destroy their local economies, based on a tradition of growing the Coca plant, with DDT, because our consumptive society has developed a drug problem.

In return we give them “loans” that doom their economies to the abyss of permanent indebtedness. We’ll give them genetically engineered seeds to replace centuries of wisdom contained in their crops. We also give them baseball caps adorned with symbols of our own culture. If a community is really lucky, it might get one of our own. We send them an Evangelical Preacher who dunks them in a river and tells them that their interpretation of the world based on thousands of years of observation and interaction is wrong. Better yet we’ll send them a young idealistic Peace Corps volunteer who passes out toothbrushes and calls it health care. Or even better, develops “eco-tourism” ventures, which allow the most privileged of western

society to glimpse “wild nature” or a “traditional culture.” Is any of this just compensation for their servitude? I don’t think so.

So I stood there in front of the Church in the pouring rain watching the enslaved condor bury its head in its black plume of feathers, unable to fly to a more suitable shelter. As the raindrops beaded and then ran off my Gore-Tex jacket, I wondered if the steel shackle around the bird’s neck had once been closed on a human wrist. Regardless, my own culpability in the cycles of oppression was scathingly real. I knew that the invisible economic chains that my country had placed on an entire continent were no less painful than the shackle around the condor’s throat. I turned away from the bird, entered the van, settled into my musty seat, and continued on with my “eco-tour.”

## Three Days off the Trail

Ever consider a trip to the landlocked paradise of Paraguay? Didn't think so. Recently, Paraguay managed to make headlines with a department store fire, which killed more than 350 people. Aside from the occasional incident of mass carnage and a nice run at the World Cup in 2002, Paraguay is a forgotten place. My trip into Paraguay offered me the opportunity to slip into the unknown, and leave behind the ethically--challenged culture of the Gringo Trail.

During the planning phases of our grand South American adventure, Josh, my traveling companion, brought up the subject of Paraguay. "Let's go to Paraguay, my buddy Travis is in the Peace Corps there."

Noting that the Paraguayan section of the Lonely Planet Travel Guide was smaller than that of most Latin American cities, and the highlights of the country, according to the Lonely Planet, were the Jesuits and their missions and the Mennonites with their windmills, I was initially less than enthusiastic. Josh, however, was not interested in my belly aching. "Man, I promised Travis we'd come, and it's on our way. Besides, he said I could kill one of his pigs for a feast!" I responded with a non-committal "whatever."

That "whatever" would eventually lead me to the Friendship Bridge, spanning the Rio Parana, where I was stamped out of Brazil, but not yet admitted to Paraguay. With some local connections and a favorable exchange rate, travel in Brazil had been



easy and comfortable. Beaches, waterfalls and luxury buses lay behind me. The tropical thorn forest lay ahead.

Only five hundred yards away was the Wild West culture of Paraguay. Ciudad del Este, the Paraguayan town, looked like Beirut and had a reputation to match. Weeks before, after hearing of our plans to visit Paraguay, our Brazilian friend Eduardo suggested that we buy guns. From the Europeanized city of Florianopolis, Eduardo could not fathom why we would consider visiting such a poor, unattractive, dangerous place. In an exasperated rant in broken English he chided us, “Paraguay, no one goes to Paraguay. Anyway, we only go to Paraguay to buy cheap electronics, and we go with guns. They will rob you and kill you. They steal many cars from Brazil. Even their president drives a stolen Brazilian car! There are no tourists there. Your friends there are not worth it. You two are stupid!”

Writing off Eduardo’s rant to overblown nationalism rooted in machismo and fear, we bid him goodbye at a spotless Brazilian bus station and headed east. As we got closer, the reports about Paraguay became worse.

A tall, swarthy Israeli with a beautiful girlfriend was shocked when he heard of our plans. “There are Islamic militants there. That is where they plan attacks on the Argentine Jews. The Mossad and the CIA are in Paraguay hunting for Osama Bin Laden! You might be supporting terrorist organizations!”

Josh offered our local connection as justification for our itinerary, “Look man, my friend is in a little community where they only speak Guarani. I don’t think there are any terrorists there. Besides it is an opportunity to experience something different.”

I remembered these sentiments when the intimidating customs official slammed his stamp into my passport. “Paraguay,” I thought with a smile. We were walking through a door into another world. As we exchanged our Brazilian Reals for Paraguayan Guarani and subsequently had to multiply by 3700 to calculate costs, I realized that this could be the South America I had been seeking. I had felt it on the streets of Salvador Brazil during Carnival, where music and people became one organism powered by a heartbeat of drums. Paraguay presented the opportunity once again. Paraguay was a chance to experience wildness.

It had been frustrating to go looking for the “other” and end up looking in the mirror. In South America, Josh and I were naively surprised to find carbon copies of ourselves: privileged white westerners, wandering around from one spectacular place to another, guided by books that reduce places to notches on a seasoned traveler’s belt. We wanted to travel differently, but it was hard to escape the tentacles of tourism. Paraguay allowed us to slip away.

So with great pleasure, I confidently placed all of my worldly belongings with the shady guardiara in the Ciudad del Este bus station and purchased a piece of mystery meat on a stick. The floor was covered with light red dirt and the signs were hand-painted. As we compared our hand-drawn maps with the bus schedule scrawled on a chalkboard and the Lonely Planet, it became clear that our guidebook was useless and the man with the straw hat in the corner might be a better source of advice. We boarded a bus headed for a crossroads that everyone knew but no one could locate on our map, and let the adventure that we had come for finally begin.

The diesel--powered bus rattled down Paraguay's main highway between Ciudad del Este and Asuncion, the capital city. The bus, a vintage Greyhound, was hot and sticky. Reminding myself that comforts such as air-conditioned buses were behind us, I slid back my window and inhaled the smell of the Paraguayan campo. Banana trees dotted the roadside and campesinos in lightly colored, loose fitting clothing labored in the fields. The vague scent of fields burning, combined with the steam rising from the damp fields in the midmorning sun, was familiar and comforting. I thought of my past travels and opened a history book.

Paraguay's history is one of the most intriguing of all of the South American nations. Considering its current state of affairs, its past as a major military power in South America surprised me. With a series of decisive victories in the late 1800s, Paraguay was poised to be the dominant force in all of South America. However, in time the Triple Alliance of Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina eventually wore the Paraguayan armies down. With its economy crashing, and isolated from the ocean, Paraguay appealed to the United States to broker a peace agreement.

While not many Americans remember our 22<sup>nd</sup> President, Paraguay does. Grover Cleveland's name is all over Paraguay, a tribute to the man who used diplomacy to return Paraguayan sovereignty to territory lost in the war. I wondered how our current President would be remembered abroad for his actions around the globe. Would the Afghan people choose to rename one of its provinces for George W. Bush? Somehow I didn't think so.

Two buses and a long taxi cab ride later found us standing in front of a battered white house called the Casa Blanca. It was Sunday and the streets of San Juan were deserted.

“It looks abandoned.”

“That’s what the directions say.”

“Well...” Josh said with a nod and proceeded through the brush towards the front door of the Casa Blanca. The door was barely attached to the house and our knocks were greeted with silence. We found the key.

A dank smell welcomed us. Books were scattered along a low shelf in the hallway. Through the frame of a partially finished room I could see a hanging mosquito net, presumably above a bed. Beyond it the neighbor’s house was visible through a hole in the wall. The far wall held a mural of the campo. The other walls had names and dates scrawled on them. A guitar hung from the ceiling. We left our backpacks and went out into the searing heat in search of water.

The side streets in San Juan were red clay. Everything looked closed. Across from the Casa Blanca a TV blared through an open doorway. Above the door a sign hung that indicated an electronic repair shop.

“Do you think they have water?” Josh asked.

“For sale?” I replied skeptically.

“Well, you never know who’s selling what down here. It looks open.”

Josh walked towards the door. A young boy cocked his head to one side and watched him approach with vague interest. I thought that this family must be used to confused gringos on their block. Josh began in Spanish, first to greet and wish

everyone a good day. I stood thirty feet away, feeling awkward and impatient. My head began to pound. I shut my eyes.

I heard Josh approach, “You don’t look so hot. They said to go up to the main street.”

“What a novel idea,” I replied sarcastically and began to walk up the street. The main drag through town was paved. The traffic was non-existent. The stone sidewalk was at least a foot above the pavement. Surprisingly, the crude paving seemed to be cooler than the dank red clay of the side streets. Ahead some teenagers were hanging out in front of a shop. As we approached, strange sounds were coming from the building.

“Sounds like Pac- Man,” Josh said.

“Looks like Ms. Pac-Man to me,” I replied as we entered the store. Sure enough we had stumbled upon the video arcade, complete with Ms. Pac-Man, Frogger, and a couple of other video games left over from the eighties.

“*Tienes agua?*” I asked a girl behind the counter, skipping the pleasantries that were embedded in Josh’s Spanish.

“*No hay. Solemente Cola-cola y cerveza.*” replied the girl, informing me that there was only coke and beer.

“*Cola-cola por favor,*” I answered, figuring that something was better than nothing. The girl held out an ice cold glass bottle of Coke.

“*Aqui?*” She asked guardedly. She wanted to be sure that I wasn’t going to leave the premises with the bottle. I replied that yes, I would be staying, and reached for the bottle.

The frosty glass felt amazing on my forehead. I looked for the church key, which I saw nailed to the opposite wall. “It’s nice to see glass again,” I said to Josh who was eyeing my coke but determined to hold out for water.

“No kidding, I wonder how long that will last.” Glass bottles in Latin American countries must have produced one of best incentives to reuse in the world. Since the actual bottle was worth something, the distributors charged the vendors for the product as well as the glass. Their deposit for the glass would be returned when all the glass bottles were accounted for. The vendors in turn passed this “deposit” on to their customers. Therefore, most soft drink and beer containers were continuously reused in Latin America. This closed loop system is purely economic and has nothing to do with an environmental ethic. Whatever its root motivation, the system reduced waste.

Sadly, this system is becoming harder and harder to find. All over the continent beverage corporations are replacing glass with plastic bottles. None of the plastic is reused or recycled. It mostly ends up in streams, which tend to be refuse dumps in many Latin American towns. In many places we visited on our South American trip, local creeks were choked with plastic. With no economic incentives, and nothing to use the plastic for, the locals toss it into the streams and rivers to remain there for eternity. Luckily for Paraguayan waterways, the country is still an economic backwater. For now it is safe from the profiteering innovations of global capitalism.

We returned to the street, with our thirst partially quenched. The slowness of our progress matched the heavy stillness of San Juan. As we rounded the corner on

the street of our abandoned looking abode, Travis came into view. Not surprisingly he was in the company of two young Latin women who looked as out of place as we did.

“Boyz!” He exclaimed as he strode towards us, with the women in tow.

Our group coalesced in the middle of the street. Introductions were made, drawn out pleasantries in Spanish were exchanged. The women were visiting from Asuncion, and were happy to meet Travis’s American friends. They struck me as quite different from the other Paraguayans I had met that day, although I couldn’t quite say why. Perhaps it was the Mercedes--Benz now parked out front of the Casa Blanca. I wondered if it formerly belonged to a Brazilian.

Once inside Travis explained that the Peace Corps purchased the Casa Blanca many years ago to serve as a home-base for its volunteers further out in the campo. Travis informed us that his village was about an hour away by bus. Considering that until recently San Juan was the closest place to Travis’s house with phone or electricity, I realized how truly far out he lived. Travis told us that the next morning we would catch the only bus to his house.

“Where are we sleeping?” Josh began, “And where should our stuff go?” He motioned at our enormous bags.

“In the back there are two more beds. I’ll just sleep on the kitchen table. It’s cockroach free,” Travis said with a smile.

The old school bus blew its horn. People slowly moved towards it. The humidity at ten in the morning was thick. The Paraguayan sun hidden by cloud did not need to be present in order for us to be drenched in sweat. I had taken two cold

showers during the night and believed that I hadn't stopped sweating. Under thick US Army issue mosquito nets that blocked all moving air, I marinated in my own perspiration while listening to the cockroaches patrol the room. Twice I stumbled outside to the shower, rinsed off and returned to my bed completely soaked. Only this tactic allowed for any sleep at all.

Josh and Travis emerged from the restaurant with coffee in hand. "Travis, you described this place perfectly," I heard Josh say. "It's like a tropical island, without the beach."

"Exactly. Nothing to cool you off," Travis said with a grin.

We loaded our backpacks and our collective provisions onto the bus while Travis slung a tank of propane over his shoulder. Once the old engine jerked us into motion, the bus began to circle San Juan with its horn blaring, looking for anyone who might have missed it. I laughed out loud at this practice, so different than the controlling schedules that governed most modern transportation.

The thirty-mile an hour breeze was refreshing. The people on the bus were interesting. Somewhere we had crossed an invisible line. The mood was heavy and the poverty apparent. The language changed from Spanish to Guarani. People's luggage changed from battered suitcases to chickens and bundles of belongings wrapped in cloth. Their clothing was western, unlike the indigenous communities I had visited in the past. The colors were drab, so different than the colorful traje of the mountain women of Guatemala and Ecuador. No one here was making money from selling western tourists an image they wanted to buy. As the bus rolled down its rural



route, people got on and off seemingly in the middle of nowhere. A few knew Travis, smiled and exchanged a few words with him in a distinctly different tongue.

Soon more houses began to appear. Set back away from the road, the dwellings had thatched roofs. People waved from their yards. Travis stood up, gave us the nod, and the bus slowed to a crawl. We had arrived in Cerritos. We paid our fare and jumped off the still moving bus. My feet hit the soft earth and sunk slightly. The smell of burning organic matter was strong.

“Let’s go boys,” Travis called already out of the road. “There it is! Shit, I really have to cut the lawn,” he said happily as he pointed at his house.

“What’s that?” I asked indicating the brick structure across the field.

“The local clinic,” he responded, still moving quickly towards his home.

“Let’s get your stuff put away and then we can take a tour.”

Travis’s house looked to be a well-constructed affair. The two rooms were separated by an open-air hallway, which served as Travis’s porch. It held a small table and couple of chairs. His bedroom had large bed supported by a handmade wooden frame complete with a headboard. The walls supported books and pictures. The bathroom was a fairly typical outhouse with a hand--fashioned magazine rack filled with dated periodicals. The shower consisted of an elevated hose located behind a rubber ducky curtain. Its source was a large cistern where Travis also got his water.

Josh and I were to sleep in the kitchen across the porch. It was simple and functional, although the bright light revealed some jumping amphibians and their prey in the corners of the room. Voices suddenly came from behind us. We turned and there were a few kids and a teenager smiling expectantly at Travis. He greeted them

in Guanrai and turned to us and laughed. “Word gets out fast in this place. Everyone already knows that I am back.” The children were soon dispatched with toothbrushes, the tools of Travis’s trade.

“So you give out toothbrushes?” I asked, assuming that this was part of Travis’s assignment as a Peace Corps volunteer.

“You got it. I am promoting oral hygiene among the Guanrai,” he said somewhat ironically, as we sat down around the small wooden table in the open-air hallway. “Mostly the kids just play with them.”

“Don’t you do some other stuff too?” Josh asked, as if unprepared for the inglorious nature of Travis’s work.

“Well, the project I’m most excited about is building stoves in people’s houses. Generally, people cook on the floors of their homes here. That leads to a lot of intestinal problems because of worms and other parasites that get into in their food. It has helped a lot. You guys want to do a round of tirere?”

“As long as it is cold,” said Josh. Travis was referring to the Paraguayan version of mate. Mate is a type of tea that is highly regarded in the southern half of South America. It was served cold here in recognition of the heat. Travis dumped a bunch of yerba mate in his gourd and poured water into it from a pitcher. He handed it to me and I took a sip through a silver straw with a copper mouthpiece called the bombia.

A motorcycle broke into Travis’s explanation of the rules of drinking tierre. A young man and even younger woman got off the bike in front of the clinic next door. The man looked like the Paraguayan version of the Fonz from Happy Days. “Your

neighbor is home,” Josh said. Travis just rolled his eyes. “What’s up with him?” Josh continued.

“That dude is the nurse at the clinic. He rides around on his bike with his thirteen-year old girlfriend and doesn’t do shit around here.”

“How old is he?”

“Oh, about twenty-three or so.”

“Her family allows that?” I asked.

“Sure,” Travis said through the bombia, “they are probably happy that they don’t have to support her anymore. I mean, look at him: from their standpoint he’s well educated speaks Spanish and clearly has a better income than most.” The nurse saw us, waved and wandered towards us with his “girlfriend” in tow.

We met him halfway across the “lawn.” Introductions were made in Spanish. Travis gestured at the thing in the Fonz’s hand. “Hey, I have that hand-held Yatzee at home!” Josh said to me in English and then quickly repeated himself in Spanish. The Fonz was excited to hear this and banged the weathered plexiglass screen with his index finger. Travis retorted with a number in the thousands, Josh threw in an even higher number and they all laughed. This continued for several minutes. I realized with a certain disbelief that I was standing in 100 degree heat, in the middle of rural Paraguay, listening to three men brag to each other about their hand-held Yatzee triumphs. I looked at the Fonz’s barely pubescent girlfriend. She smiled at me blankly with gold teeth. I felt like passing out.

Seeking escape, I said in Spanish, “Guys, I am headed back for the tirere.”

Everyone followed back towards Travis’s house. Once seated (except for the girl) the

ribbing continued but on a slightly different topic: the lawn. Travis and the Fonz began to argue over whose lawn was in better shape. Personally, I would have referred to the grounds around Travis's house and the clinic as a field, pasture or perhaps clearing. Initially, I assumed they were joking, but it became clear that they were quite serious. After the Fonz and his woman, who reminded me of one of my former six grade students, bid us adieu, crossed the ill kept lawns, and roared off on his Japanese crotch rocket, Josh asked, "You really care about the condition of the lawn?"

"Yeah, man, people don't mess around here. I am sure everyone in Cerritos has noticed that my lawn needs some work. I kinda hoped my neighbor would have taken care of it for me. We'll cut it later," he said with a sly smile.

Silence settled over us for a moment. The insects of the thorn forest seemed close by. The heat began to press harder on the earth. A single fly buzzed around the porch. My eyes started to close and accept the heat-induced nap.

Voices startled me to attention. Three men stood in the doorway. Travis rose to greet them. Josh and I stood as well. Our greetings were exchanged in Spanish, but as Travis produced more chairs and another round of tirere, the conversation quickly switched into Guarnai. Occasionally, I recognized a word in Spanish, but I was quickly lost. I looked at Josh and took comfort in his apparent confusion as well.

The men began talking rapidly again in Guarnai, snickering occasionally. I noticed that the older man kept gesturing at me. Travis smiled and said, "He," nodding at the older man, "says you are the first tourists to ever come here. He also thinks you must be the dumbest."

“It’s quite possible,” said Josh. Travis translated his response and we all laughed together.

“He also thinks that *you* look like him,” Travis said, pointing at me.

“Huh?” I replied numbed by my lack of comprehension and the heat.

“He thinks you look like him,” Travis repeated. I stared at the man and he smiled and waved his arm back and forth between us. I smiled back and shrugged my shoulders.

“Manuel,” he proclaimed as he slapped his chest, “y Manuel Segundo,” as he pointed at me.

“Manuel Primero,” the man said again.

I reached for his hand and said, “Manuel Segundo.” Everyone laughed again.

We passed most of the afternoon chatting idly with Manuel and company. As they were leaving they made the suggestion that we get busy sleeping with Paraguayan women. Travis laughed.

When they left Travis produced some homemade glasses crafted from large beer bottles. After a couple bottles of Paraguay’s finest brew, Travis decided that we were sufficiently altered to mow the lawn. He went into his bedroom and returned with a machete.

“Doesn’t that take forever?”

“Do I look busy to you?” he replied. “I usually try to do this in the morning before it gets too hot, but you boys look like you haven’t seen enough of the sun

today. Let's try and be careful, I don't want to have to take either of you to the clinic-  
-you've met the nurse."

Cutting the lawn in Paraguay involved an arcing, low sweep of the machete across the grass. At the apex of your swing, good form dictated a quick flip of the wrist to ensure the sharp side of the blade maximized the effect of your back swing. Travis, donning a large hat and removing his shirt, took the first shift. The machete was surprisingly effective. He quickly trimmed a large portion of the "lawn," while Josh and I watched from the shade of the house.

Soon my turn came up. Stealing Travis's functional sun hat, I proceeded to work my way around the back of the house. I realized that I was having fun, living out some boyish dream of hacking my way through a steamy forest while actually doing a domestic chore, which seemed completely absurd considering the setting. "Don't forget the edge around the garden!" Travis called out.

That night we made a simple meal of pasta and vegetables that Travis had grown in his garden. The single bulb burned above our head and Travis remarked about the arrival of electricity late last year. He told us that any day now a phone would be operational at the clinic. Progress was snaking its way into the campo.

Sleepily, Josh and I dumped our mattress on the kitchen floor and gasped in disbelief. Several hundred insects covered the softwood. The frogs looked fat and happy. "Jesus Christ! No wonder Travis has his bed off the floor," I said.

"A line in the sand?" Josh asked, referring to a defensive measure we had deployed on one previous occasion.

“Good old Tom?” I said questioningly. Josh nodded his response. Out of a backpack came Tom Sawyer, an ironically named super bug repellent. The extensive warning label advised using the product on clothes only. Josh and I couldn’t bring ourselves to cover our clothes in it, but spraying it on the floor had kept roaches out of the room in the past.

The morning came fast. With the accompanying heat and our friends sharing the floor, I felt no need to linger in bed. Soon we found ourselves walking down the red clay road seeking a domestic animal for Josh to kill for our dinner. People waved at us from their houses and Travis grumbled about having to rush by without stopping to say hello.

“You really have to stop and say hello every time you walk by somebody’s house?” I asked.

“Why do you think it is so difficult to get anything done around here?” Travis said. “I mean that’s how people spend most of their time. It’s probably one of the biggest sources of frustration among Peace Corps folks. A work ethic doesn’t really exist here, beyond keeping yourself from starving. But after awhile you get used to it. You learn the language, adjust your goals, and begin to enjoy yourself. Unfortunately, though, people generally talk about three things: the weather, their animals, and sex-- at least the men, that is.”

Walking fast directly into the sun was hot, but my feet felt light beneath me. Once again I was struck with the notion that I had finally arrived in the South America I had hoped to find. Here the language of power was not European in origin,

and there was no chance of encountering other gringos on this road. To citizens of my increasingly provincial country, taking off to South America for a year sounds like a huge adventure. However, to most citizens of “first world nations” it is a fairly common thing to do. The Gringo Trail can be a very crowded place.

Paraguay was proving to be a fascinating counterpoint to every South American nation I had visited in the past. To a western traveler looking for the stereotypical example of an indigenous culture, Paraguay might be disappointing. The people were clothed in slacks, shorts, and button-down shirts that you might find at Goodwill. According to Travis the area had been converted to Christianity long ago, but the Guarnai weren’t attached to it or anything else for that matter. I didn’t see any shamans. Western influence had passed through here, altered the culture, and left. Now off the international travel radar, free from our linear idea of progress, the Guarnai lived a simple, humble, authentic existence unchanged by tourism and the demands of international economics.

As we neared the house where Travis’s pig lived he stopped us and said, “I don’t really want to kill my pig today, guys. I kinda like him, and, well... it will be a ton of meat. I thought I’d save the pig for my going away party anyway.”

“That’s fine man, I’m not sure I can handle killing a pig, anyway,” Josh said. To understand his desire to slit a pig’s throat, strangle a turkey, or pluck a chicken clean of feathers, you must understand that to him it is a way to consume meat with a clear conscience. Josh was one first people I knew to embrace ecological concepts surrounding food. For Josh, slaughtering his own dinner would be the apex of ethical eating.



“But then Josh won’t get to kill anything,” I said, anxious to see if Josh would actually follow through after years of preaching.

Josh looked at me slightly annoyed “Hey man, if Travis doesn’t want...”

Travis cut Josh off and smiled conspiratorially at me, “No, Jeff’s right, I promised you could kill something if you guys found me way out here, and you’re going to kill a chicken.” Josh rolled his eyes and looked affected by the heat. I laughed.

We walked back down the road a little bit until we reached a house with a small fence defining the perimeter. I noticed that the lawn was neatly trimmed.

Travis had informed us that besides animal husbandry, most of the people who lived in the area were involved in cotton production in one way or another. The house that we were approaching looked well kept. I wondered out loud if these folks were doing well in the cotton business. Travis told us that the grandmother of the family was a “leader” in the women’s basket-making collective. The group had received some small grants from the government and would sell their baskets a few times a year in Asuncion. This homespun industry was making an economic difference in the lives of the families that participated, while simultaneously empowering women in the community. For this family, local ideas had led to prosperity at home.

As if on cue, la abuelita appeared in the doorway, smiling at us with open arms. She greeted us in Spanish. I was introduced as Manuel Segundo.

After what seemed like an hour, Travis mentioned that he might be taking one of his chickens home. La abuelita looked unhappy about this. She gave us the OK,

after a little bartering over the cost of tending to Travis's chickens. We were dispatched with one of her sons and a small cage to go collect dinner. Along the way, he asked us if we'd had a chance to sleep with any Paraguayan women yet.

The chickens could sense our intentions as soon we approached their pen. In a frenzy they ran about the enclosure, fruitlessly searching for escape. Travis selected a rooster for our dinner. We stared at our quarry for a moment. Travis asked in Guarnai if we should name him. La abuelita's son, apparently unconcerned with gender confusion, suggested Katy.

The rest of the flock, sensing a reprieve, instantly relaxed. La abuelita's son entered the pen and Katy took evasive action. The man, surprised, lost his balance as he spun around and landed on one knee.

"Perhaps we should help him," Josh suggested. Travis shook his head no and we watched for another several minutes. I realized if we helped catch Katy a certain amount of face would be lost. Finally, the doomed bird began to tire. Katy was presented to us in a wooden cage. We thanked the man for his effort and walked back to Travis's house with dinner.

"Well, should we take a hike?" Travis suggested after Katy was safely passed off to the family who would share in tonight's meal. "We could walk down the road, but since you boyz are "backpacking" and all, I thought we might take the direct route through the forest. It'll probably be a little swampy, so I suggest sandals." The first section of our hike seemed to involve some thick bushwhacking.

“There have to be snakes here, aren’t there?” I asked, suddenly a little nervous about stomping through the forest in my sandals.

“Yeah, man, there are. I stepped off my porch one day to see a huge rattlesnake coiled up right in front of me. I got my neighbor to come over with a sickle and cut its head off. There’re Fer de Lances around too, but I’ve never seen one. Actually, we lost a kid here to snakebite last year.”

“You’re shitting me, I fucking hate snakes.”

“Don’t worry,” Travis said grinning, as he began the treacherous descent down the rotting ladder, “I’ll bring the machete.”

Tromping through the thorn forest was easier than I expected. It was not as dense as the chaparral of southern California. The trees were not very high and their leaves were small, allowing light to filter through to the forest floor. The waist-high plants were easily trampled or beaten back with the machete. The ground cover did not molest my exposed feet. I didn’t encounter any thorns. The fact that our destination was downhill helped. We took turns out front, cutting our path with the machete.

We reached the bottom of the hill and were faced with a sloppy bog to cross. It looked like a perfect place to be ambushed by a deadly reptile. Once as a boy, my older nephew showed me his friend’s boa constrictor strangling and swallowing a mouse. Then they released the snake in the room, turned off the lights and locked the door, and told me that they would beat the crap out of me if I screamed. Childhood fears die a hard death.

Thankfully, we crossed the bog quickly and emerged onto the dirt track. We plodded along as the clay road turned our feet red. “Do you think I can pick up some toothpaste at this store?” Josh asked.

Travis laughed, “No. It’s not really going to a store. It’s more of a house that sells meat. You’ll get one in Asuncion tomorrow.” Until then I had forgotten that we were leaving so soon. Despite the insane heat, a reprieve from the long arms of tourism had provided me with an example of how one might travel without exacerbating cultural and environmental dilemmas. Travis’s home provided us with something other than a consumptive connection.

At our destination the pork provider only had some rather undesirable parts of pig for sale. We headed home on the road and soon encountered a man on horseback. He knew Travis and they began talking rapidly in Guarnai. With Travis acting as translator, the man began to question us. After minimal pleasantries he bluntly asked, “Have you slept with any Paraguayans yet?”

We shook our heads no. He looked disappointed, then laughed and rode away.

“Jesus, Travis, that really is a common question,” Josh said.

“I used to tell them no, too,” Travis said, “but now I tell them hundreds and hundreds. It makes them happy.”

The road took us the long way home. A flatbed truck responded to our outstretched thumbs. As we bounced along, holding on to the rails, Josh and I suggested to Travis that we could start promoting Paraguayan eco-tourism here in Cerritos. He laughed.

“It is nice to know that some places are safe from the backpacking hordes,” Josh said as we jumped off the truck.

“You ready?” Travis deviously asked. “Katy is waiting.”

We stood around a table in the open-air kitchen of the neighbor’s house. Travis’s best friend joined us, as well, to witness what was sure to be a spectacle and partake in a rare meal of pollo asada. “So, I just hold the thing upside down, with its legs in one hand, its neck in the other, and then just snap its neck over my thigh,” Josh said in Spanish. The woman who was giving the instructions in Guarnai nodded her approval. She opened the cage and Katy burst out surprising everyone.

Quickly, the dogs were set upon him. They chased him into the forest only to have him come back towards the house racing at us. Perhaps he sensed the snakes. Dumbfounded, we watched as the rooster tore into the kitchen closely followed by two foaming dogs. The table crashed to the floor. Chairs were knocked over. A glass broke on the dirt. Everyone doubled over with laughter.

If Katy was smarter, he might have escaped. He was a step quicker than the dogs, but he kept circling the house instead of making a clean break for the wilds. Finally, as Katy tired, one dog tackled him from behind, grabbed him by the throat and held him down. The woman removed Katy from the dog’s mouth and handed the still struggling creature to Josh.

Josh looked sick. His arms strained to control the bird. He began to twist Katy’s head backward; the bird continued to struggle. His face flushed with effort. I

snapped pictures. Travis, along with his friend and neighbor, laughed hysterically.

The dogs looked confused.

Josh twisted and twisted. "It won't break!" he exclaimed through gritted teeth. Katy's head had been completely rotated three times when Josh looked up and pleadingly asked, "Can I rip its fucking head off?"

Travis said, "Why not?"

With an audible grunt of relief Katy's head was separated from his body. Josh dropped it to the ground. He limply held the rooster's headless body by its feet. He looked momentarily defeated, as if somehow the action had not fulfilled his expectations. Travis and I clapped and threw down a glass of beer in honor of Katy. The woman removed the lifeless bird from Josh's weak grasp. This seemed to bring him back to life.

"If we put it down, will it run around?" Josh asked in Spanish. The men explained that no, Katy had died too slow a death by strangulation, and thus was unavailable for postmortem performance. True to his ethics and culinary interests, Josh went into the kitchen to see how the woman was going to first pluck, then clean, and finally prepare dinner. After a few photos to further document the event, Travis and I returned to sit with the other men who clearly found Josh's keen interest in kitchen chores strange.

Katy tasted excellent. We ate greedily and quickly, washing down Katy's strong flavor with beer. The men ate around the kitchen table. The woman busied herself with her children. We wiped our faces with the tablecloth. Darkness crept into the room. It was time to leave.

We said our good-byes and stumbled in the dark to Travis's house, exhausted from the day's events. Despite our heavy eyes, we talked for awhile. I sensed that Travis was reluctant to see us go. I was grateful to him for allowing us to experience his home.

Katy had his revenge. In the darkness of the next morning, I found myself sprinting out of Travis's outhouse to race after the only bus that day. As I chased the blaring horn, I grabbed my eighty-pound pack from Travis like a relay baton and slapped him on the back. Once aboard, I waved to Travis, standing on his well-manicured lawn smiling at us.

Our decision to visit Paraguay was grounded in a search for an authenticity only found in wild places. In South America it is easy to fall into lockstep with other travelers racing from one natural or cultural wonder to another along the Gringo Trail. After you have snapped your pictures, you might find yourself in a vegetarian restaurant, reading a menu in English run by dreadlocked hippies. You might as well be in Eugene.

Western Civilization began drastically altering the Americas 500 years ago. Now, except deep in the rainforests or in remote mountains, the peoples of Latin America have been fundamentally changed. Your typical backpacker is in denial of that fact. On the Gringo Trail history becomes irrelevant. We seek the old and the ancient. We want Internet access and vegan dinners. We are willing to pay for all of it.

In Paraguay I entered a country barely mentioned in travel guides. Few tourists crossed her borders, and none had ever been to Cerritos before. What I found there didn't conform to stereotypical, marketable notions of how indigenous peoples in isolated places lived. In place of mysticism and nature worship I found discussions of sex, lawns, and Yatzee. In Paraguay we located a reality, as opposed to a package designed to rid gringos of their dollars and Euros. In Paraguay lies a wildness that is not only found in its forests, but also in its obscurity. Paraguay's people and their culture continue to evolve free from the demands of tourism. Global economics have not yet told the Guarnai what role to play. Romantic ideas of indigenous cultures are not reconstructed and sold in Paraguay for the pleasure of westerners. Paraguay is different. Paraguay is wild.



## Eating at Home

The phone rang as I was grinding buffalo berries into a pulp. “Jeff?” a pseudo-sexy voice came through the receiver, “You and Gillie wanna go to the Old Post? Its burger beer night.”

“Well...” I thought for a second.

“I just realized it’s Monday, five bucks for a burger and beer,” she continued, trying to sell me on a weekly event that during the last two years of my life had practically become a staple.

“I don’t know, I just started marinating steaks...and well Gillie is getting sick of the OPP, but maybe.” As usual my mind began to race, searching for a way out of my kitchen.

I stared into the pinkish pulp, thought about the Native Plants and Indigenous Peoples book I had found, and said, “Sorry, Bexs, I am going to stick with my experiment here.”

“So domestic these days,” she said sarcastically, her husky voice either referring to my recent marriage or sudden interest in cooking.

“Yup, gotta go, thanks for the invite,” I hung up and stared at my steaks, still in their packaging, in disbelief. Normally, being a fairly lazy person in general, and an extremely lazy person when it came to food, I would’ve run off to the bar. There I would’ve consumed a burger patty straight from the industrial beef industry, probably

from a cow loaded with hormones, slaughtered in some god-awful way, processed by machines into nice round patties, and delivered to my favorite watering hole courtesy of Cisco. Following the burger with the mandatory beverage (or two), any qualms I might have had about the origin or quality of the burger would have been washed away with a good dose of locally--brewed beer.

Now I know better than this. In fact, before I moved to this idyllic mountain town to go to an environmental studies graduate program, I had lived in Los Angeles, where I bought organic produce and had pretty much given up on meat. I was by no means a vegetarian, but I had ceased to seek meat out on a regular basis. While I could praise myself for holding myself to a high environmental ethic, it really had more to do with the fact that meat just didn't cross my mind very often. Perhaps it was the heat, the availability of raw fish, or the tastes of my girlfriend, but red meat had slipped from my palette.

How things changed. Fleeing the madness of So-Cal and arriving in Montana, just off a five-month trip to South America, I found myself craving a daily serving of dead cow. Argentina was an eye opening and gut bursting experience. While the Paraguayan rooster provided me with a closer connection to the animals I was eating, most of the meat I ate in South America was killed, prepared and served by someone else. By the time I returned, and moved to Montana, it was hard to think of a breakfast besides steak and eggs.

Wrongly prejudging the attitudes of my fellow environmental studies students, I expected to be surrounded by animal rights advocates with "meat is murder" bumper stickers attached to their cars. Luckily, I encountered folks who generally

embraced the concept of eating meat, especially if it was wild game you shot yourself. Buffalo and organic beef were also readily available. Free from growth hormones, images of stockyards and slaughterhouses, I found that there were many options available to the conscientious carnivore in Missoula, Montana.

Last year, in search of the ultimate burger, I found myself sipping strong coffee in a weak November sun, waiting at the top of a clearcut for a deer to show itself. The forest where we were hunting was thick. We hoped to derive an unintended benefit from the commercial logging that had taken place here. My companion had the gun and the tag. I was along for company and assistance. My ability to provide assistance was certainly questionable, as were Andrew's chances of actually shooting anything besides me. I was concerned about our collective inexperience. You see, neither of us had ever shot anything bigger than a squirrel. Andrew's marksmanship might bring a deer down, but our field dressing knowledge amounted to a couple of sheets of downloaded information from the Internet. While Andrew had gone out with experienced hunters earlier that season and had discussed the procedure in great length, I couldn't get the image of us standing over a fresh kill and referring to [www.howtobutcheradeer.com](http://www.howtobutcheradeer.com) out of my head. Thankfully, luck was with us that day and we escaped without killing anything.

This fall I headed out in pursuit of whitetail once again. I saw countless does protected by hunting regulations. Early one morning, the muted thump of hooves brought my gun around right. Dropping to one knee and lifting the safety, I stared at a frozen whitetail doe through the scope of my gun only ten yards away. I tasted our

collective fear peppered with my desire. I returned unsuccessful that day, but content with a deeper understanding of mountains close to my home.

Despite my quest to fill my own freezer with meat butchered by my own hand, other sources of meat had slipped back into my routine. Eating out on the cheap became a way of life. While organic burger or recently defrosted back-strap would find its way into my belly, flesh of unknown origin was far more commonplace.

Thus, I was pleasantly surprised that I turned Becca down and returned to pounding buffalo berries into a pulp. I really had little idea what I was doing and no recipe to follow. The tidbit of information I had came from a native plant book, which stated that “native peoples used the buffalo berry to flavor buffalo meat.” From this I decided to subject two perfectly good pieces of local cow meat to my experimentation.

The tart flavor of the berries was the first major obstacle. The female bush in my front yard produced berries early on in the summer. I was watering my native plant garden early one morning before the sun had a chance to begin to bake the earth when I saw the little red fruits on my newly planted bush. Greedily, I grabbed a handful and shoved them into my mouth. Jesus, they were bad. Quickly I spit them out and stuck the hose to my mouth hoping to rinse the berry-induced cottonmouth away. I eyed the bush skeptically. I knew that they probably needed to ripen some more, but part of me was convinced that they would always taste like crap.

During the course of the summer a slow sweetness began to creep into the berries. While they were still tart, they no longer twisted my mouth into strange positions. Still I was convinced that they were going to be pretty unusable other than

as a bird feeder until I asked my know-it-all roommate if a pie might be possible. She looked at me like I was moron, sighed and said, “you can make pie out of anything if you add enough sugar.”

I was tempted to ask her if dog feces and sugar would make a good pie as well, since I had copious amounts of it in the back yard, but instead I just replied with, “Really?”

“Of course!” She said with an enormous eye roll, and stormed off as if my question confirmed once again why despite my ownership of the property she was certainly more qualified to be living in my house than I was.

Sugar popped into my head as I looked at the tart mixture in front of me. As I reached for the sugar bowl, brown sugar suddenly seemed like a much better idea. After a few small blocks of it, balsamic vinegar found its way down from the shelf. My wife entered the kitchen and surveyed the scene. It was completely obvious that I was winging it.

“Where did you get this idea again?”

“A book I found the in Mt. Jumbo trunk,” referring to a curriculum my school was currently renting from the local natural history center.

“Hmm...” she wandered over to the fridge and returned with Stonewall’s Kitchen Maple Chipotle Sauce. “Why don’t you put some of this in?”

“Because then I wouldn’t be making this from scratch. If I wanted to marinate it with that, I could have left the berries on the stupid bush.”

“Look, I want to have a good dinner, and those steaks weren’t cheap.”

“Just get out of here! Go!” I said, playfully pushing her out of the kitchen.

I returned to my task in peace. The maple chipotle sauce was staring me down from the corner of the counter, with a promise of ease and simplicity. I could return to uninterrupted beer drinking in about fifteen seconds if I gave in. Quickly I grabbed the sauce and returned it to the fridge.

“All right,” I thought, “some garlic from the farmer’s market couldn’t hurt.” I crushed some and dropped it into the frothy mixture. I also buried some in the meat as well. The mixture was still tart. “Maybe a little salt will help,” I thought. Remembering the soup I destroyed just days earlier with this ingredient, I proceeded with anxious caution. Things were improving, but I knew I had to do better.

Falling into a predictable safety net, I returned to the fridge and I grabbed a bottle of Teriyaki sauce and poured a little in. I felt like I had betrayed my berries, using this premixed ingredient. However, I couldn’t deny that the Teriyaki was improving things rapidly. Now I had something to work with. After a couple hits from my hidden bottle of Marie Sharp’s famous hot sauce, I was ready for some feedback.

“Gillie!” I shouted “Come here and taste this.” After a minute she returned.

“Wow, that’s way better. Did you use some of that Stonewall’s Kitchen stuff?”

“No.” I said indignantly. “But now does it just taste like Teriyaki?”

Probably sensing my fragile state, Gillian replied with a kiss and bounced out of the room, “I’ll pull the grill out,” she said from the back door.

I added a little water to increase my yield, gave the bubbly mixture a final taste, discarded my “just Teriyaki” fear, and dumped half of it onto the waiting steaks.

The rest of my mixture found its way into a small saucepan, which was covered and placed on medium heat to cook it down. When the steaks were ready, it would be poured over them. As a neophyte in the kitchen, I took pleasure in noting I was experimenting with something as complex as a reduction sauce.

Despite my absentmindedness on the grill that evening, I managed to cook the steaks just right. The beef seemed to absorb the buffalo berry concoction well. The remains of the berries provided a pleasant garnish to the tops of the steaks.

As we ate the meal lit by bright candlelight, with red wine bottled by friends across the mountains in Oregon, I realized what a simple pleasure I had engaged in. Until recently in my life, the verb “to cook” was rarely used in the first person. My happiness multiplied as I looked around the table and realized that many of the components of this meal hadn’t traveled long distances to reach my table and I knew many of the people responsible for their creation. The berries, as well as the basil and zucchini came from our garden. My boss provided us with tomatoes from a garden of her own. My favorite organic farm not thirty miles away raised the beef. The garlic arrived fresh from the farmer’s market yesterday.

It wasn’t completely local of course. The Marie Sharp’s had traveled from Belize in my backpack and the salt came from a container with a woman named Morton on it, who has always reminded me of Mary Poppins. I would have loved to try my buffalo berry delight on meat I had killed myself. However, the meal tasted

amazingly good, with wine that complemented it perfectly. Happily, I was eating at home.



## Walking on Jumbo

“*Quiero verlos!*” Nels called out in Spanish, practically bouncing out of his chair.

“What?” Charles asked in a testy tone.

“Can I see those?” Nels repeated, for the benefit of our monolingual naturalist.

“When we get outside, you will get to use them,” Charles responded.

My students were dying to get their hands on the binoculars or any one of the number of interesting objects that Charles had produced and laid on the table. Charles was the “visiting naturalist” assigned to my class. He was droning on about the “tools of the naturalist,” practically teasing my class with all sorts of intriguing items. Animal skins, magnifying glasses, a deer skull and the binoculars were set before them, tempting them with tactile learning experiences. Their sharp minds and energetic bodies were ready to use the tools of the naturalist, rather than hear about some dead guy named Thoreau.

Nels was undeterred, “You said we would be going outside 15 minutes ago!?”

“Uh, well, soon. We will go out soon, just a few more things.... Now does anyone know a naturalist?” The whole class did a collective mental eye roll. I considered helping Charles out but decided against it. Today, he was going to learn how to talk to third, fourth, and fifth graders experientially.

Using the “tool” of intuition unmentioned in the lecture, but undoubtedly vital when walking in nature, Charles sensed he was losing the crowd. He looked at me and said, “pencils?” Clipboards in hand, and partnered up, we were ready to naturalize.

We burst out the front door of the school. Questions in English and comments in Spanish started to fly at Charles.

“What do I put on this line?”

“*Quiero ir primero!*”

“When do I get to hold the binoculars?”

“*Mira, parjaro!*”

“Is that a crow?”

Charles looked overwhelmed. The bilingual abilities of my class weren’t helping. I decided to intervene before things got out of hand.

“You will share the binoculars with your partners. If you can’t figure out how to share with your partner, you can share with me.” Their faces told me that one problem was solved. “Now Charles, would you like to explain how to fill out their phenology reports?” Charles gave some necessary guidance and everyone wrote down “Crow.”

“Great,” I thought, “crow.” Standing in the middle of Harrison Avenue, I began to be skeptical about the usefulness of this nature walk. We looped around the side of the school and started to walk towards the trailhead leading to Mt. Jumbo.

“Magpie!” Someone shouted.

“Knapweed is everywhere,” yelled someone else.

“Write it down, write all of it down. A naturalist records everything he sees.”

Charles said.

“Hey, I’m a *she!*” said a budding 5<sup>th</sup> grade feminist with mock indignation.

At a painfully slow pace we crossed the one-acre playground. The kids were having fun. It was great to watch them see the playground as more than a place to have recess, but I was a little bored. I had already hiked Jumbo that morning. I had watched the sun hit the Bitterroot Mountains while chasing my dogs up the hill. I saw a large bear just two days ago, only yards from where we were currently standing, but I knew eight screaming children would surely frighten away anything besides the knapweed.

I loved the trail we were about to ascend. This open space provided a quick access from work and home. I walked, ran, and stumbled up and down it so much I rarely thought about what I passed anymore.

We reached the trailhead and Charles stopped us for a second. He reviewed the rules of binocular use, the need to be a little quieter, and the rule that the kids should stay in between us, lest a mountain lion had any designs on a late breakfast. Off the playground now, the kids calmed down and began to use their tools to discover things I had run by just hours ago. Fading summer wildflowers, clumps of knapweed, and stones on the path prevented us from moving very quickly.

“Did you know that some of the rocks on Mt. Jumbo are some of the oldest rocks in the world?” Charles asked. The kids were wowed by this fact.

“Look!” Nels shouted with a barely contained whisper, “A bird right there.”

“Good spot, young man,” said Charles raising his field glasses to his eyes. “Two actually, towhees, red breasted I believe.” I glassed the two birds. Small, sparrow-like birds were sitting on branches of chokecherry bush just yards away. I handed the binoculars to Rachel and helped her focus.

“They’re pretty,” she said, her small arms drooping under the weight of the binoculars.

In the distance I spotted two birds dancing over the upper branches of a large ponderosa pine. Taking the binoculars back from Rachel, I saw two magpies harassing a larger bird in the top of the tree. “Hey, Charles check that out,” I said pointing.

“Wow, look kids, the magpies are dive-bombing an American Kestrel.”

“Why are they doing that?” asked someone.

“Smaller birds hate raptors in their territory. It makes them nervous.” Charles responded.

The last time I watched birds for that long, they were the condors in Peru. Now I watched them with my bilingual students. If they travel to South America, they will be ready for Paraguay rather than Colca Canyon. When she was six, Rachel told her mother that speaking Spanish was like walking through a “magic door.” I am confident that her “magic door” will lead to a profound understanding of the world that she encounters. Rachel and her friends are growing up in a world where English is the language of power. Spanish immersion education is a subversive activity.

As we observed this avian drama play itself out for several minutes, I thought about my return to teaching. Surrounding me were kids, with eyes wide open, and hearts free of heavy burdens. These faces were several shades paler than the faces of my last class, and their families were paying a lot to attend one of Missoula's private schools. Now I had a class of eight, rather than thirty-eight. Their inquisitive minds, however, produced questions strikingly similar to those I had encountered before.

Nature is always a great teacher.

Lately I hadn't been paying close attention to the world that shaped my home. As we climbed higher on Mt. Jumbo, I could see the school below. My house sat just two blocks beyond it. Native plants, like those on Jumbo, dotted my front lawn. A potted yucca sat in the center. The past seemed close at hand. My students were now on their knees, sketching in their journals, captivated with the tiniest rocks.

Light snows will settle here in a few months and cover the coyote scat. The west face of Jumbo will be spotted with elk. Mule deer will graze where we were standing. Last year two wolves traveled across the other side of the mountain. Maybe they'll den there this year.

When I walk on Mt. Jumbo, I'm paying homage to my home and the lives that have shaped it. Jumbo is a place of renewal. The mountain is a refuge for all things wild. There is hope on Mt. Jumbo. Once I knew there was hope in the chaparral above Los Angeles. I surrendered it there. I don't intend to let that happen again.

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