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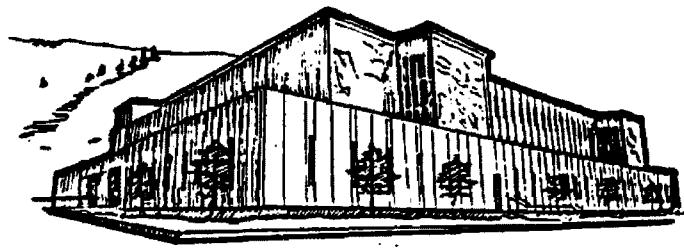
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GRINGOS IN THE MIST:

A NATURALIST JOURNEY THROUGH ECUADOR

By Greg Gordon

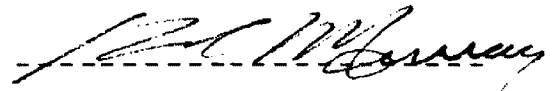
B.A., University of Colorado, 1986

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Approved by



Chairman



Dean, Graduate School

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INTRODUCTION

I don't like real experience. It's too hard to figure out. You never know what's going on. You don't have any control over events. I prefer to have life filtered through television. That way you know events have been packaged for your convenience. I like a narrative imposed on life, so everything proceeds logically to a tidy conclusion.--Calvin (of Calvin and Hobbes)

There's nothing like a voyage into the Third World to fling open the doors of unfiltered experience and turn your world upside down. However, this was not what I had in mind when Gerard, an old friend I hadn't seen in years called me from upstate New York.

"What are you doing this spring," he asked.

"I don't know I was thinking about taking some time off, getting tired of school," I said absentmindedly.

"Want to go to Bolivia?"

"Sure." I looked out the window at the December drizzle. "Um, where exactly is Bolivia?"

"It's between Peru and Chile."

"Oh, right."

"There's lots a big mountains to climb, 20,000 foot peaks," Gerard said, knowing just how to tempt me.

"No shit?"

"Yeah, I've been reading all about it."

"Twenty thousand feet, wow!"

"Wah--the Chinese word for "unity," he corrected me

"Wah, right. Twenty thousand feet. Jesus Christ! I've

never been that high."

"So you want to go?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"And it's really cheap."

"Even better."

"Bolivia? Isn't that where Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid died?" I asked.

"And Ché Guevera," said Gerard.

"Who?"

I always wanted to go to South America. I don't know why. South America always held some allure for me. High mountains, steamy jungle, maybe it was all those years of National Geographic. What is this fascination we have for the exotic, this compelling urge to travel, to experience the unknown?

Why would I abandon graduate school to run off to Bolivia? I told all my friends I was going to South America, at first just to see how it sounded, then to tell myself that's what I was really doing. It worked.

Traveling was not as romantic as it sounded; most of it was dreary. The cramped rides in buses made for people five-foot-four, the asphyxiating mass of people crowding the marketplace, half of them aiming for your wallet, wore on the nerves. Smells, tastes textures, and bowel movements never before experienced created an intense emotional

upswelling which can never be replicated by "virtual reality."

It soon became apparent that Gerard and I had different agendas, and so we parted ways. He decided to stay in Quito, Ecuador, our first stopover, and study Spanish while I felt a need to keep moving, exploring, climbing. I made a point of travelling light. However cultural baggage isn't something you can lose at the airport. I never made it to Peru or Bolivia. Instead I stayed in Ecuador.

About the size of Colorado, and with ten million people, Ecuador is the most densely populated country in Latin America. From the dry Pacific coast the land buckles upward to two parallel mountain chains with numerous peaks soaring above 20,000 feet, then plummets down to the Amazon basin. Running north and south, more or less continuously between the *cordilleras*, lies a valley 8000 feet above sea level and less than thirty miles wide. *Nudos* or knots of hills divide the valley into links. Most of Ecuador's population lives here, with the exception of Guayaquil on the coast.

Until 1991 it was thought cholera had been eradicated in the Western Hemisphere. We arrived in the midst of South America's largest epidemic in history. The poorest countries were the hardest hit, Columbia, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, and especially Peru with over 159,000 reported cases. Every day the Ecuadorian newspapers tallied the

toll, "130 cases in Riobamba, 220 cases in Esmeraldas, 350 in Imbabura." By May, Ecuador had over 4000 cases of cholera leaving one hundred dead. In South America, 1200 died in the few months since the outbreak. It's estimated that cholera will leave 40,000 dead in the next three years as the epidemic spreads.

Cholera has been called "the world's stupidest disease." We know what causes cholera, how to cure it and most importantly how to prevent it, yet hundreds of people die from it. Human contamination of drinking water, caused by unsanitary and crowded conditions induce cholera to spread rapidly. Cholera causes violent diarrhea and dehydration. The solution is simple, spend a week on a cot with a hole cut in the bottom and drink lots of uncontaminated water; for severe cases, intravenous saline solutions are necessary. Unfortunately, the one's that die, the campesino children, live far from medical help and their parents don't understand that water carries the disease. In emergency measures, the government prints posters telling everyone to boil their water. However, it neglects to build outhouses. As cholera advances from the hinterlands, it also spreads in Ecuador's largest city, Guayaquil, simply because they lack trash removal.

Lima, Peru, dumps 97% of its raw sewage into the Pacific. The cholera bacteria concentrates in the tissues of shellfish, one of the dietary staples of the coast.

Twenty years ago, one of Peru's presidents received millions of dollars in foreign aid to build municipal sewage systems. Instead he spent the money building a monument to himself.

Traveling alone was even more difficult; there was no one else to blame, no one else to get upset with. I spent too much time thinking, and drifting through other people's lives, just looking in. I was failing Tourism.

Like all travelers I went through a period of culture shock. It's a very real thing. I had taken numerous short trips to Mexico, but Ecuador was really the *Third World*. The poverty distressed me but not as much as the realization that I was a part of the problem. I knew this intellectually but it took a three month emersion for it to soak in on an emotional level.

I had no idea how much my lifestyle and government policies directly affected the lives of people all over the planet, but the illiterate campesino who grows bananas and coffee instead of food crops knew. The Huaorani hunter deep in the rainforest whose only contact with the outside world is American oil workers knew. By being a tourist, by remaining outside, was I responsible for such conditions?

In a land where Ché is second only in popularity to Jesus, I could not help gaining some understanding of who he was and what he was fighting for. On buses and in homes the faces of Ché and Jesus are displayed side by side. In North

America we have folk heros, like Davy Crockett, and John Henry. In Latin America they have martyrs.

And here I was, the embodiment of oppression--a white, middle-class American male staring at the faces of Jesus and Che as the bus hurtled down the Avenue of the Volcanos.

I realized my own search for purpose, my desire to scale peaks, my preoccupation with pinnacleness, was also a form of machismo. I discovered the beauty of not climbing every mountain.

At what point do we cease to be spectators and become participants in the world? I began to understand that I wasn't an isolated entity, but rather a witness to the unraveling of the whole. For me, it became necessary to do something, not that I could personally save the rainforest, but at least I could find out more of what was happening. This is a story of where I went and what I learned.

Chapter One

QUITO AND COCA

The guide books recommend the Gran Casino Hotel as a good budget hotel in quaint Old Town Quito. Designated a U.N. World Heritage site because of its colonial architecture, narrow cobblestone streets, gothic cathedrals, and open air plazas, Old Town retains much of its colonial charm, say the books.

"El Gran Casino Hotel?" I ask the taxi driver at the airport. "Cuanto cuesta?"

"Dies dollars."

"No. Es mucho?"

"Si, pero es muy lejos."

"Si, pero dies dollars?"

"Ok. Ocho dollars."

I shake my head. He opens the trunk and reaches hurriedly for our bags.

"Sies," he says, "Cuatro," I say.

Gerard signals another taxi.

"Cuatro dollars para ir al Gran Casino?"

"Si, si," He hurries us over to his cab.

Later I found out a taxi from the airport costs under a dollar. Ripped off. Taken advantage of.

"El Gran Casino esta en un lugar muy peligroso," the taxi driver says. "No salir en la noche. Es muy

peligroso." He makes a slash across his throat.

It's nearly 11 p.m. I consider going somewhere else but where? No doubt this guy will take us to some expensive hotel downtown.

As he unloads our packs he reiterates his warning about it being dangerous and not to leave the hotel after dark. I have to admit the neighborhood does look a little foreboding.

We are awakened by singing in the streets at five a.m. Early mass? At daybreak school kids fill the street. Diesel fumes perfume the morning air.

Over 40 years ago, novelist Christopher Isherwood traveled through Ecuador; he wrote:

That is the irony of travel. You spend your boyhood dreaming of a magic, impossible distant day when you will cross the Equator, when your eyes will behold Quito. And then, in the slow prosaic process of life, that day undramatically dawns-and finds you sleepy, hungry and dull. The Equator is just another valley; you aren't sure which and you don't much care. Quito is just another railroad station, with fuss about baggage and taxis and tips. And the only comforting reality, amidst all this picturesque noisy strangeness, is to find a clean pension run by Czech refugees and sit down in a cozy Central European parlor to a lunch of well-cooked Wiener Schnitzel.

Well, we don't find any Czechs or Wiener Schnitzel, however we do find a refuge in this hectic city at the South American Explores Club which is not nearly as neo-colonial as it sounds. Run by two intelligent and beautiful women, Seriose with a Irish accent and Xanthe, from Canada, the

pleasant house functions as a clearing house for climbing, backpacking and adventurous tourism. Seriose offers us a cup of tea, comfortable chairs, a library full of big books, a stack of maps, and a file cabinet full of climbing information.

When looking at a map of Ecuador the first thing you notice is the eastern boundary, or the lack thereof. Since 1740 Ecuador and Peru were locked in a border conflict which occasionally erupted in a series of skirmishes. In 1887 negotiations begun to settle the dispute with King Alfonso of Spain as arbitrator. However, the claims were so convoluted that no decision was reached. Finally, in 1942, eager to establish peace in the region, Brazil, Columbia, Peru and the United States signed the "Protocol of Rio de Janeiro," in favor of Peru. Not parley to this decision, Ecuador refuses to acknowledge the eastern half of the country as Peru. Ecuadorian maps include the east with a nod to the "disputed" border, which still has not been delineated. Outside of Ecuador, however, the maps clearly show one boundary, that of the 1942 agreement. This loss of nearly half the country is a perennial political cause. Numerous politicians trumpeting national sentiment promise to take back the disputed area.

Overwhelmed on our second day in Latin America we are trying to decide whether to go north or south from Quito before heading to Bolivia in four weeks, when we meet

Nichole and Brigid, from New Zealand. The Kiwis are keen on getting a group together for a jungle trip and need two more people. Quite a splurge--\$150 for five days. Way beyond our budget, but it is the jungle. Gerard expresses concern that he hasn't begun taking his malaria pills. The Kiwis introduce us to the fifth member of the expedition, Philippe, a rather abrasive French fellow on a whirlwind, four-month tour of South America.

"Gerard? is that a French name?" asks Philippe.

We make plans to buy airplane tickets to the frontier town of Coca at the edge of the Oriente. When the travel agent says the flight is full, Philippe, fluent and forceful, says we've already paid for the tour, and somehow she finds five available seats.

A mocha river snakes through the vast greenness stretching out below as our plane from Quito descends from the clouds. As we approach Coca, roads divide the greenery into squares of banana plantations. Stepping off the plane is like stepping into a greenhouse; the air, heavy and rotting, drips from my clothes.

A soldier in camouflage walks by, a green parrot riding on his shoulder.

Half a dozen other Americans disembark with us, oil workers from Texas. Their fellow workers give us a ride into town. We learn that oil exploration has been going on

here since 1970. The men spend two months here and return home for month off. That night over more than a few beers, the exploration crew chief, a large, likeable man, with a gentle manner, tells us the oil company reforests the exploration sites.

"You can't even tell they were ever there," he says. I want to believe him.

Coca has two roads, both dirt, or rather mud, as it is constantly raining. Mud mixes with oil making walking adventurous. The houses are squat with corrugated tin roofs. Most people go barefoot or wear rubber irrigation boots.

We decide to go for a walk; crossing town takes no time and soon we are on the bridge across the Rio Napo. Long skinny dugout canoes powered by small outboards cruise the huge, dark river.

The first gringo to see the Napo River was Gonzalo Pizarro, brother of Francisco, the conquistador of the Incas. Gonzalo became governor of Quito in 1540 when rumors surfaced of lands to the east rich in spices and the lost gold of the Incas. The Spanish found little gold in Quito and reasoned that it must have all been hidden somewhere. The Indians obliged them with tales of El Dorado to the East. So with 350 Spanish and 4000 Indians, Gonzalo journeyed east from Quito.

After what could only have been a wretched journey in Spanish armor over the cold Andes and the humid jungle, they arrived at the Rio Napo amidst torrential rains. Hungry and miserable, hundreds of Indians deserted. The Spanish found no spices of any quantity so the search for gold continued. Gonzalo commanded the remaining troops to build a ship to take them down river. During the six months it probably took to build, many had died of hunger, disease, and attacks by "savages" and most of the Indians had deserted. Gonzalo sent his chief lieutenant, Francisco de Orellana, and a small party to float the Napo to the Rio Coco and find food and return. Arriving at the junction, Orellana found little and the river was much swifter than they thought and could not return upstream so he decided to continue downstream and became the first European to encounter the Amazon.

They met numerous tribes, fighting many and replenishing their food stocks from the defeated bands. They received report after report of tribes rich in gold and silver, always inland. Orellana, however, was more concerned with survival and acquiring food for the journey, and let these rumors pass.

More than halfway down the Amazon, Orellana was attacked by a fierce tribe led by tall, white women which he referred to as *las Amazonas*. An Indian informant told Orellana the women lived inland in houses of stone, and the men were captives of nearby tribes whose only purpose was

propagation. After the women became pregnant, the men were sent home. Male babies were killed at birth and the bodies sent back to the men. The women were rumored to have great stores of gold and silver.

Eight months after leaving Gonzalo, Orellana finally reached the mouth of the Amazon, and set sail for Spain.

Long assumed dead, the governor, meanwhile, arrived at the outskirts of Quito, with one hundred exhausted, starving, and naked men remaining from the original expedition.

On the other side of the bridge, a path leads off the road into the jungle. Excited by the prospect of a small exploration, we slop through the rich, wet earth into the rainforest and are soon swallowed up.

Just a few meters from the road we are in a different world. Sounds of insects replace the sounds of humans, leaves replace gravel, mossy tree trunks replace army trucks. Huge ants--nearly two inches long, parade down a tree trunk. Smaller leafcutter ants cross the path, heroically carrying bits of leaf. These ants leave chemical trails for others to follow and, in time these trails become ant highways bare of any vegetation. According to John Kricher's *Neotropical Companion*, which I "borrowed" from the Explorer's Club, in Latin America there are about two hundred species of leafcutter ants, the world's only

vegetarian ants. They don't eat the leaves, but chew up the leaf pieces kneading them into a spongy mass, which provides a growth medium for a fungus tended by the ants in underground gardens. The ants feed on the fungus. Over the millennium, the ants have tended the fungus, which has lost the ability to produce spores for reproduction, and thus relies upon the ants for propagation. The fungus has become so dependant upon the ants for survival, it is unable to feed itself, as it can no longer produce the enzymes to break down leaves. The ants provide for all. This fungus has truly been domesticated.

"Hey check this out, it's just like a documentary," I say bending down to the ants trooping across the path. But I find I'm alone. Everyone else has slogged back to the road. I sigh and trudge back too. Brigid has fallen down and is covered in black goo to Nichole's delight. She makes Brigid stand in the mud so she can take her picture.

At the edge of town, women wash clothes, men and women bathe, and kids splash and play in the river. It strikes me that everyone is dressed. I suppose in this world of public bathing and washing, some privacy must be maintained. Standing waist deep in the Rio Napo, people soap their underarms, chests and crotches, like they are taking a shower under their clothes. How does it feel having tourists watch you bathe and wash your clothes?

Nichole accompanies Brigid down to the river. The kids

giggle at her mudsplattered body. She steps gingerly into the water knee deep and splashes herself. Grinning, a man nearby hands her a bar of soap. She looks puzzled. He tells her to immerse herself in the water and scrub with the soap and river water. Everyone laughs at the gringa who doesn't even know how to bathe.

All the next morning we wait for Whympers Torres, our guide. We would be anxious to get underway, if not for the stifling heat. Instead we are nearly content to sit at the outdoor table under the umbrella drinking the big 650 ml bottles of beer and watching a man walk down the street with an anaconda draped around his neck.

Whympers finally shows up and all is not well. He explains that the new army colonel doesn't know him and won't give him a permit to travel down the Shiripuno River, a small river a day's drive from Coca. The Shiripuno, a tributary of the Cononaco River, winds through remote rainforest before joining the Curaray River and flowing into the Napo above Iquitos, Peru, several hundred miles downstream from Coca.

Whympers asks if we would mind going down the Napo to another river. Philippe says, "no esta bien." The Napo, a significant branch of the upper Amazon, is a major corridor of petroleum activity and we wished to avoid it. Philippe lobbied for a trip as far from the Napo as possible. So, Philippe, Whympers and I return to the army base to plead with

the colonel.

When we pull up to the base the MP's won't let us in. Whympers pleads and they finally let us through. We hurry down to the headquarters. A giant plaque with a snake and "Jungle Command" emblazoned on it adorns the wall of the hacienda that serves as HQ.

The MP at HQ tells us the colonel is at the airport. So we hurry back to the truck at the gate and just then the colonel pulls up. Whympers runs over and explains that he is a guide and he's done this trip many times before *sin problema*. The colonel says that Whympers doesn't have a guide license and can't go. Whympers says he went to Banos for the guide course, but got sick and didn't pick up his certification. The colonel says, to us, we can get a different guide, one that is authorized to go and Whympers has to give us our money back. Philippe explains that Nichole needs to catch a plane from Quito next week and we don't have time to get another guide.

They plead and argue back and forth, the colonel sitting in his jeep, and Whympers begging puppy-eyed, hands on the doorframe. I feel ashamed for this handsome, seemingly capable man at the mercy of this Franco Junior behind aviator sunglasses. The colonel keeps shaking his head. Suddenly he consents, as quickly as he said no. He takes Whympers's ID saying he could take us, but that would be it until he produces his guide license.

"No" is the standard answer to any request, changing to "yes" at some unknown time following extensive pleading. I found it difficult to plead when someone said "no." I wasn't used to someone saying "no" just because they could, so often I took it at face value. However, I soon learned that aside from outright bribery, whining and pleading is the way to get things done in Ecuador. People love to hold what little power they temporarily have over you, especially if you're a gringo.

Chapter Two

BENEATH THE CANOPY

Attempting to get more light, two large trees on either side of the Shripuno River spread their branches forming a monkey bridge. Squirrel monkeys, light tan with black faces, swing, bounce and pivot overhead, chattering at the boat as we slow for a better look. Pissing from the treetops, they keep an eye on the intruders.

Nests of the crow-like Orpendolas sway like pendulous testicles from overhanging branches looking as if they may break and plop into the river. Orpendolas weave these strange nests on the farthest branches as protection against snakes, and often, to avoid monkey predation, they build them near bee and wasp nests, which bulge like giant goiters high in the forks of trees. Bright violet-colored flowers burst through the green. There are not many flowers; it is winter, after all.

A black bird with a yellow breast, rather like a meadowlark, darts along the shore. Large, rich-black swallows with white breasts swoop and dive above the river snatching up the morning insects with a snap of their beaks. A ringed kingfisher skits along the banks looking for fish. It follows us downriver, alighting on a branch or log ever few hundred meters. The sky starts to sprinkle again.

A helicopter drowns out the squawks of parrots, the hum

of insects, and even the drone of our outboard canoe. Oil derricks tower above the green rainforest canopy like skeletons of dead birds. Uprooted trees line the river bank, their pale mats of roots ripped out and exposed to the sky. Disillusioned, we hope to leave the ravages of oil exploration behind as we near Yasuni National Park in the heart of the Oriente (Ecuador's Amazonia).

A Huaorani family signals us as our dugout canoe cruises by one of the exploration camps. The Huaorani (the indigenous people in this part of the rainforest) had no contact with the outside world until the arrival of missionaries in the 1950's. Since then an estimated 20,000 Huaorani have died from introduced diseases. Now their hunter/gather lifestyle is further jeopardized by oil rigs, seismic exploration teams, helicopters, and roads which open the rainforest to a flood of colonists from the Andes. And tourists like ourselves.

The Huaorani indicate in halting Spanish and hand gestures that they want a ride upriver. Somehow Whympers, our guide, makes it clear that we only have room for one. Awui, a boy of 15, or maybe 20, I can't really tell, makes an instant decision and climbs aboard.

In Huaorani there are no words for time, no word for day, hour, minute, year, and in the jungle where every day of the year is the same as the next, why should there be? We have to leave by 3:00pm Thursday because Nicole needs to

catch a plane back to New Zealand so she can be at work next Monday morning. Awui will wait downstream for his family until they show up.

Awui has nothing but a t-shirt and blue gym shorts, nothing else for a four day journey. What could he possibly need? The *selva* is his home. Our canoe, on the other hand, is loaded with clothes, cameras, notebooks, binoculars, trashy novels, cans of tuna, a rusty old rifle, sleeping pads, sheets for mosquito netting, flashlights, a bottle of wine, toothpaste, contact lens solution, bottles of Coke and Orange Fanta.

We have six languages for dinner that night. English, German, French, Spanish, Quichua, and Huaorani. Whympers' helpers, Jose and Colon, speak Quichua, the indigenous language of the Andes, and Spanish. Whympers speaks primarily Spanish and a little Quichua. Gerard's first language is German, and Philippe's is French: however, they, Nichole and Brigid and I all speak English. Philippe and I are the only gringos who speak Spanish. So, unfortunately dinner divides up among Spanish and English speakers, and Awui has no one to talk with.

"Awui seems rather shy, don't you think?" says Nicole.

"We're probably the first white people he's ever seen," points out Gerard.

"Do you suppose we should try to talk with him?" asks Brigid.

"I say, Awui, Awui, would you like to come eat with us?" Awui stops eating for a minute and looks at her.

"He can't understand you Niki, dear," says Brigid.

"How do you suppose he feels about our being here?" asks Nicole.

We finish eating in silence.

Is there a difference to him between white tourists and oil exploration?

After dinner, Whympet shows us how to craft a ground cover by hacking palm fronds out of the jungle and laying them down, their fingers interlocked to shed the rainwater. Jose carves out the palm heart, which we gobble it down. It tastes like sweet water chestnuts.

The tiny red ants produce painful stings, and I quickly exchange sandals for rubber boots. Awui is barefoot as always, although his feet are so wide I doubt he could ever wear shoes if he wanted to. He seems rather unconcerned about the ants. Are his feet so tough the ants can't bite, or are ants just not a matter worthy of notice?

The Kiwis are clearly not impressed with the sleeping arrangements. There are no blankets. Whympet strings up sheets forming a canopy-like mosquito netting under a giant tarp. This pacifies the Kiwis somewhat. It's too hot for even a sheet anyway. I grouse a bit that I've forgotten a sleeping pad and have to sleep on the hard ground, but make do with some clothes. Philippe seems a bit irritated that

Gerard has bedded down next to Brigid. Awui lies on the ground at the end of the tarp exposed--no blanket, no sheet, no pillow, no complaints.

Dawn in *la selva* is very noisy. The whistles and chirps of birds, the loud drumming of a *carpentero* (a great name for the large, Pileated-like woodpeckers), and the droning of insects narrate the incessant greenery. Whympers hacks at the boat with a machete, carving out a better place to mount his new twenty-five horse Evinrude outboard. This is its maiden voyage and he positively beams when pulling the starting cord, and the motor starts on the first pull. New outboards are incredibly expensive and hard to get on the headwaters of the Amazon.

We ply the chocolate river in a forty foot dugout canoe. Ours is constructed while the Huaorani's are literally dug out of a single log from the trunk of the Choncho tree. Three people with a chainsaw can spend twenty days making a dugout; making it by hand takes one hundred days. Other dugouts, much larger and made of metal, haul supplies and equipment to the oil camps.

Each bend in the river reveals banks thick with new types of vegetation. Palms burst forth in a cacophony of viridian, shoving the smaller leaf trees aside. One species of palm shoots straight up, its trunk exploding in stiff four, six, and eight way fronds. Other palms dip and rise in the slightest breeze, fanning imaginary wood nymphs. Low

shrubs line another stretch. Thigh-thick lianas drop into the river from trees with huge spreading crowns, sucking the water up like fat straws. Other plants such as epiphytes (plants that grow on other plants) obtain water directly from the moisture laden air, needing no roots and growing in the crook of trees. The rainforest is a ceaseless competition for sunlight. If a plant can spend its entire life in the branches of a tree, it is the first to receive sun and rain. And in the tree tops, the pollinators--insects, birds and bats--are more common while the wind blown seeds have a better chance of dispersal than on the calm rainforest floor.

One type of epiphyte, tank bromeliads, have evolved trough-like leaves, that funnel water to the plant, which can store up to two gallons of water. These tanks support an ecosystem of their own, with small insects, algae, frogs, snails; fallen debris supplies the nutrients. (One study found 250 animal species occurring in bromeliads.) A collection of these tank bromeliads can weigh hundreds of pounds, stressing the host tree and even breaking off branches. Some trees don't take kindly to these freeloaders and have evolved a smooth bark that prevents epiphytes from gaining a foothold. Others have scaly bark which flakes off. Some trees don't branch until they are sixty to seventy feet tall. However, these adaptations don't seem terribly successful as epiphytes are everywhere, sprouting

columns of red flowers.

Layers upon layers of plants form a mosaic of greenery. An estimated 9,000 to 18,000 plant species grow in the area of Yasuni National Park, a botanist's paradise, a geologist's nightmare.

The Oriente is probably the most botanically diverse place on earth. This high biodiversity resulted from the Pleistocene era when much of the Amazon basin dried out. Isolated areas, such as the Napo River drainage, remained humid, serving as a biological refuge. Many species still remain in the area as remnants from the Pleistocene and are now found nowhere else. Jaguars, tapirs, monkeys, fresh water dolphins, 120 other mammals, over 600 bird species, some 500 species of fish, 180 reptiles and amphibians, and over 100,000 insect species inhabit this rainforest wilderness. Biologists and botanists estimate hundreds more species remain undiscovered.

Whymper signals Jose to pull the boat over. He grabs a vine and bends it toward the boat. Orange, egg sized fruit dangle from the vine.

"Grenadillas" announces Whymper.

Peeling back the crusty skin reveals dozens of black seeds covered in slimy goo. The goo is deliciously sweet and a little sour next to the seed.

"It's kinda like drinking snot," says Brigid.

"Is this where Grenadine comes from," asks Nicole.

It would make sense but grenadillas are a type of passionfruit.

Before lunch we go for swimming after repeated reassurances that there are no piranhas, although Whympers relates a few piranha jokes that lose something in the translation. We are actually more worried about the orifice-seeking candiru fish, which we dub the sphincter fish. In reality, it only swims up one's penis. Then this unpleasant creature turns sideways and lodges itself in with the barbed spines on the side of its head. I AM NOT MAKING THIS UP. The only way to remove the needle-sized candiru is to have one's penis removed. (This would be much worse than merely being eaten alive by piranhas. One intrepid English explorer was so concerned he made himself a device from a cricket cup to protect against any unwelcome guests.) Apparently the sphincter fish is attracted to urine, so if you don't piss in the water there's no risk.

Awui watches intently whenever we go for a swim. We must look quite strange to him. The Huaorani have no body hair. As strange as we find this, they must find it equally strange to see these huge (Gerard is 6' 4"), pasty white people covered with hair. Does he find the young Kiwi women attractive (they are, by Northern European standards), ugly, or just strange? Perhaps he's not caught up in evaluating people by appearance.

The sun is out in full force now, turning into a warm sleepy afternoon. Brigid basks on the bow. Philippe waves his socks in the wind. Jose and Colon doze in the stern. Grey angry clouds turn into towering cumulonimbus and thin wisps. Oriole-like Troupials line the green banks flashing orange and black. Flaunting undersides of black velvet, an eight inch Blue Morphos butterfly dances in iridescent blue around the bow of the boat. Butterflies, for all their beauty can be quite tenacious. Just ask the passionflower. Passionflower plants are poisonous to most insects. However, Heliconid butterflies have evolved the ability to tolerate these poisons so their larvae can feed on the leaves. In one of the delicate interrelationships of the rainforests, a specific species of butterfly can only tolerate the toxins of a specific species of passionflower. Passionflowers then evolve new toxins to discourage the butterfly larvae. This gives rise to numerous passionflower species and corresponding butterfly species.

Not only can the butterfly larvae tolerate the poisons, they turn it to their evolutionary advantage. The caterpillars accumulate the passionflower toxins in their tissues, and when they become adults the toxins give the Heliconid butterflies a nasty taste for any bird predators.

The passionflowers also produce a nectar to attract ants, bees, and wasps to protect their leaves against the caterpillars. Some passionflowers produce a yellow glob

which looks like an Heliconid egg clusters, thus "tricking" the female butterfly since she will not lay eggs on a plant that already has an egg cluster, presumably to reduce competition. Other passionflowers mimic the leaves of nearby plants as a camouflage against the Heliconid butterflies.

A pair of *papagayos* flies overhead, squawking, their orange, yellow and red plumage spectacular through binoculars. These large macaws have a silhouette as distinctive and endearing as their Spanish name. *Papagayos* always fly in pairs and mate for life. If one dies, according to Whympers, the other searches mournfully through the forest, screeching and soon follows its partner, dying of a broken heart. Whympers places his hand over his heart and says, "*es como yo y mi mujer.*"

The toucan is also a colorful romantic, tossing fruit to its mate with its oversized bill. Almost as long as its body, the toucan's bill is mostly hollow and thus lightweight. The huge bill is useful for clipping fruit from distant branches and eating insects, snakes and nestling birds. The male also uses its bill for fencing and aggressive displays. While the coloration might suggest a relation to parrots and macaws, the toucan is a member of woodpecker family. Because of a special "hinge" in their tail bone, toucans can fold their long tails up against their back, probably so they can sleep in tree cavities.

Whympers points to the thick vegetation lining the bank and cuts the engine. "*Escucha. Javelinas.*"

We hear a slight snuffling in the forest.

"*Son muy peligroso-las javelians.*"

"What's he saying? What's he saying?" asks Nicole.

Somehow I've fallen into the role of group interpreter. I'm far from fluent in Spanish, and it requires my total concentration. Just as I'm getting the gist of what's being said, someone asks, "What's he saying?" Then I have to shift and think in English, summarizing what Whympers says. The Kiwis look at me as if to say, "I know you're not telling us everything he said because it took him 15 minutes and you only said four minutes worth."

However, Gerard is amazing. In just a few days he is able to understand a good bit of Spanish and gets tickled when he figures out how to say something in Spanish. A big grin spreads across his face and he shakes with the pleasure of communication.

The Kiwis pronounce the final "e" in Philippe so it sounds like "Philippe, eh?" It's not long before it becomes natural for everyone to say "Philippe eh". He doesn't seem to mind. I think he enjoys this new twist on his name, especially when Brigid says it. Perhaps he's been traveling long enough not to worry about mispronunciations.

Whympers tells us the name Awui means "stick" in Huaorani.

"Language is a virus from outer space." Who said that? William Burroughs maybe. The birds have a language, and the plants too. If it's so difficult just understanding members of our own species how can we possibly hope to communicate with other species?

In Huaorani, *wapumni* means "hello," "goodby," "how are you?" and I think, "friend."

"Well, let's go then," Philippe says. He's been pushing for a hike through the jungle and this seemed like a good opportunity. We've spent four days travelling on the river, our campsites on small beaches. Our forays into *la selva* have been just a few steps, not much beyond the luminous strip of river. Frankly, it can be rather frightening stepping into that dark chaos of green from the bright light of the known world.

"*Es muy peligroso*," repeats Whympet.

"I'm not sure I like the idea of tromping through the jungle after a couple hundred wild pigs," says Gerard.

Javelinas, or peccaries, have been known to charge people, chasing them up a tree if encountered unexpectedly while rooting along the forest floor for roots, leaves, fruits and insects.

After another warning Whympet agrees. *La selva* isn't as dense as I expected--a vine here, whack with a machete, a palm frond there, whack, a small tree, whack. We soon became

separated and lost in the neverending pattern of buttressed trees, vines, lianas, philodendrons, and green. While vines are small and flexible, lianas are the steel cables of the plant world. Tarzan swung on lianas; vines could never support him. Finally after repeated calling and wandering we all meet up again.

Whymper slices through a thick liana and cuts it into sections. Handing a piece to Brigid, he holds up one end of the liana. Water comes pouring out. Fresh water from lianas! Weary of four days of Coke and Orange Fanta, we greedily guzzle the sweet water.

Awui stands back amongst the greenery, watching. Awui usually stands off to the side, quite reserved. Every once in a while he'll break into a wide grin, his lips pulled back revealing a mouth full of large broken and blackened teeth. Pain shoots down my jaw every time I see his big smile break free. Disease is unknown among the Huaorani except those introduced from outside. Their only ailment is extremely bad teeth as a result of a diet of fruit and soft foods rich in carbohydrates.

Awui doesn't seem thirsty. Some enterprising anthropologist determined (I don't know how) that the body cells of indigenous people require far less water than those of white people, which is why whites become dehydrated so easily. Not only is our skin color poorly adapted for sunlight, besides being hairy and overweight, even our very

cells are squishy. We are basically Northern Europeans, physically adapted for comfortable, cloudy, wet places.

We follow Whympers through *la selva* as he shows us various medicinal plants, explaining the uses of each one while I translate. We pass a tree with very phallic roots, almost lifelike, suspended about four feet from the ground. The roots grow toward the soil as the tree grows steadily taller. Or perhaps the strange bulbous root tips serve to gather moisture from the air.

Whympers gestures toward the roots. "*Las mujeres Huaorani usan estos cuando se perdian sus esposos,*" he jokes in a low voice.

"What'd he say?" asks Nicole.

"Um, he um said, that this is what the Huaorani women use when they lose their husbands."

"Oh."

Back near the river, Whympers leads us to a large tree with a white trunk and big poplar type leaves.

"Sangre de Drago. Es medicina, bueno por el estomago."

Well that's a good thing to know. It's also good for ulcers, skin lesions, cuts and bites, *todo*.

The rainforest is laden with medicines, posions and stimulants, the majority of which the modern world is not even aware. One out of every four pharmaceutical drugs is derived from tropical plants. Many botatnist believe the rainforest may hold the cures for cancer and AIDS.

These substances are often chemical toxins produced by plants to protect against unwelcome insects, herbivores, fungi, and pathogens. Noted ecologist Daniel Janzen states, "The world is not colored green to the herbivore's eyes, but rather is painted morphine, L-DOPA, calcium oxalate, cannabinal, caffen, mustard oil, strychnine, rotenone, etc."

Whymper hacks into the trunk of the *Sangre de Drago* with a machete. He holds the machete against the tree so the black sap runs along the blade and drips into a red plastic cup. In the cup the sap, which is liquid and not very sticky, is actually a deep magenta. It dries purple on the blade, which I suppose would be the likely color of dragon's blood. I reach up and taste a drop. It's dryly bitter, almost poisonous tasting, I rub it on some bites; it turns white and soapy.

"*Es medicina,*" Whymper says.

Numerous hack marks from previous tours scar the tree trunk. Ants enter the bark through the hack marks. How long before this medicine tree dies from giving its blood to curious tourists?

Late in the afternoon, Whymper signals Jose to cut the engine, and the boat coasts into a tiny inlet. Whymper stands on the bow surrounded by green and hacks vines out of the way as we drift into the channel. Suddenly the narrow channel opens into a small lagoon. We startle five

beautiful red and brown Archaeopteryx-like birds, the size of turkeys with head crests. Higher in the foliage I spot another dozen. The boat moves slowly; the birds don't flush but shuffle nervously about. These Hoatzins have great crests of feathers, and their faces are bare, with bright blue skin and red eyes. A Neotropical Companion says that Hoatzins feed exclusively on leaves from plants of Philodendrons, which they chew into a pulp that slowly ferments inside them, giving the birds an unpleasant odor and taste. But monkeys don't seem to mind, and often prey upon the birds.

Like the prehistoric "first bird," Archaeopteryx, young Hoatzins have wing claws that they lose when adults. They escape danger by dropping into the water; they swim and dive well. When the danger passes, the young use their wing claws to climb back onto the vegetation. According to biologists, the wing claws are coincidental, an example of convergent evolution. Convergent evolution occurs when different species have similar needs and evolve similar methods of dealing with those needs. This doesn't mean the species are related in any way.

However, I still prefer to think of the Hoatzin as an ancient species still surviving deep in the rainforest. And they do look like Archaeopteryx.

After watching Capuchin monkeys and setting up camp. Whympers, Philippe, Gerard and I head back out to the river to

drop some fishing lines for the night. Jose, Colon and Awui stay by the lagoon fishing for piranha. The Kiwis stay in camp.

When we return, Jose, Colon and Awui greet us with a couple dozen piranha, cleaned and frying in oil and salt.

"I think that boy may have a deficiency," says Nicole watching Colon empty half a carton of Morton's Salt into some frying bananas.

"Would you like my piranha?" asks Brigid holding out her plate. "I'm not terrible keen on it."

"Sure!" say Philipe, Gerard and I.

Although, fairly tasty, piranhas are and very bony and not very big. It takes at least three to make a meal. Luckily, there are plenty of piranhas and banana chips to go around.

From the cleaned piranha carcasses, Whympers extracts the jaws, loops a fishing line through the bone and hangs the neckless around my neck.

Determined to see a caiman, the Amazonian crocodile, Philipe spends the evening down by the lagoon tossing a fishing line with a hunk of piranha into the water.

"He is out there. I know it," says Philipe. After an hour I grow bored and rejoin the others back at camp. Gerard writes in his journal. Nichole braids Brigid's hair. Jose and Colon wash dishes. Whympers fiddles with the tent. Awui stands on the bank intently watching Philipe fish for caiman.

Just as we crawl under the sheets which serve as mosquito netting, Philippe rouses me to take the canoe out to look for caiman. Silently we pole the canoe through the lagoon, while Whympers stands on the prow with my REI headlamp flashing across the black surface for the yellow glow of a caiman's eyes. Suddenly he plunges his hands into the water and comes up holding a five-foot caiman. Whympers apologizes that they don't get much bigger around here. Downstream, toward the Amazon, caimans grow ten to twelve feet long.

We take the caiman back to show the others. Whympers places the reptile in Brigid's hands while Nichole takes flash photos. I don't really want a picture of myself holding a caiman. Lying limp in Brigid's arms, this creature hardly evokes fear, but rather pity and compassion. We carry it back to the lagoon and release it. The caiman slowly swims off a few meters and stares back at us, eyes shining suspended in the water, mysterious but not frightening. Whympers tells us about the Israelis he once brought in here who machine gunned all the wildlife. He will no longer take Israelis and allows no hunting on his trips.

We head for the junction of the Cononaco and Tiguino, the river which flows from the lands of the Tagaeri. The Tagaeri, a tribe of the Huaorani, are one of the last

uncontacted tribes in the world. Nobody seems to know how many Tagaeri remain. Estimates range from thirty to fifty still living a traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle. They are especially resistant to infringement upon their territory, and eagerly fire arrows and spears at any tourists or curiosity seekers, as well as oil workers. In 1987, the Tagaeri attacked a group of oil exploration workers who were laying seismic lines that cut through the Tagaeri gardens. The oil companies enlisted the help of the Catholic Bishop to missionize and "tame" the Tagaeri. Bearing gifts, the bishop and a nun flew into the area by helicopter. They were found a week later with seventeen spears embedded in their bodies, ceremoniously killed. And last February, eight Tagaeri were reported attacking a helicopter with spears.

We will turn around before entering the Tagaeri territory.

A beautiful scene greets us at the junction of the two rivers. We can see quite a ways in three directions, up the Tiguino where the Tagaeri live, and up and down the Cononaco. *La selva* sparkles with the recent rain. Thin clouds glow pink in the evening sun. The world is quiet and peaceful as we sit on the gunwale of the dugout dangling our fishing lines over the edge. No poles. We just throw out a hook with a hunk of fish tied to a large monofilament line.

Three nights ago, Colon and I prowled the beach with a

flashlight and machete. I shone the light right where the water meets the sand, while Colon peered intently into the water for a tiny minnow, machete poised above his head ready to make the strike. When we spotted a fish, down came the machete in the water sealing off any escape. Colon then used the machete to scrape the fish up on shore. With a handful a minnows as bait, Colon hooked what folks in Montana call "a nice fish," about a two pounder. Whympers macheted it into bait, and the next day Colon caught a five pounder. Again Whympers hacked it into bait.

Jose and Awui and Colon used some of the fish to catch the mess of piranha, and we're now using the rest as bait.

Whympers slowly pulls on the line; he's got something big. The fish pulls the canoe into the main channel of the river. It breaks the surface. It is huge--and then it's gone. A few minutes later he's hooked another. When he finally pulls it up to the boat, it's a large catfish-looking thing. Whympers reaches out and stabs it with his machete, shoves his hand in the wound, and lifts it into the boat. It's about twenty pounds and three-feet long with thick leathery skin, a long sloping forehead, long thick whiskers and tiny eyes--not surprising given the muddiness of the river. It's sort of a cross between a catfish and a shark. I give its head a whack with an axe, which just bounces off its bony skull. I hit it harder and then try to kill it by severing its spinal cord with the axe and finally

give up leaving it bleeding and gasping in the bottom of the boat. We make our way back upstream.

We have fried catfish and bananas for dinner, and the catfish soup the next night is delicious. This fish gives all eight of us three full meals. The piranha is tasty enough, but the catfish/shark is a true jungle delicacy.

That night Whympers tells us a few "ghost stories" of the spirits that live in the forest. The most common spirit is a "boom-boom," a deep drumming that comes from the trees.

"If you hear it, you be quiet and don't bother the spirits," he says.

Years ago, while on a hunting trip a *companero* ignored the folk warning and shouted back at the drumming. The drumming grew louder. The men shone their flashlights into the dark. Whympers's *companero* panicked and fired his gun at the night. The booming moved closer and closer. They quickly wove crosses out of vines and twigs and placed them around camp to keep the spirits away, but the booming besieged them all night. By morning the disrespectful *companero* had become very ill. They took him to a Huaorani *brujo* (medicine man) who said the man was inhabited by "*espiritos malos*." He stayed with the *brujo* for six months, becoming very thin and almost died, but eventually recovered.

In a story reminiscent of many Native American myths, Whympers tells of when he was hunting *javallinas* with five

companerios. They heard the *javallinas* and saw what they thought were two to three hundred of them moving through *la selva*. They could see the bushes move and had their guns out, but never actually saw one. So they split up. Whympers went to where he saw the movement and couldn't find any tracks, so he figured it was spirits. The others had already disappeared in search of the *javallinas*. He heard a couple shots and hurried off in that direction. He found his friend lying on the ground underneath a giant *javillina* which disappeared as soon as Whympers and the others showed up. This man came down with fever and could barely walk. They had to make a stretcher out of palm fronds to carry him out.

Another time, years ago on one of his first trips into *la selva*, Whympers saw a giant man walking the beach at night. He didn't approach the man, but snuck back to camp, never mentioning the incident to his *companerios*.

Translating these stories with my mediocre Spanish and then writing them down a couple days later, I can imagine how difficult it must be to maintain any degree of accuracy in transcribing native myths. I'm sure part of me is looking for a point or purpose in the stories; often there is none. I can't tell how much cultural bias may creep in when I seize some sentences as important and gloss over others.

In *Backward*, Will Baker tells of the myth of Pishtako:

Some years ago a bizarre rumor spread throughout the Amazon basin, a tale still believed in many tribes. It is said the white man come to the *selva* with their gifts in order to capture the Indians, take them to secret places, and render them into oil which is used to power airplanes, motor boats and autos. So fueled, these craft return bearing more gifts, seeking more Indians.

We drop Awui off at the Huaorani village and helicopter supply port. A large dugout-style barge unloads drilling pipe. Multi-colored pools of oil float on the river's surface. The industrial smell of steel and petroleum mixes with the heavy green air of the jungle. A Huaorani family stands in front of two huge fuel tanks waving and jabbering. Whymper hops off bearing animal crackers and saltines. Eight to ten Ecuadorians are stationed here.

The Huaorani greet and absorb Awui, while I wander around the camp. An Ecuadorian *petrolero* from Esmeraldas, the petroleum shipping port on the coast, appoints himself tour guide. Standing on the cargo platform, he illustrates the helicopter loading procedure, holding a large steel cable above his head.

Standing in meek contrast to the loading crane, drilling pipe, fuel tanks, bags of concrete, and helicopter slings, is the Huaorani camp of wooden huts and palm roofs. A Huaorani man sits crossed-legged on his veranda next to a cooking fire and large black caldron. Long, black hair dreadlocks down from his large head. He squints at us and picks his toenails. Four green macaws perch nearby; a

couple of chickens dart about. The Huaorani men wear dark colored t-shirts and shorts, the women, long thin dresses. The children go naked except for fake pearl necklaces. Until a few years ago none of them wore clothes--quite practical given their hot, humid environment. One old fellow with the traditional distended split open earlobes, which form a loose loop hanging nearly to his shoulders, wears a yellow hard hat.

The rainforest is aptly named. It's rained on and off for the past three days. An occasional patch of blue allows the sun through until another grey cloud passes over. As we hum back up the Shripuno, retracing our outward journey, the outboard breeze keeps the humid air moving past. Rafts of flotsam from last night's deluge float down the middle channel marking the swiftest current and making travel rather hazardous. Two-liter plastic bottles of Coke and Sprite, and plastic quart jugs of Castrol Oil bob in the logjams. Blue plastic fifty-five gallon drums drift along--escapees from the oil camps. What sort of junk lies under the surface?

We're headed back upstream after an early morning swim. A beautiful Monday morning on our last day in *la selva*. It's about 75 degrees at 8:30 under partly cloudy skies. Our destination camp--the beach where we spent the first night--is completely submerged. The rain of the past three

days raised the water level about eight feet. We look for an alternative campsite, but the river overflows the banks. Water covers the forest floor. Poling the canoe among the trees, we finally find some high ground and hack a campsite out of the jungle. The next morning I notice one of the hacked lianas has sprouted a one centimeter core growth overnight.

Philipe motions Gerard and I over away from the camp. "Guys, guys come look at this."

"I shit here yesterday." He points at a lump of dirt.

"And look it is gone!"

"Philipe, you lost your shit," says Gerard.

There was nothing left. It just vanished, carried off by dung beetles and other insects. The rest decomposed in a few hours. I look around the campsite. If Whympet brought each of his groups here, they would have to hack back the jungle each time. Everything is so busy growing, there's not even time to rot. Die, and the minute you hit the ground, bugs are making off with little pieces of flesh, and zoom, your bones decompose and are recycled back into a mushroom or vine or philodendron shooting its way skyward. Sometimes vegetation doesn't hit the ground before the decomposers are at it. Once I hacked at what I thought was a liana; earth came showering down on me. A tree had decayed into dirt while still standing. It was supported by lianas which sapped nutrients as soon as they were released,

in a self-suspended terrarium.

I know of people who find Nature boring. I once lived on a remote island National Park for a short time. One visitor exclaimed, "What ever do you DO here?"

Wilderness returns our senses to us. It takes a few days, but your senses stop filtering out all the noise, and you find yourself, not in a vacuum, but connected to everything going on around you. You could die, you could get lost, you will be cold, hot and uncomfortable. Senses wide open, receiving, you suddenly return to civilization, and overwhelms you.

I feel a sense of loss leaving the rainforest. I don't feel I'm taking something with me, so much as leaving something behind. I wish I could stay longer, perhaps float all the way down to the Amazon. These tapestries of a wet, green universe must do something to the psyche, and I feel my psyche needs something done to it.

A small dugout sits by the shore as we pass back by the banana plantation. Whympy shouts and whistles then tells Jose to toss the remain food--crackers and fish into the dugout.

"Esta gente es muy pobre," he says. Into the dugout goes a pack made of woven palm fronds filled with crackers wrapped in plastic.

Well on his way to being Coca's most wealthy citizen by exploiting the rainforest for tourism, Whympers wants to maintain good relations with everyone, colonels and Indians. Born in another place, Whympers would have made a superb politician; you can't help liking him.

The smell of oil fills the air as we near the *petrolero* camp where we picked up Awui five days earlier. The road following the pipeline back to Coca reeks of oil. Oil leaks from the pipeline into creeks and rivers. Swamps in the rainforest are covered in crude. For the past eighteen years this pipeline leaked over 16 million gallons of oil into the Oriente (the Exxon Valdez spill was 11 million gallons). From here the pipeline stretches 300 miles, climbing to nearly 10,000 feet over the Andes and dropping back down to the coast for refining and export (mostly to the U.S.).

Even the road back to Coca is heavily oiled dirt. The rain turns it into a black slime waterslide. Trucks spin and slip on the thick wet oil. A long trailer can't make it up the hill, and the road is too narrow to pass without danger of sliding off the edge. Campesinos hack palms to place under the spinning wheels of the semi. Another truck doesn't make it, flipped on its side. I sit on top of Whympers's open air "monkey bus" propped up against my pack. Clouds churn in the distance. At the top of a hill the rainforest stretches out for miles. Chickens peck and

scratch at the road, their feet blackened by oil. Freshly washed clothes are spread out to dry across the black pipeline. Oil lies in pools in front of campesino homes while coffee dries on large concrete slabs nearby. School kids carry backpacks and wear yellow plastic raincoats emblazoned with the emblem of their donor, TEXACO. Oil plumes burn in the distance. As we get closer, a huge production facility comes into view.

POEM OF ECUADOR

Steep mountainsides cultivated green
With coffee, sugar cane, bananas, and corn.
A small Quichua boy in a woolen poncho,
Traditional derby, blue jeans and sneakers,
Steps off the bus
Vanishing into the empty paramo.

A picture of Jesus stuck like a photograph
In the corner of the bus's yellow fringed rearview mirror,
On a board with wheels,
A boy crippled by polio pushes down the street.
He flops himself to beg up the steps of the bus.

A baby lies crying in a cardboard box
Surrounded by bananas, potatoes, and chickens.
Women slap clothes clean along a concrete aqueduct.
Girls in school uniforms perch on park benches
Their shoes shined by boys in rags.
Dobermans lunge against iron gates.

An old man with no teeth
Can do nothing but weave baskets,
Each smaller and fitting inside the previous,
The smallest no bigger than a fingernail.

ON A SLOW BUS TO JIPIJAPA

Colorful buses painted red, green, blue and white
Each has a name--
Sangre de Toro, 22 de Julio, El Miligaro,
Reina de la Camino, Super Ford.
The driver, a huge black man with sideburns
(like he stepped off the Mod Squad)
Towers above Ecuadorians jostling to board.

A shadowbox of the Virgin luminated with a red
Christmas light hangs above his head.
Next to it a roadrunner cartoon sticker,
A bumpersticker above the door proclaims "RADIO FREE CHINA."
"Dios es mi guia" painted in scroll letters,
The salsa version of "Satisfaction"
crackles the radio.
Women climb on shouting "Helados! Chicles! Mandarinas!"
Boys flash the latest headlines
"Murderer drinks victim's blood"
"Two headed girl born"
Photos of corpses parade under your nose.

Vendors pile off as the bus begins to move.
The ticket collector crosses himself
As we ascend up the steep twisted road.
The driver honks at Indians and burros sitting in the road.
Another bus begins to pass,
The driver leans forward and steps on the gas,
The old school bus seats rattle loose as we bounce over
bumps.
Downhill, we gain slowly on the other bus,
Begin to pass.
A small, white car is coming the other direction.
The driver leans forward,
Passengers draw a collective breath,
We squeeze by--two buses and a car on a slender road,
Let out our breath and we smile at each other.

A woman's chicken thrashes about
She quiets it,
Wringing its neck.
The bus stops to pick up an old Indian woman
And lets off five drunks to piss.

At the bus station in Jipijapa hangs a framed poster
of a good looking nun baring her chest to reveal a tatoo
of Che Guevera.

Chapter Three

INDIANS AND OIL COMPANIES

Back in Quito, I'm unsure of what I'm doing. I'm tired of witnessing the world as if it were in a glass cage. My plane for Lima leaves in two days, yet I don't feel ready to leave Ecuador. I'm also uneasy about traveling through Peru by myself.

Sendero Luminoso activity is on the increase. *Sendero Luminoso*, or Shining Path, has been compared to both Mao's cultural revolution and Pol Pot. Over the past ten years "The People's War" has left 25,000 dead in Peru. The deaths are not only from Sendero; the government security forces are equally brutal. The revolution is going to get even bloodier.

Recent reports indicate Sendero has public support and strength equal to the military. Peru is a country divided. Those districts not under military rule are under Sendero control. Sendero's popularity is almost understandable given the living conditions of Peru's campesinos and the failure of land reforms. Sendero presents itself as a real alternative.

Campesino women, who have suffered the most over the years and have long been excluded from established politics and ignored in reform movements, find the movement appealing. In fact, many Sendero leaders are women. Arms

give Senderista women respect and authority previously unknown to them.

In typical takeovers of villages, Sendero ousts the male dominated municipal structures replacing them with "peoples committees" where women are able to participate and often dominate, implementing more equitable social structures. The people's committee redistribute land, promote collective agriculture, provide education for all, and reintegrate ancient rituals.

Sendero takes women's concerns seriously, emphasizing gender equality, subsistence economy, of which Indian women are primarily involved. Women know they will not be raped or abused by a Sendero soldier, nor will they be degraded for being poor, Indian, or female. The darker side of Sendero imposes death penalties for domestic violence, adultery, and rape.

It's not Sendero I fear so much as the general lawlessness and violence that accompanies a rapidly eroding government. In a country in such upheaval simple boundaries, like not robbing or assaulting someone, collapse.

I'm curious to learn more about what's happening with petroleum development in the rainforest. Searching the files at the South American Explores Club, I find thousands of reports on climbing mountains but only a thin, dated file on

Ecuadorian environmental groups.

At La Casona, I end up sharing a room with Larry, who recently quit his job as a management consultant in Los Angeles and is in Ecuador researching sustainable products from the rainforest. I also meet Kevin who's also concerned about what's happening in the rainforest, and he puts me in touch with Paul Dulin of Care International.

In his busy downtown office, Paul takes time out to explain the two pristine areas under immediate threat of petroleum development--blocks 16 and 22. (See maps 1 and 2.) Both blocks include large parts of Yasuni National Park and the Huaorani Territory and are under concession lease to Conoco, a subsidiary of DuPont.

In 1979 Ecuador created the Yasuni National Park in the heart of the Oriente. Shortly thereafter, a group of oil companies led by Conoco discovered oil in the park. In the spring of 1990, the government of Ecuador, in a thinly veiled political move, expanded the neighboring Huaorani indigenous territory to 1.5 million acres. Much of this land resulted from redrawing the boundary of the park to exclude the proposed oil fields, which now lie in the deepest part of the Huaorani territory. However, the government did not give the Huaorani any mineral rights.

"The government comes off as concerned by giving the Huaorani territory. However, this country's government is famous for subverting its own legal instruments," says Paul.

Although petroleum exploration and development are illegal in national parks, "The law of hydrocarbons supersedes all others," says Paul.

"The government views oil as in the best interests of the country and actively encourages development," he continues.

Paul points out that Conoco, while not having a proven track record, has been fairly conscientious. Exploration is generally localized and takes place by river or helicopter.

"There's minimal site disturbance--three to fiveteen acres. Regeneration is quite quick," he says.

However, seismic cable lines require swathes five to ten meters wide through the rainforest every mile.

"Obviously this impacts wildlife, but mostly from noise disturbance from the explosives." Conoco has repeatedly pledged publicly to conduct petroleum activities in an "environmentally sensitive" manner. For example, they promise to use cluster wellheads, drilling wells angling in from one site, rather than drilling numerous sites. They also promise to rehabilitate the area and not interfere with the Huaorani lifestyle.

In blocks 16 and 22, about 125 Huaorani (out of 1200) live a more or less traditional hunter/gatherer lifestyle. Semi-nomadic, they live in family groups of fifteen to twenty, subsisting off monkeys, *javillinas*, small garden plots, and their incredible knowledge of medicinal plants.

Paul informs me that the Huaorani are just starting to organize, but it's difficult after years of traditionally fighting each other. Not only do bands like the Tangeri attack outsiders, intertribal warfare is common.

"These guys go in and raid this village and take the women, a very warrior like people," Paul says.

The Huaorani don't believe in natural death, but view death as a consequence, usually caused by a brujo of a neighboring clan. A death in one's tribe calls for revenge. Traditionally, forty percent of Huaorani deaths come from revenge killings.

This intertribal violence serves an ecological purpose, keeping the Huaorani wide spread so as not to deplete forest resources. However, the missionary Summer Institute of Linguistics, have persuaded several Huaorani tribes to settle in villages, with the resulting environmental deterioration. The missionaries also imposed their morality and discouraged native celebrations. Anthropologist Laura Rival states, "Parents have notably more children today than before."

The oil companies also contribute to Huaorani settlement. PetroCanada relocated the Babeiri tribe near the oil road. "The Huaorani have accumulated pots, t-shirts, plates, tapes, pocket lights, and spoons; in the mean time, they have been selling all their game to the military and oil workers. Their diet has worsened: sugar, rice, coffee,

canned tuna fish. The children do not go to school, nor in the forest for that matter; they spend their days watching oil trucks and military vans passing by," writes Rival.

The Huaorani do not distinguish between the fifty different oil companies; they simply refer to them as "the company". They view "the company" as another forest resource to be harvested. There is no word in Huaorani for work, but rather a repertoire of words meaning "making" or "doing." They refer to cutting seismic trails as "busy land doing in the company."

"The company" employs Huaorani men to cut the paths for seismic lines and in return provides the workers and their families with food, pots, clothes, tools.

According to Rival, traditionally, sexual division of labor was minimal and "not sustained by any ideological representation of male dominance." Now ninety percent of the men have worked for the oil companies. "The sexual division of labor is today a reality, as most men work in the oil companies and as women do most of the agricultural work." When the men leave the village to work for the oil companies it creates a disparity between men and women's experiences. "They learn how to be Ecuadorians, they learn Spanish and they acquire new habits and values."

Even if the Huaorani survive as a people, it is doubtful their culture will remain intact in the midst of oil exploration. In block 16 lie an estimated 250-500

million barrels of oil-To access this pool of dinosaur goo, a 90 mile road and pipeline must be built into the heart of the Huaorani territory. The new road will open the area to colonization, further eroding the Huaorani culture, as well as clearing the forest to raise coffee, bananas, and cattle. ELF, a French company which holds the concession north of block 16, has already constructed fifteen miles of road.

To prevent colonization, Conoco and the government agree to police the road, and not build a bridge across the Napo River; the pipeline will go under the river. However, after the twenty years for which Conoco holds the lease, the title reverts to the government, which views the Oriente as a release valve for population pressure. As long as land can be opened up in the Oriente, the government will diffuse the land distribution struggle by building a bridge and opening the road to colonization.

For nearly 20 years, international oil companies, led by Texaco, have sucked oil from a vast reserve near the headwaters of the Amazon. So far, oil roads have opened 2.5 million acres of rainforest.

Slicing through what was recently pristine rainforest inhabited only by the Huaorani, the 63 mile Via Acua, the road running south from Coca, now supports a population of 30,000 colonists.

The oil companies maintain that colonists destroy the rainforest, not petroleum. However, as two rainforest

ecologists note, "To blame colonizing peasants for uprooting tribal people and burning the rainforest is tantamount to blaming soldiers for causing war."

Laura Rival points out that most colonists are actually oil workers who do a bit of agriculture or supply oil workers with the necessities of civilization--bars, brothels, stores, and labor. "Without oil companies, there would be simply no colonists living down the Via Acua," she writes.

Paul contrasts Conoco to "Texaco which is one of the worst polluters in developing countries and in the United States as well. They have no safeguards. They were the first and cast the model for petroleum exploration. Braspetro (a Brazilian company) is horrific and ELF is no better."

Admittedly Conoco is more susceptible to environmental pressure than, say, Petroecuador or Braspetro; it has a public image to maintain.

Paul points out that "if we succeed in stopping Conoco, the government opens the lands to concession, and Braspetro most likely goes in. Conoco can be held accountable for environmental safeguards. I'm not supporting Conoco." Paul stresses that in no way is he in favor of Conoco; he's just recognizing the political realities of the situation.

"What's Ecuador's biggest environmental problem?" I ask.

"The government," he replies without hesitating. Paul says he's worked all over Latin America and this is the worst he's ever seen. "Not just the current government, it's the whole way it's set up. A new government comes in and says now it's our turn to get rich."

Some of Ecuador's "Political realities:"

- * Up to its volcanos in debt, Ecuador is highly dependant upon petroleium exports, which account for 40% of the nation's income.

- * From 1972 to 1982 the government earned over \$7 billion in oil revenues.

- * "15% of Ecuador's rainforest has been destroyed by oil production, which entirely depends on foreign investment," states Laura Rival.

- * The failure of land reforms can be traced back to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for instituting policies and pressures on Third World countries to cut social services and food programs to service their dept.

- * The World Bank is considering a \$100 million loan to Ecuador to develop petroleium reserves.

Back at La Casona, Larry's on his way to meet with Douglas Ferguson of the Rainforest Information Centre (RIC) to discuss sustainable products. I tag along to the RIC

house, just a few blocks away. On the way, we run into Kevin who's just come from there and is quite excited.

Apparently, the RIC is heading into the Oriente for three weeks to work with the Huaorani, and Kevin will be joining them.

"Cool! Do they need any more help?" I ask.

I didn't want to go to Peru, anyway.

"I don't know, man. They're a weird bunch," he warns us.

Douglas is an arrogant, rude, unfriendly, paranoid, chain smoking Australian. I think we'll get along just fine. Larry introduces me as a graduate student/park ranger, which I immediately sense is the wrong move. Larry wants to export chrigras bags and hopes Douglas can set him up with the Huaorani.

Chrigras are the original "shopping bag" of the indigenous people of the rainforest. Light, durable and amazingly strong, these hand woven bags are used by the Huaorani, Shuar and other tribes to carry fruit, vegetables, fish, gear, anything, through the dense forest leaving both hands free.

Larry believes chrigras are a sustainable product that directly contributes to the economic well-being of indigenous people without sacrificing their culture. Rather than becoming oil or construction workers or languishing in the cities, many indigenous tribes can support their culture

and lifestyle by making and selling chrigras and other artisina. One adult will take more than a month to make the expandable fish-net-like bags, which are woven or knotted from the fibers of the chambira palm.

They make the chrigras from the fronds of the palm thus not fatally damaging the tree. Douglas says there's no danger of overexploiting the palms as there's tons of palms, lots of jungle and few Huaorani. It's hoped the increased travel and contact from the chrigra business will aid in the communities becoming politically organized. Only through organization will they be able to hold off colonization and development.

While Douglas and Larry are discussing chrigras, I ask Sparrow, an energetic ethnobotanist and junior shaman, about participating in the upcoming Huaorani project. I'm not sure exactly what it is they are doing--something like cutting a boundary around the Huaorani territory.

At first, Sparrow doesn't seem too enthusiastic about me volunteering. Then, I notice half a joint lying in a bowl of sea shells.

"Hey, are we going to smoke this or just let it sit here," I finally ask.

Sparrow's dark eyes light up. "You wanna smoke some weed?" He gets a lighter and we torch up.

"Alright! Now I know I can trust you. So you wanna come with us? That would be great. We could really use

you," he says.

Douglas has a long talk with Larry about rainforest products while I drift into a daze. I'm always amazed at people who can function while stoned. Douglas is asking Larry for \$2000 up front. Larry insists he's exploring options, but wants to work through the indigenous federation. A bit unprepared for this unbusinesslike approach and talk of financial commitment, Larry heads out while I continue to talk with Sparrow.

"The Huaorani eat monkeys. So you better be able to eat monkey meat," Sparrow says trying to discourage or test me. "It's a lot of hard work, swinging a machete all day cutting line," he adds.

A blond kid sitting next to Sparrow looks at his hand which is black surrounding a stitched gash running the length of his palm.

"Luke nearly lost his hand," says Sparrow.

"I fell on my machete."

"And some crazed Huaorani shot at him the first time we went out."

"They blow gun monkeys out of trees, man"

Luke, barely 19, spent two four-week stints with the Huaorani.

"Out there in the jungle, I'm the boss. What I says goes, no questions," Douglas puts in before ducking back into the office to agonize over strange messages on the

computer screen.

"You know anything about computers?" he asks poking his head out.

"A bit."

"Well, see if you can get this bloody thing to work."

"What's the problem?"

"It won't fucking work! That's the bloody problem."

"I'll see if I can play with it."

"Good luck." Douglas returns to the kitchen for more coffee. Left alone for a few minutes, I reformat the printer and it begins clattering away vibrating the filing cabinet it sits on. Proposal for the Delimitation and Protection of Huaorani Territory comes rattling out. Reading it I begin to get a clearer picture of what RIC is up to.

The proposal outlines an eleven step plan to help insure the self-determination of the Huaorani Nation. Part of the plan is the current project, the demarcation of the Huaorani Territory granted in 1990. Because the Huaorani are nomadic, creating a physical boundary is necessary to keep the colonists and *petroleros* out. This five meter line cut with machetes would be planted with distinguishable native species such as, "mani de arbol, and "chontaduro," and posted with warning signs. In this manner the Huaorani would have legal recourse in preventing the shrinkage of their territory. The line was begun by COFENIAE (the

Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon), but didn't involve the Huaorani. Working in cooperation with the Huaorani (as RIC intends) would serve to make it their own.

With the printer clicking away, Douglas becomes enthusiastic about my participation in the Huaorani project. And more accepting when I casually mention that my former roommate is currently serving a jail term in Indonesia for leading a logging blockade with RIC-Australia. Protesting the cutting of the Sarawak Rainforest, home of the Penan people, they climbed aboard a freighter carrying Sarawak logs. The Indonesian government didn't take kindly to this and charged them with trespassing and sentenced each of the protesters to several months in prison. The action received heavy press coverage in Europe, Asia, and Australia.

With the backing of COFENIAE and IERAC (the Ecuadorian government's department of interior), the Huaorani project seems perfectly legal and straightforward. I have no intention of languishing in an Ecuadorian jail.

Douglas invites me to help with the continuing Huaorani project, joining Sparrow, Kevin, and Ali, a stylishly dressed Iranian from Santa Fe. We would be in the rainforest for four weeks, living and working with the Huaorani, hacking line through the jungle and teaching the Huaorani about outboard motors.

In a gracious move at pacifying the Huaorani,

Petroecuador will be presenting them with a number of outboard motors next month. Douglas lobbied Petroecuador to allow RIC to conduct an extensive workshop on how to use and maintain the motors after the presentation. The Huaorani live in a non-linear world, and we're going to teach them about outboard motors?

Sparrow thinks that with the increased mobility the motors provide, the Huaorani can better communicate and become politically organized. I admit that it's not a matter of preserving a quaint culture as a museum piece, but of allowing a people's basic right to self-determination, and I certainly don't feel comfortable suggesting someone continue living in the Stone Age because I think it's nifty. On the other hand, I wonder about creating a dependence upon petroleum.

The world is closing in on the Huaorani. It seems they only have one option. The oil companies and government will drive them to extinction unless they change; by laying down their spears and stop attacking one another, by learning Spanish, and by instituting a political system and demanding rights and recognition.

I suppose there's no such thing as cultural purity. People borrow what they need from other cultures and discard what doesn't work. Demanding purity strikes me as just another form of colonialism. I just hope Sparrow's right, the Huaorani will be the Huaorani with or without outboard

motors.

Douglas also emphasizes that the Huaorani could disperse the harvest of the chambira palm used in making chrigra bags for export, thus creating a sustainable economy. Motors and cash for making chrigra bags, then what happens? Money and gas, is that what the Huaorani need?

Chapter Four

HACIENDA ON THE RIO GUAYLLAMBAMBA

The Culture of Terror

Blatant colonialism mutilates you without hiding: It prohibits you from speaking, from acting, from being. Invisible colonialism, on the other hand, convinces you that servitude is your destiny and impotency is your nature: it convinces you that you are not able to speak, not able to act, not able to be.

--Eduardo Galeano

The following day I meet Jose, a fast talking expatriate hippie. Jose has been living outside the United States for over twenty years. He's worked on haciendas and palm oil plantations, owned a bar in the Dominican Republic and is now working with RIC to establish a biological reserve in the cloud forest. He invites me to return with him to Los Cedros. Since we would not be leaving for the Huaorani Territory for a couple weeks, I decide to join him.

Jose and I fight for a seat on the 7 a.m. bus from Quito. The bus only travels to Sanjuangal three times a week. Anticipating the crowd, Jose bought tickets the day before, reserving us seats. Still, I feel bad about kicking out the woman sitting in our seats. Jose handles it with Latin American directness, waving the ticket in front of her face and repeatedly insisting she move. Reluctantly she gathers her bulk and hefts herself out. By now the bus is so crowded we have to climb up on the seat and over. As the bus lurches off, the woman looms over me half sitting,

wedged in place by the people still climbing aboard. Cigarette smoke and body heat contribute my advancing claustrophobia, and by the time we reach Nano an hour later. I'm sure I can't take another eight hours of this. So I climb out the window and scamper up on top of the bus. Fashioning a seat out of the fifty pound sugar sacks lashed to the roof, I enjoy an open air bus ride through the Ecuadorian countryside, soaking up the morning sun and clouds.

A mud slide blocks the road. Everyone climbs off and a bunch of us set to work leveling the mud, while the others stretch their legs. A few of the kids run down to play in the river. Everyone seems to know the bus won't be moving anytime soon.

Jose joins some of the men kicking rocks out of the road. I grab a branch and loosen dirt along the steep bank while a couple of others scoop up the pudding-like mud by hand. *A couple of shovels would go a long ways. There you go again, being the gringo with all the answers.*

On the far side of the road, another group pushes mud down into the river. Their efforts cause chunks of road to collapse into the river as well. The driver and a couple others change the tire on the left side to a larger one to get more clearance which leaves the right side of the bus several inches higher than the left. I can't imagine that this will affect the ride any.

A dozen people can move a lot of dirt in a short time, almost as much as one person with a shovel, and after three tries, the bus slobes through the mud and scree and we reload. As we peak out of the canyon, fincas and small towns appear along the rolling hills.

Several hours and innumerable small towns later, we descend into a cloud shrouded valley. By now, the road has degenerated to little more than a dirt two-track leading us to Sanjuangal, the end of the line. The twenty or so people left retrieve their gear from the roof and disappear into this town of maybe a dozen buildings. This town and the road to it aren't even on the map. Quito is the nearest city, eight hours by bus. However, Otavalo is only forty kilometers away--by trail.

After eating we walk the two miles to Don Pepe's hacienda in the rain. After the long, dusty bus ride and the muddy hike, I begin looking forward to a hot shower and a bed at the hacienda.

As we walk, we stop and shake hands with everyone we see and talk. In what is apparently a highly regarded social ritual, even in the pouring rain, everyone says, "buenas tardes" and shakes hands with everyone else. Jose carries on an abbreviated conversation, "Si, si, Quito, bien, si." Then everyone says "luego" and shakes hands with everyone else again.

At Don Pepe's, a half a dozen people watch a soggy

Ecuabally game. I grimace. *We can't shake everyone's hand.*

Thankfully, Jose hurries by the crowd repeating, "Buenas tardes, buenas tardes." This custom of acknowledging everyone's existence is pleasant, but trying.

Upstairs we dry off and chew panella, raw brown sugar pulled like taffy, while the Dona and Gracilla, the daughter, update Jose on the local gossip.

The "hacienda" turns out to be a two story open wooden structure. Instead of windows, half walls let in the air and sunshine while pillars support the roof. A tiled kitchen opens to a grapefruit tree, and a pulley system lowers kitchen scraps to the ground. The back opens to the cloud forest, the front to a Ecuabally court, chickens and dogs. It's not quite what I expected from a "hacienda."

On the wooden kitchen wall hangs a Czechoslovakian serving platter with a silver rim and a portrayal of an 18th century upper class Europeans playing piano, flute and violin in a sitting room, like a scene from Amadeus. Below hangs a Nippon portable radio on a nail. Next to it is thumbtacked a calendar from a insurance agent in Quito. Kerosene lamps hang from the ceiling, and pineapples sit in a basket under a Virgin Mary clock.

People constantly come and go in the house. A boy brings a load of firewood and corncobs for the Dona's stove. Two little girls cart in a sack of yuca. Dogs wander in and are chased out, while the cat sneaks along the

windowsill trying to steal a scrap. The Dona, a tired, old woman who stares at the campo and mutters to herself, pounds yuca with a rock.

Twenty years ago Don Pepe, the son of Czechoslovakian immigrants, carved this hacienda out of the cloud forest. Across the Rio Guayllambamba, a ragging muddy torrent, the tropical forest still blankets the hillside.

Don Pepe is a big old Czech with thick white hair, wears a cap his wife knitted and boasts a crumpled grumpy benevolent face. He must be sixty or seventy years old; I can't really tell. He draws on the table with thick stumpy fingers and scrunches up his face, peering at you with bright blue eyes making his big Czech chin stick out.

For dinner Gracilla serves soup made with huge arrowhead shaped leaves of the *papacuno*, the bread and sausages Jose brought, and pineapple for dessert. We eat off old plates from Czechoslovakia. Dona and Gracilla eat in the kitchen after the men are served. Coffee grown and ground on the hacienda follows dinner. All the food Don Pepe's family eats is grown or raised on the hacienda, except of white sugar, salt, cooking oil, wheat flour, and tuna fish.

While Don Pepe devours the newspaper Jose brought from Quito, a campesino family comes by with the friends and relations of a little boy who has an earache. Don Pepe comes out of his reading revelry and administers medicine to

the boy. Suddenly I am in Africa with the great white landowner helping the poor landworker. Or on a southern plantation. All the campesinos defer to Don Pepe. How can someone come in here with nothing, bust his ass for years, and have dozens of campesinos living in shacks working his land?

Is it because he's white--a entitlement assumed and propagated by both white and non-white?

The white ten to fifteen percent of the population controls most of Ecuador's resources and exclusively dominates the upper classes. Indians, which comprise half of the population, own the poorest parcels of land or work on haciendas. Most do not speak Spanish, and rarely live beyond a subsistence economy. Mestizos, stuck somewhere in the middle, occasionally break into the merchant class, but most work in the fields.

Durring the colonial period, the King of Spain granted most of the fertile lands to the conquistadors who then extracted a tribute of cash, blankets, corn, chickens from the Indians whose land it had once been. And only four hundred years later, the 1964 Agrarian Reform Act outlawed tenant farming. Under this system the tenant worked for the hacienda several days a week in return for a house site and a small plot of land (usually the most unproductive). A number of Indians have become small landowners since then, eking out a living on plots high on the hillsides, nine out

of ten of which are too small or marginal to support a family. And half of them are still landless.

Jose says because Don Pepe has tractors and can plant a lot of crops, the campesinos are better off working for him; they make more money and have less work and worries.

HACIENDA ON THE RIO GUAYLLABAMA

Three girls play barefoot on a minibike,
The wildhair oldest, maybe eight, holds a baby
The other, about four,
Trips and falls on her dirt smuged face.
Wildhair holds out her free hand to help.

An ancient tractor lies in pieces,
The threads of these bolts haven't seen,
Fresh oil in fifty years.
Don Pepe up to his arms in grime,
Pokes at a motor,
Smile on his whethereed Czech face.

Turkey struts bold red flaps of skin around the yard,
Senora chases the dogs out of the kitchen with a broom,
A man stands on the wooden suspension bridge throwing
Grain into the grey morning,
The breeze blows the chaff into the roaring chocolate river
below.
His fly broken halfway open,
A man loads grapefruit into a cardboard box,
Outside my door.

The sun from a cloudless sky lumminates,
Eastern hillsides of cloud forest,
The roosters are quiet after crowing 4am.
I will not have chickens on my farm.

For breakfast we eat fried plantains with loads of good strong coffee. After Don Pepe, Jorge, and Jose leave, Gracilla cooks up a ripe plantain for me to try, much sweeter.

An old woman brings by a couple of plantinos baked in

mani (peanut) sauce as a gift. Looking closer at the wrinkled face, I realize the "old woman" must only be in her forties.

The women are always working. Gracilla never stops moving from feeding the chickens to weeding the garden to cooking for Pepe and cleaning the house. She tells me she went to high school in Quito and worked there for two years but didn't like it.

"Hay mucho trabajo, hasta la sies de la manana hasta las nueve de la noche. Cada dia. Me gusta el campo," Gracilla says and means it. "There's a lot of work, from six in the morning to nine at night. Every day. But I like the ranch."

Gracilla shows me her garden, with *papacuno*, avocado and payapa trees, aji bushes, kale. I ask about a tree with long, drooping fruit like zucchini. She tells me it's luffa. Gracilla pulls one off the tree. Taking it to an outdoor sink, she smashes it with her hands. As she kneads the fruit against the counter, the thick green skin peels off, revealing white fibrous insides. Washing and twisting, Gracilla squeezes the seeds and pulp out of the spongy mass. She hangs it on the clothes line to dry, and says that I can take it with me to use when bathing to scrape off the dead skin. *Oh yeah, luffa.*

Gracilla then shows me the rows of luffa drying in a hut. She says they sell them in Quito. I always thought

luffa was a sponge or some sort of underwater creature. I never imagined it grew on trees.

So many things grow here, so many forms of life everywhere. It's so green and growing and fruitful that it's frightening. It stinks of life. I need a little starkness, a little death.

For dinner Gracilla serves hot breadfruit, cooked for two hours so the shells are soft and peel right off. Breadfruit tastes like, well, bread and fruit . . . and a little nutty. We also eat soup and bread baked with yuca flour and filled with squash jelly.

After dinner a campesino family drops in. The young mother has malaria and the baby is malnourished. Gracilla treats them as best she can, giving the mother a malaria shot and some goat's milk for the baby. After they leave, Gracilla sits down with a cup of strong coffee. She says that so many people have children at a young age. One girl had five abortions--or rather aborted five times by the time she was fifteen. Another girl had a child at twelve.

"How old was the father?" I ask. Gracilla says that the baby's father is the girl's stepfather.

Others have five to eight kids--all starving, or at least malnourished.

Jose points at his head and says in Spanglish, "Es la capacidad intelectual."

"Los niños no toman leche y proteína. So they don't develop. All the people eat is arroz blanco, yuca y pan blanco y Coke."

"Es la educación, no?" I ask.

"Claro," says Gracilla.

"Can't they teach the kids nutrition and sex ed?" I ask.

"The teachers are bad. They can't even teach the kids how to shit. Son tontos, It doesn't take education to figure out that if your five kids aren't getting enough to eat, adding more kids makes it worse," says Jose.

An appalling educational system, a corrupt government, environmental destruction, rampant sexual abuse, mass poverty, overpopulation, a poor diet of starch and sugar in a land bulging with food, a staggering debt and no revolution in sight. Where do you start? In many ways the Third World is ahead of us. The United States is on its way to entering the spiral, if it hasn't already, especially in the inner cities.

The reaction of any population to stressful environmental conditions is to have more offspring. When conditions are favorable, survival rates are high, necessitating few offspring. When environmental conditions deteriorate more young are produced so as to increase the chances of survival.

If we can presume to extrapolate to human biology (a

dangerous proposition, but somebody's got to do it), adverse environmental conditions whether it be pollution, famine, warfare, disease, poverty, or exploitation, serve as a stimulus for population GROWTH.

Overpopulation can be traced upward to the international debt crisis. In order to make payment on massive loans, Third World countries cut social welfare programs and put land into export production. Not only does this force people off the land, but they no longer grow food for consumption. Instead they have to buy food (mostly white rice and sugar), thus increasing poverty and malnutrition at the same time.

A loss of land results in a loss of security, which is compensated for by having more children: to provide for parents in old age, as a work force, and to insure their survival in the face of high infant mortality.

Unequal power structures and land ownership patterns come to a head in family relations. Denied meaningful work, men cling to the only power they retain, that over women. The low self-respect which comes from being unable to support a family can lead men to move in and out of relationships.

Gracilla points at "machismo," which I suppose can be defined as measuring a man's virility by the number of offspring he produces if not by the number of women he impregnates. "Tengo una factoria nueva," a man says to

describe his new bride. "I have a new factory."

Community attitudes, as well as machismo, pressure women to keep having children until bearing a son, further stressing an already malnourished family. This powerlessness results in perpetual motherhood. If women were given a choice, how many children would they have?

A study of women in Quito and Guayaquil consistently linked low socioeconomic status and high fertility. For example, women with a high school education averaged fewer than two children, while women with no formal education had more than five children.

This study was done in 1965! What's going on here? Somebody's not listening.

The wolf pack and the condom are both behavioral adaptations to limiting population growth. Social changes, as well as improving environmental conditions, are the only effective long term solutions to overpopulation. Not only do people need clean air and water, but also a healthy state of being, enough to eat, right livelihood, access to education and liberation of women.

A few Third World countries (Cuba, Colombia, Burma, Sri Lanka), have reduced their population growth to less than two percent. Access to a basic diet, expenditures on public health, and increased female literacy are considered the primary factors. Social changes that empower people reduce population growth, according to Frances Moore Lappe and

Rachel Schurman.

They write, "High birth rates among the poor can best be understood as a defensive response against structures of power that fail to provide--or actively block access to--a source of security beyond the family."

However, not everyone needs to become like the developed world. In fact, one rich, white kid in the United States uses ten times the resources as a child in Brazil. Wendell Berry states that even one person with the access and will to use atomic weapons is too many, illustrating that it's not the numbers of people that should concern us so much as what those people are doing.

Chapter Five

THE GOLDEN QUETZAL

A beautiful morning dawns sunny and hot with blue skies, green forest, and a chocolate river. A miserable day for hiking. I'm dripping sweat as soon as we cross the bridge over the Rio Guayllambamba and begin hiking up the trail. The red and black clay saturated by the rains, turns the trail into thick, slippery goo. I walk a little behind the horse, Sandoz, who keeps slipping and stumbling through the muck. The mud sucks my boots down into the earth. Solid ground lies down there somewhere. As I take a step, my foot comes halfway out of the boot before the mud unwillingly releases it with a hollow slurping sound.

"This is the bad section, hey?" says Jose glancing back. "The trail to Otavalo is like this the whole way and then there's the bad parts," Jose laughs and slurps on ahead.

After a couple hot hours Jose announces, "Maria Ellena's is just right up here a bit. We can get a couple beers."

BEER! Oh, this is too good to be true. Beer!! I'm hot and sweaty and about to sit in the shade and drink a beer. Hahahahah beerbeer beerbeer. At the top of the hill sits a wooden house. Jose ties Sandoz to a post and we walk over to the woman washing clothes.

"Dos cervezas," says Jose.

"No hay," says the woman not looking up.

"No hay! Si, claro hay."

"No hay," she repeats.

All she has is warm Coke. Jose about has a cow. We drink warm Coke, eat sardines and crackers and think about cold beer.

Maria Ellena mentions that someone's working Hector's land.

"Who? who? Quien esta?" asks Jose excitedly.

"No se. Mala gente," she says. "Bad people."

After a long, hot, muddy eight hour hike up the Cedros River, we arrive at a tired wooden house. We walk through the yard of chickens to the watering trough. After drinking from the trough, I splash water over my grimy head. *Just like being in the Old West.* A woman comes over, and Jose buys some cheese from her wrapped in banana leaves. She thinks men may be working Hector's land, but she doesn't know.

A few minutes later we descend the hill to Jose's place, more of a field camp than anything else. A couple of plastic tarps keep the rain off the open air shacks. Jose's partner, Juan, is jonesing for some Triago, a cheap cane alcohol.

Behind the shacks lies an old garden and banana patch.

Yellow-rumped tanagers with deep black backs, vibrant yellow rumps and bright blue beaks hang upside down among the bananas gleaning insects off the broad leaves. Jose and Juan don't seem concerned with keeping nature at bay and the garden has progressed into a blend of wild and cultivated plants.

A bird lands on a naranjilla leaf. The broad leaves with purple veins, the underside covered with purple hairs, lead to a thick stalk and a fuzzy orange naranjilla. Cut a naranjilla open and you see a green, juicy fruit with hundreds of tiny seeds. It looks and tastes like a sour kiwi fruit. Delicious! One of the best fruits yet.

"I've got six different kinds of bananas here," says Jose as we eat the huge platanos covered in mani sauce. "Four of them are cooking bananas. Those over there are the *mantequillas*. Taste well, kinda like apples, man. I also got your regular Ecuadorian export bananas that people you know buy by the pound. I can't believe that people buy bananas by the fucking pound, man. Here I give them to the wild animals." In fact, Juan just saw a brown agouti munching on some bananas below camp at dusk.

BANANAS BLEED

did you know that?
 that's how they do it,
 to harvest the bananas
 they cut down the tree,
 I guess its more like a big stalk,
 three, maybe four, whacks with a machete.
 the banana sap
 comes pouring out through the gaping wound.

it looks delicious.

The Los Cedros river splashes clear with a green-blue tint, through boulders and deep pools. The water's about seventy degrees. Vines dangle above the pool, moss blankets the rocks, and epiphytes cloak the trees. Surfboard sized leaves sprout out of a thick stalk and hang over the river. Such incredible diversity of shapes and shades of green.

It's obvious people are tropical animals, I think crouched on a rock naked and dripping wet from jumping into a jungle pool. I look at my body. There's no fur; I wouldn't last long like this outside of the tropics. Way, way back the rainforest is our home. Is this sense of homecoming part of our fascination with the rainforest? Humans inhabit a landscape. How does landscape affect our behavior, our language, our thoughts, our soul?

Large, tree dwelling snakes often prey on monkeys, their only natural enemy in the Old World. Jung said that human's paranoid fear of snakes is part of our collective unconscious from when we lived in trees, not so long ago really. That feeling you get just before falling asleep when your body jerks like you're grabbing on to something, also stems from living in trees. The only other danger a monkey faces is falling out of the canopy when asleep.

Humans live in the rainforest unencumbered; the forest provides for everything. It would be impossible to die from

starvation with all this food lying around, fruit and nuts and leaves and roots. And it never gets cold, even at night. No wonder the Huaorani regard death as unnatural.

"With a fantastic collection of stamps to win friends and influence his uncle," the Tombstone Blues crackle from Jose's small battery powered tape player. He rocks back and forth cleaning his revolver when I return from the river.

"Protection, man. We don't know who's up there. We just want to buy the land, man, but they might not understand. I'm going to try and talk with them about, you know, saving the land, and not shooting the monkeys, but this Hector, he's killed people and escaped from jail three times. I don't think he's around, but his uncle's up there and he busted Hector out of prison, you just never know, man. We don't know what there doin' up there or why or how many, or if they even want to see our gringo faces, but I'm just gonna go talk to them, man."

I gradually derive from Jose that RIC, in cooperation with IERAC (the Ecuadorian Department of Interior) is buying land along the Los Cedros River to form a biological reserve which will buffer the 500,000 acre Cotacachi National Park from encroaching colonization. Hector's land is the last piece up the valley. But Hector is long gone. He killed a fellow some years ago, escaped from jail a couple times since and is still on the loose. Someone working Hector's

land means they somehow bought it from him and might not be willing sellers. Furthermore they are in the process of clearing it for cultivation, and possibly taking potshots at the endangered Brown-headed Spider Monkey.

The following morning, Jose, Juan and I head through a cleared field to where a man is cutting lumber with a chainsaw, slicing the trees lengthwise. He also thinks there may be someone up there but won't say for sure. We hear shouts from below so we take the trail through the pasture and into the trees where a man, woman, child and cows are standing in the forest stream. They tell us that there are indeed four "mala gentes" working Hector's land.

We hike up a ridge through several pastures. At the top of the ridge we drop down through the forest to a branch of the Cedros.

Unlike the rainforest, the cloud forest has distinct wet and dry seasons. Luckily the wet season is just ending. This is the southern end of the great Choco ecosystem, one of the most unknown and unstudied ecosystems on Earth.

I walk slow, my mouth open at the enveloping forest. A bright red-orange millipede crawls over huge, fallen leaves. I pick him up and he curls in a tight spiral, a black line down his back, a spiral within a spiral in a non-repeating pattern. Jose and Juan are far down the trail. I drop the millipede and hurry on. We cross the river and head up the other side, no longer following a trail, but rather a

machete path through the forest. *Yup, buy this, man. No matter what it takes. Nobody's fucked with it yet. It's the last piece, gateway to pristine, untouched forest. Everywhere people go they touch the land, rape the land. It's true. Then you see places uncut or ungrazed and it's beautiful. Get these fuckers out!*

As we start up the hill we hear a couple shots.

"Now remember, man, let me do all the talking," Jose says.

"No problema," I say.

Suddenly we are standing in a cut. Cecropia trees lie everywhere in a broken jumble. Smoke rises from a hut on the top of the hill. One last cedar tree rise behind the clearing. Beyond, in all directions, stretches unbroken forest. *These are the guys who freed a murderer from jail, and we're in the middle of nowhere, and we would never be missed, and our bodies would be tossed to rot in the jungle, and in two days would be completely decomposed.*

Stumbling over the fallen trees, we "buenas tardes" and "Como les van" our way up the hill to the open shelter. Four men stand around cooking a pot of lunch on a fire. Machetes are propped up against the shelter and an ancient rusty shotgun lies along side. Two crested guans, large turkey like birds, hang by their feet from the crossbeams. *They seem friendly enough. Nothing but Ecuadorian rednecks out destroying the countryside. Nothing to be frightened of.*

Jose gets right to the point. He wants to buy the land for a nature preserve. He explains the need to protect headwaters, and monkeys, and plants for medicine. They all agree that, yes, it was a very nice place and would sell it to Jose but they had already done much work on it making this nice clearing and shelter and had to be compensated for their labor.

In Ecuador, land itself is worth little, rather labor, or "improvements" on land contain the value. Jose suspects these guys heard someone was interested in buying it, so they hurried over to do as much work as possible so they could charge more for the property.

"Hablamos, hablamos ahora. Quanto quierre," Jose was in a buying mood. "Let's talk now. How much do you want?"

"How much did you pay for it? We'll give you what you paid plus your labor."

"It was very cheap because I done a lot of favors for Hector," the older man replies.

"Hablamos, hablamos," Jose repeated.

It's not like RIC has any funds available for land purchases or an investment portfolio. Fortunately, last week RIC received a \$1000 donation from a woman in Santa Fe to buy land and dedicate a tree in memory of her daughter.

Eventually Jose talked them down to \$1000.

"What do you guys think? Is \$1000 a fair price?" Jose asks us. "We're getting ripped off, of course."

I shrug. "Do they have any papers?"

"No, but he says he's done Hector a lot of favors and the land's his. He'll sign the papers stating he's the owner to sell the property," Jose says.

"Will they stop cutting and go away," I ask.

"Tomorrow."

So Jose and the man arrange to meet tomorrow to seal the deal for the \$250 of Sparrow's money Jose has by chance for emergencies. He will receive the rest in Quito when he signs the papers next week. The whole deal takes just over an hour.

I don't think this is quite how the Nature Conservancy operates.

As we pick our way back through the fallen trees, an occasional banana tree in the mist of the second growth cecropia trees indicates that this area was once cleared and cultivated many years before. I'm not entirely convinced that humans are indeed capable of destroying the tropics, much less "destroying the planet." Granted we can certainly make it a lot less habitable. Environmentalists often speak of "destroying the planet" and "saving the Earth." It strikes me these are statements of supreme arrogance, implying that humans have the ability (if not the will) to consciously change something as ancient and complex as the Earth. In fact, short of human extinction, benign neglect may be the best thing we can do for the planet; give it a

chance to heal.

However, we can protect wild land and perhaps this is the most important thing we can do. In this tragic world, it may be the only thing left worth saving. After humans either reduce or eliminate themselves, biological reserves, will remain from which the remaining species can issue forth and reinhabit their world. By eliminating wild habitat, not only do we remove ourselves from the sacred, but we make it increasingly difficult for nature to recover from the human experiment.

A trail from Jose's follows the crest of a ridge. Instead of craning my neck straight up, I can look out onto the platforms of mosses and epiphytes suspended in the saddles of the great trees.

I'm still amazed at the lack of bothersome bugs. I keep expecting to be swatting at mosquitos or cussing black flies or find my back covered by army ants. No insect pests, no snakes drooping from trees.

I begin to recognize certain plants. I can't name them, but notice their large leaf patterns that I've seen before, and the forest no longer seems so foreign.

One of the most striking things about so many tropical tree species is the prevalence of buttresses supporting the trunks. One explanation of buttresses is that they prevent lianas, but again I see many buttressed trees plagued with

lianas. Lianas can weigh a tree down so much they break off branches and even cause the collapse of the tree. Some lianas known as strangler figs can encircle a tree and kill it.

The strangler fig or *Matapalo* (tree killer) is a member of the Genus *Ficus* along with 900 other species, which all bear figs. Strangler figs begin life in the canopy and drop lianas toward the ground. The various tentacles of the lianas twist together and support each other. Eventually the strangler fig smothers the host tree. Sealed off, the host tree dies and decomposes, supplying nutrients for its conqueror. The *matapalo* now stands as a tree on its own with a hollow center where the host tree once stood.

I stop at a rotten moss covered stump. Numerous plants, epiphytes and ferns, but also woody plants, sprout forth. I count seventeen types of plants that I can easily distinguish. I'm not a botanist, so there's undoubtedly more species. I start keeping an eye out for stumps and soon come across one that is a pillar of moss. It is difficult to tell where stump ends and ground and plants begin. I don't even try counting the species on this one.

I can see and hear the rain falling but none reaches me on the ground; a few drops and a pleasant mist is all. The temperature is constant. Everywhere is life. The earth is so nurturing. It's easy to see why people wouldn't want to give the forest up. What is surprising is that they'll cut

it down to make room for cows.

The clouds sink at dusk over the forest and a fine mist covers everything.

Jose seals the land deal with a down payment of \$250 in the banana patch. At eight in the morning, under partly sunny skies, the involved parties sit on a rotting moss covered log to sign the receipts. The clouds lift revealing mountains draped in trees that have been sealed off from colonization and will be preserved in their natural state. Everyone leaves happy.

This afternoon I strap on a machete and put on rubber boots. *Jungle Greg going off to hack his way through the wild tropical jungle.* I'm right on the edge of unexplored, uninhabited wild land. *There's jaguars out there! But I've got my machete.* I'm smack in the middle of a cloud. I have no idea where I really am. Not being able to look at a map and say "This is where I'm standing" is rather unnerving.

Jose, Juan and I hew our way to the top of the ridge meeting a trail. As we walk, we widen the trail. Gradually we hack less and less and soon we're walking silently through the knee deep ferns and ducking under vines instead of hacking through, listening to the birds and not wishing to make any noise. In a large flash of black and yellow, a pair of orpendolas squawk through the trees and a large,

dark shape crashes through the brush.

"A tayra," Juan announces.

"A what?"

"A tayra, I don't know, like a big weasel or wolverine."

Off amongst the foliage is a large, bright red bird. Binoculars reveal a bright orange crest. A Cock of the Rock. I don't know many South American birds, but this one's as distinctive as it is rare.

We soon come upon the giant matapalo. "The mother of all matapalos" Jose calls it. This particular matapalo is a huge tree in its own right. Three large trunks merge together at the base. Deep recesses lie hidden within the contorted trunk of lianas. Bending down and looking into the tree, I can see a small stream of light coming from the other side. I sit back in the buttressed arms of the great tree while Jose and Juan return to camp. I stare up at the hanging greenery trying to spot birds or monkeys, but not trying very hard, just sitting and listening.

It's now definitely summer--the dry season in the cloud forest when it only rains part of the day. The mornings are nice with patches of blue sky, so I go off for a hike by myself seeking a haven from the static of the BBC Worldwide and Jose's tirades.

BBC's broadcasting "Scott of the Antarctic." In

today's episode, Scott has 800 miles to return after finding out Admenson had gotten to the South Pole first.

I wander up a little side stream of the Cedros, and hack my way around a big boulder sitting in the middle of the stream. I poke along looking up at the trees; it's drizzling again but nothing reaches the ground. Around a bend a waterfall and a steep granite cliff block the way.

What is it about water, about waterfalls, that draws me so? Is it because it's the only open place in the claustrophobic jungle? I'm having a little trouble with all the biology going on around me. Tiny white-vented euphonias dart about the tall trees. The root of a liana punches straight through a shelf fungus on its way to the forest floor. The roots, rocks and leaves look like they're moving, everything teems and pulses with life. The plants look like animals and the animals look like plants. Roots twist themselves into weird shapes that look like insects and snakes. Insects resemble sticks, leaves, roots, fungus. Brown mottled frogs hide on the forest litter. And algae grows in the sloth's fur.

What am I doing here? Why am I not in Machu Picchu? In Bolivia? I even bought a plane ticket for chrissakes. No. Wait. Calm down. I'm sitting under a waterfall in the forest. What more do I want? Why am I not happy here? The weather? The oppressive greenness? The company? Army ants

march across a fallen log.

We spend the day cutting a trail up to Hector's shelter, the newly acquired RIC property, so the biologists coming next week will be able to set their traps.

According to Juan the area is called Riconda or "deep corner." "Assassins roost" according to Jose.

"You don't like Riconda?" asks Juan.

"Riconda? What's that?" asks Jose.

"That's what people around here refer to it."

"Riconda, I never heard anyone say that," says Jose.

After hacking along a flat area, we begin working uphill. Soon we are cut off from the river by a steep embankment and can only continue up. Halfway up the hill Jose stops.

"Hey, uh, we're going up hill here, Juan. I don't know that we want to be going uphill. Know what I mean, Juan?" Jose shrugs his shoulders and waves his machete around.

"You know these biologists are going to be carrying these traps around. They're not going to want to be going up hill now. I just wanted to get from point A to point B in the simplest way possible and then you just head straight up the hill here."

"I guess I made a mistake," says Juan charging up the hill swinging his machete.

"You know maybe you're getting tired, swinging that

machete around; you're not looking where you're going. Look, we're just now to the matapalo. I just want to make a nice easy trail from my place, you know what I mean, Juan?"

"You want to go back?"

"Oh, it's too late, now." Jose swings at an overhanging vine.

On the summer solstice a near full moon hangs over the banana field. Mars and Venus dance around each other. Jupiter sneaks up from below. Orange blinking eyes of fireflies float over the rotting stumps. I lean against a moss covered log and watch the quick shadows of bats dart among the bananas seeking out the ripe fruit. In the buttress of a tree glows a four inch tube of green light. I bend down--*What if it's a snake?*--I straighten up and turn on my flashlight. *Yup, something's glowing.* One of the roots a pale green. *Glowing roots, very weird.*

After some deliberation I venture into the jungle. The trees close in becoming black shapes. It's incredibly dark with The of sounds, the river, frogs, insects, bats, and, tree rodents reverberate through the darkness. Tiny red points of light watch me from above. I resist the urge to turn on the flashlight. I walk slowly, my feet feeling the roots along the path. Coming across a dry creek bed I find a rock and sit in the dark and listen to the night noises. I try telling my self I should go farther into the forest,

yet something holds me back. Spirits seem to be about at night. *I wonder why that is. Is it because we're more aware of them at night; there's less to distract us? Why do we dismiss spiritual presences so quickly? So much of the time we believe that if we can't see it, it doesn't exist.*

Another sunny morning after a rainy night. My last day in Los Cedros, and I hope I see some animals, I'm getting kinda tired of vegetable matter. Sitting in the warm tropical sun, a butterfly alights on my ankle. The sun's so bright I can see the shadows of the butterfly's antennae against my skin. Do butterflies spread their wings like vultures to warm their skins in the morning sun? A hummingbird shimmers red and green, flirting with an orange and yellow flower dropping from atop an old stump. A bright green parrot darts across the treetops.

One of the rarest and spectacular inhabitants of the tropics, the Golden-headed Quetzal alights on a tall snag behind camp. This technicolor bird sports a bright yellow beak, an iridescent green head and shoulder, a deep scarlet breast and back, and a long (fourteen inches) black tail. Juan and I sit captivated, watching the legendary bird. Sacred to the Maya, the quetzal represented freedom.

It perches on the snag for a long time and then like prehistoric fantasy creature, it lifts its black and red

wings and floats down into the cloud forest.

We leave the next morning for Sanjuangal and end up talking about the CIA most of the way.

"The CIA invented crack you know, " Juan tells me.

"How do you figure?"

"The CIA is the biggest drug dealer in the U.S. right?"

I had read enough issues of Utne Reader and Mother Jones to recognize the probability of this. "Well I don't know if they actually deal, but they're certainly involved in cocaine trafficking."

"Yeah, okay, so where do you find crack? In black ghettos. It's a shitty drug. It makes you feel shitty. Rich white kids won't touch it. So the CIA comes up with a cheap, shitty drug to keep the black community down. They're all killing each other and totally divided, man."

"Keeps them from getting pissed and having a revolution?"

"You know it, man."

I don't know if the CIA is really behind the crack epidemic, but it's certainly plausible and that's just as scary as if it were true.

We stop at Maria Ellena's and this time she has warm beer.

Without Jose to dispute everything, Juan's on a roll. "You know when they elected Nixon, I was really surprised.

But I figured it was a fluke. Then they re-elected him, I just didn't understand, but they nailed him so I figured ok, that's over. But then they went and elected Reagan, and I was dumbfounded, just couldn't figure it and when they re-elected him! Well, I just didn't know what to think. Then they go and elect Bush, the head of the secret police for chrissakes. I don't think anything can surprise me now."

"You know I've spent most of my life under Nixon, Reagan and Bush," I say. "I remember when I was little, must have been five or six, my mom caught me in a lie. She took me aside and said, 'Don't you lie. You don't want to grow up like that man, Nixon, do you.'"

This was my first recollection of right and wrong. The model of immorality held before me was the President of the United States. In civics class we learned about democracy and covered our heads in the hallway in civil defence drills.

"The Soviet Union's overextended. There's too many little countries. It's silly to worry about them, the whole thing will fall apart if they just leave it alone," my mom said in the early 70's.

In sixth grade, Nixon fell. Mom was vindicated. Things almost looked up there in the mid 70's with Jimmy Carter, solar energy, clean air and water, human rights. All gutted by Reagan/Bush returning us to imperialism and business as usual.

*I was born just before Kennedy was shot (by the CIA?)
I grew up in the shadow of Vietnam and Johnson. Nixon took
me to high school. My adult life spent under Reagan/Bush.
Why should I have any confidence in American Democracy? The
CIA behind the crack epidemic? Why not?*

We reach Don Pepe's just as buckets of rain drop from the sky. As we arrive at the road to town, Juan stops by the little store "to wait for Gracilla coming in on the bus." I had been warned and had seen enough of his alcoholism to know that he would be there a long time and I didn't want to be around. Accepting his lame excuse, I walk into town. I plop my soggy self down on the wooden bench at the Sanjuangal "Inn".

Three boys and a girl sit at a table doing their homework by lantern. One of the boys makes a paper hat. I show them how to make paper airplanes and soon they are all winging paper airplanes about the room. As he picks up his waterlogged plane, one of the boys, about seven, asks me where I'm from. "Los Estados Unidos," I reply.

"Why does the United States blow up people's houses?" he asks.

I shrug and stare at my beer.

Chapter Six

STEEL BARS AND CONCRETE WALLS

When the tragedy of the world market no longer dominates our existence, unexpected gradations of being in love with being here will emerge.

--Walter Lowenfels.

After three months I'm just beginning to scratch the surface, and as I peel back the skin of Ecuador, I get frightened. My bubble feels fragile. Complete immersion-- well, I'm afraid of drowning. I'm not sure I really want to cross that zone of comfort. I feel I'm spending far too much time hanging out with other gringos but it's so easy-- we share a similar fate.

On Sunday afternoon, I meet Gerard in the Parque de las Carolinas. Gerard tells he came down with amoebic dysentery while he was on the coast last week and had to be hospitalized for two days. He thought it was cholera. He seems to be fully recovered so after condolences, I ask him about the coast.

"Dude, you better be careful. This place is crazy. I was staying near the beach . . ."

"Did you camp out?"

"No way, that's asking for trouble. I went out for a morning walk along the beach. I figured, "Hey, morning, no problema." This guy in rags comes running up to me and runs by. He's covered in blood. I kept walking and down the

beach I found woman he'd beaten, robbed and raped."

"If I'd been there ten minutes earlier I'd have my head blown off," he says.

On the other side of the park a huge concrete cross looms behind a stage up for a free concert. A hang glider dangles high against the green peaks of Pichincha.

One girl wears a tee-shirt depicting a skull wearing a green beret and a big knife through his head and saying "Kill 'em all and let God sort them out."

Three giggly teenage girls rudely bump into a young Indian hauling two crates of Coke to a vender and nearly knock him over. The girls frown at him in disdain and he looks at the ground in apology. This white/dark class distinction is so pervasive it seems unconscious and an established part of behavior. White equals money and power, European, beauty, the standard. Dark means poor, Indian.

Gerard relates a story from our Dutch friends, Kees and Marty. It seems they were hitchhiking from a village where they went to investigate a community development project gone awry. They couldn't find any sign of the veterinary clinic that was supposed to have been build with the funds. As they were leaving they were picked up by the German veterinarian who was to have built the clinic. He said that when he arrived last year, the village had spent all the money on a fiesta. He was so upset that he started poisoning all the dogs in town. He confessed that the back

of his truck was full of sacks of dead dogs.

After finishing work for the day, Magali, the RIC secretary and recent refugee from Peru, asks me if I'd like to read some radio plays she's writing.

Cut-out prints of Picasso and Gauguin decorate the whitewashed walls of Magali's apartment which overlooks a small valley dominated by a huge cathedral. A cloud forms a milky bridge across the surrounding hills isolating this little town in the middle of Quito.

I sit at her desk under a bare light bulb reading her radio plays. She punches them out on a cheap manual typewriter. Magali's radio plays all contain environmental themes, and the trees and worms talk. The one I'm reading is about a *brujo* (a medicine man or healer) who badmouths the eucalyptus trees, which are so pervasive in the Andes. The spirit of the eucalyptus comes and asks why. So the brujo takes the spirit into the future when eucalyptus dominate the landscape. A eucalyptus is crying because there's nothing but other eucalyptus. All the other tree are long gone.

The centuries of firewood gathering have deforested the Andes, which are now bare except for eucalyptus. Introduced from Australia, the eucalyptus grow rapidly and can be cut down sooner for firewood than the native pines.

Magali makes fresh-squeezed orange juice as the evening

mists roll off the lichen covered red tile roofs below. She tells me of a small mountain town in Peru where Sendero Luminoso came and killed the mayor and told the hated wealthy landowning family to leave or be killed. They left. Sendero then distributed the land and livestock to the villagers in exchange for their commitment to the movement. So when Sendero needs soldiers they will come and take the men from the village. If you refuse the "gift" they tell you to leave.

Unafraid of her sadness, she looks straight at me while on the verge of tears and continues, "Peru is very beautiful and there are many places of powerful spirits. I will never go back. It's too violent. I went to a meeting and the Sendero were there. I didn't know they were the Sendero when I went. But this woman took the mike and said she was Sendero and they tried to take the mike away and all these people stood up and starting saying things and chanting 'Sendero.' It was their faces that frightened me. Their faces were empty, blank. They were like robots, all saying the same thing. They didn't do anything, but I was very scared."

She falls back against the wall as if saying this takes great energy.

The sale of Hector's land goes smoothly. The two biologists from UCLA arrive to conduct a mammal study of Los

Cedros. They will collect baseline data and determine the population of the endangered Brown-headed Spider Monkey.

Unfortunately, they were unable to procure mist nets with which to capture bats. Their small mammal traps shipped by airfreight are still in Miami. The other traps sit at customs because of a minor paperwork technicality. The biologists are frantic as they only have a few weeks to do the study. Finally they the traps are released, and all is set for their departure to Los Cedros. Everyone at RIC is excited because the biologist were able to raise \$6000 to purchase additional lands. It looks as if the Los Cedros project is taking off.

It would be interesting to tag along and help with their field study were I not going into the Huaorani territory for three weeks. Kevin and I will be joining Douglas, Ali and Sparrow, and we both feel comforted that there will be another "outsider" along.

Two young men, Nantohue Coba and Moi Enomenga Nantohue, the president and vice president of ONHAE (The Organization of Huaorani People of the Ecuadorian Amazon) camped out on the living room floor of the RIC house. I spend the morning with them trying to learn Huaorani. "Huaorani," it turns out, means "one person--many people." Coba wants to learn English so we exchange languages in the mutually understood Spanish. My brain gets rather muddled at times. Not surprisingly, Huaorani is like nothing I've ever heard. In

fact, it belongs to no other language group in the Amazon. It's a fun language; it even sounds like the jungle. For example, "How are you?" translates, "Emano imi," and "I want to eat fish," becomes "Boto ponemopa quenquin yeye."

The next day Jose shows up shaking his head. The biologists left the \$6000 in cash they brought in their hotel room while they went down to dinner. When they returned it was missing. The biologists verge on breakdown, everyone else, however, takes it in stride. Even I know better than to leave cash in a hotel room.

The day before we are to leave for Huaorani territory I start to feel ill. Douglas comes in and wakes me at five in the morning to leave for the Huaorani territory. I haven't felt well for the past couple days and now I know I'm too ill to go. I shake my head. Bitterly disappointed, I explain my condition, a chronic lung infection which puts me out for two weeks to two months.

Douglas shrugs and heads downstairs.

I curse my body. And lack of commitment. *Che also had asthma, but that didn't keep him out of the revolution.*

Xanthe, manager of the Explorer's Club, takes pity on me and provides a back room at the house so I can recuperate and indulge in chicken soup, sleep, and hot baths in eucalyptus leaves.

Watching people come into the Club, I begin to wonder if going to a country to climb mountains a form of colonialism. The U.S. State Department warns against traveling in El Salvador. If your hair is long you must be a communist guerrilla and the Government "disappears" you, if your hair is short, you must be CIA and the guerrillas off you. Not only is El Salvador one of the most dangerous places, it also has some of world's best surfing. Surfers travel with impunity, as if swimming trunks with sharks are letters of diplomates. Everyone knows surfers take no interest in politics.

Where does this take us? Mountains teach us things, especially those of us too stubborn or arrogant to listen to other people and insist on doing everything the hard way. Some of us need to gaze into a crevasse in order to look into our own soul.

A few days later I walk back to the RIC house. A white Ford Taurus is parked outside with two men in suits inside. *Oh shit. Somethings up.* Jose and Jeff, manager of the RIC permaculture project, stand in the doorway.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Welcome to the house of the dead," says Jose.

Ohmygod! Someone's died.

"What! What happened?"

"It's all in the papers, man," says Jose.

"What? What's in the papers?"

"They arrested Douglas, man."

"Why? What for?"

"We don't know." he says and heads upstairs.

"Douglas, Ali, Sparrow and Kevin were taken into custody in Coca by the Army and are being deported," says Jeff.

"But why?"

"That's just it, man, we don't know," calls down Jose.

Xanthe and I pack up some food and books and bring Kevin's sleeping bag down to the jail. The jail is in the part of town which always seems dark, even at midday. The first three taxis refuse to take us.

Men in sharp uniforms, their green pant legs tucked neatly inside shiny black calvary boots, mill about. Long sabers dangle from their sides and .45 automatics are strapped under their arms. Some carry automatic rifles. It's difficult to tell whether they are police or soldiers. An armored car sits in front of the dilapidated colonial building, indistinguishable except for the bars across the windows. The prison guards are unarmed and not exactly in uniform. Guards are the lowest on the scale, one step above prisoners.

The guard at the gate says we can't go in and holds out his hand. Xanthe steps back and says, "He wants us to pay

him."

"Okay, how much?" I ask.

"I don't know."

I give him 1500 sucres (\$1.50) and he lowers the chain. We walk up some concrete steps and three men in old green coats stand in the doorway.

"We want to see our friends."

"No, you can't," the guard tells us.

"Why not?"

"You have to wait for approval."

"Okay"

"Do we have to bribe these guys too?" Xanthe asks.

"Sure, why not?"

But the guard lets us through to see the man behind the desk with the big ledger book.

"We want to see our friends, and bring them some things."

"No, you can't. Leave your things here and we'll give them to them," he says.

"No way."

"You can't go in; it's after five," he then informs us.

"What do we do now?" Xanthe asks.

"Wait."

A few minutes later he waves us forward and stamps our hands. We walk through a pale blue gate. Another guard checks my pack, giving it a squeeze.

A man with his shirt unbuttoned halfway down his hairy chest and a massive crucifix around his neck shows us up a flight of dark stairs to a metal gate. The gate clangs behind us. *I hope they let us back out.* Eighty or so middle-aged men stare at us. I can feel Xanthe's apprehension. I wouldn't want to be the only woman in this room.

Fifteen bunks line the walls of the concrete room. Some men are sleeping. Others are smoking, talking, squatting against the far wall. One man paces back and forth. It's much better than I expected of an Ecuadorian jail. Lying on a couple bunks are four tired looking gringos.

Douglas, Ali, Jonathan, and Kevin are happy to see us, as we dump books, bags of croissants, chocolate, and fruit on their cots. In a fit of poetic irony, I included Philip Agee's Inside the Company.

"I always wanted to read this," Ali says picking up the book.

Kevin motions to the next bunk, "The guy next to me is the kick-boxing champ of Ecuador. He's my friend."

"Everyone's real nice," adds Ali.

Their fellow inmates look after them bringing coffee in plastic bowls, giving up bunks so they wouldn't have to sleep on the floor, allowing them first place in the chow line. As political prisoners they are the closest thing to celebrities any of these men have had contact with. The

five dollars the British Ambassador gave the head prisoner didn't hurt either.

"There's other gringos here. A couple on their honeymoon tried smuggling a couple of kilos of coke. Looks like they will be here for fifteen years or so," says Ali.

Between puffs of his cigarette, Douglas explains that the Army is in the not-so-subtle employ of the international oil companies to keep the Oriente secure for exploration. The oil companies dislike the idea of independent environmentalists working with indigenous people and had them detained.

"So what's going to happen," I ask.

Douglas shrugs. "Looks like they'll deport us."

Later from Jeff, I get more of the story. What Douglas didn't know was that orders came from the military to get these guys out of the Oriente. So a false intelligence report surfaced implicating the RIC in "subversive activities" and inciting indigenous uprisings.

The military operates separately from the "democratically elected" government. The Ecuadorian government itself wasn't necessarily interested in the RIC activists and would just as soon oppose the military's efforts.

The military could not actually deport them. So the government, under pressure from a friend of RIC, Tony Munoz of IREAC, and the British Embassy, finally relented,

releasing Douglas, Ali, Sparrow and Kevin without deportation a few days later.

Although none of the activists were British citizens, the British embassy was instrumental in securing their release. The Ambassador pointed out that arresting and holding citizens without charges is a serious human rights violation. From deep inside their midcity fortress, The American Embassy seemed unconcerned. They certainly didn't address any inquiries or return my calls. The entire incident made front page headlines in the Quito newspapers for two days, and went completely unnoticed in the United States.

Riding back from the jail through the crowded nighttime streets of "old town," I gaze out at the people streaming through the streets, stopping for a quick bite at a street stand grill. Indians line up at *bodegas* buying candy with their market money from selling pigs and vegetables. I feel like a diplomat in a limo. I wonder by what strange quirk am I on this side of the glass, on this side of the bars. It's really a boundry problem. I have weak boundries; things leak in. I try to keep my world from wobbling too much.

The third week I was in Ecuador, I met Britta, who is from Wisconsin and studying in Ecuador on a Fulbright. We'd become close in the past months, the way strangers together

in a foreign county become life long friends. She often helped me put my experience in a context I could understand.

Britta lives with an Ecuadorian family. The father is a doctor, part of the small middle class. They live in an small house in the upscale section of Quito, with nice furniture, a color TV and VCR, and a small dog. Both son and daughter are in high school. Patricio drives a '71 Chevy Nova, has a Doors poster on his wall and braces on his teeth. Angelina hides in the bathroom so I won't see her in her pajamas.

A few blocks away lives the family of a security guard. He, his wife and four kids live in the back of one of the larger houses. He makes fifty dollars a month. They can't afford any of the nearby schools so the children have to go across town to one of the most rundown sections of Quito. Britta has sort of "adopted" this family and was honored as the godmother of one of the girls, Consuela.

Britta invites me to attend a school play that Consuela is in. Typical Britta, she doesn't know the address so we drive around asking people in the neighborhood where she thinks it might be. The cab driver asks people on the street; I run into a *bodega*; Britta asks at an apartment building. But no one has ever heard of the Juan De Mera School. We drive to another neighborhood and ask around. I think the cab driver would be getting irritated, but he's enjoying the hunt. Somehow we eventually find it and are

only fifteen minutes late. The father greets us at the gate.

We are given seats of honor, real folding chairs. Britta videotapes the program to everyone's delight, while the little boy, about three, sits on my lap. He's been sick for two weeks, and was in the hospital, but it was too expensive so they had to take him out before finding out what was wrong.

After the program, the girls crowd around us wanting to know their names in English and the names of U.S. basketball teams. Then they demand autographs, screeching "firma me" sticking out notebooks and hands for us to sign.

These school girls will live their lives in extreme poverty in an overcrowded city. I have more money in my pocket (fifteen dollars) than their families will see all week. Many will probably be abused by their fathers or brothers; most will be pregnant by sixteen. Their future holds little, if any, hope.

So often we are afraid to touch the magic in the world. Yet we climb mountains and float rivers hoping for a glimpse. Then it comes, all the mystery of the world glistening in the palm of an eight-year-old girl as she takes your hand to play basketball on a small court surrounded by crumbling concrete walls.

POSTSCRIPT

Citing opposition by environmental and indigenous groups, in December of 1990, Conoco announced it was considering canceling its petroleum plans. Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC) and Cultural Survival, acting on the assumption that Conoco is the lesser of many evils, met with Conoco officials last winter to discuss petroleum development. NRDC and Cultural Survival are now soliciting a \$25 million donation from Conoco to establish a foundation for Huaorani community development projects, and for scientific research and protection of Yasuni National Park in exchange for not opposing Conoco's leasing activities.

"For reasons that are still unclear, Cultural Survival and NRDC have recently assisted Conoco in rescuing its project, threatening to undermine two years of planning and lobbying on the part of Ecuadorian environmentalist and indigenous groups to fend-off Conoco's development scheme," reports "La Campana Amazonia por la Vida," a coalition of 13 environmental and human rights organizations solidly opposed to petroleum development in Yasuni National Park and the Huaorani Territory.

NRDC staff attorney Robert Kennedy Jr. stated in a meeting with Conoco that NRDC accepts the reality that Ecuador will develop its resources and "NRDC believes that

it is better to have Conoco do the developing than anyone else." He also stated,

"the environmental community is having second thoughts about the wisdom of not dealing with big business."

In a March meeting with CONFENIAE, a group of 960 Ecuadorian Amazonian communities, Kennedy emphasized the "inevitability" of petroleum development and expressed his belief that Conoco is "serious about its promises," and susceptible "to our influence."

This October, Conoco announced it was withdrawing from Block 16 lease in the Oriente. However, the other members of the exploration group are planning on pursuing exploration. Conoco CEO Nicandros stated in a press release, "This was a difficult decision because it is a good project . . . But we simply have more good projects to do than our capital resources can cover. . . Conoco Ecuador plans provide a road map for safe, environmentally responsible projects of this type." With Conoco's withdrawal the primary interest in the oil exploration group leasing block 16 is Overseas Petroleum and Investment Corp. of Taiwan.

It now remains to be seen whether NRDC and Cultural Survival will continue to work with Conoco's ex-partners, as Conoco CEO Nicandros says, "I salute those interest groups and individuals who saw the value of a continuing, constructive dialogue. I urge them to maintain this

positive relationship with the future Block 16 operator and to seek ways to work with all governments and companies to encourage environmentally responsible development worldwide."

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