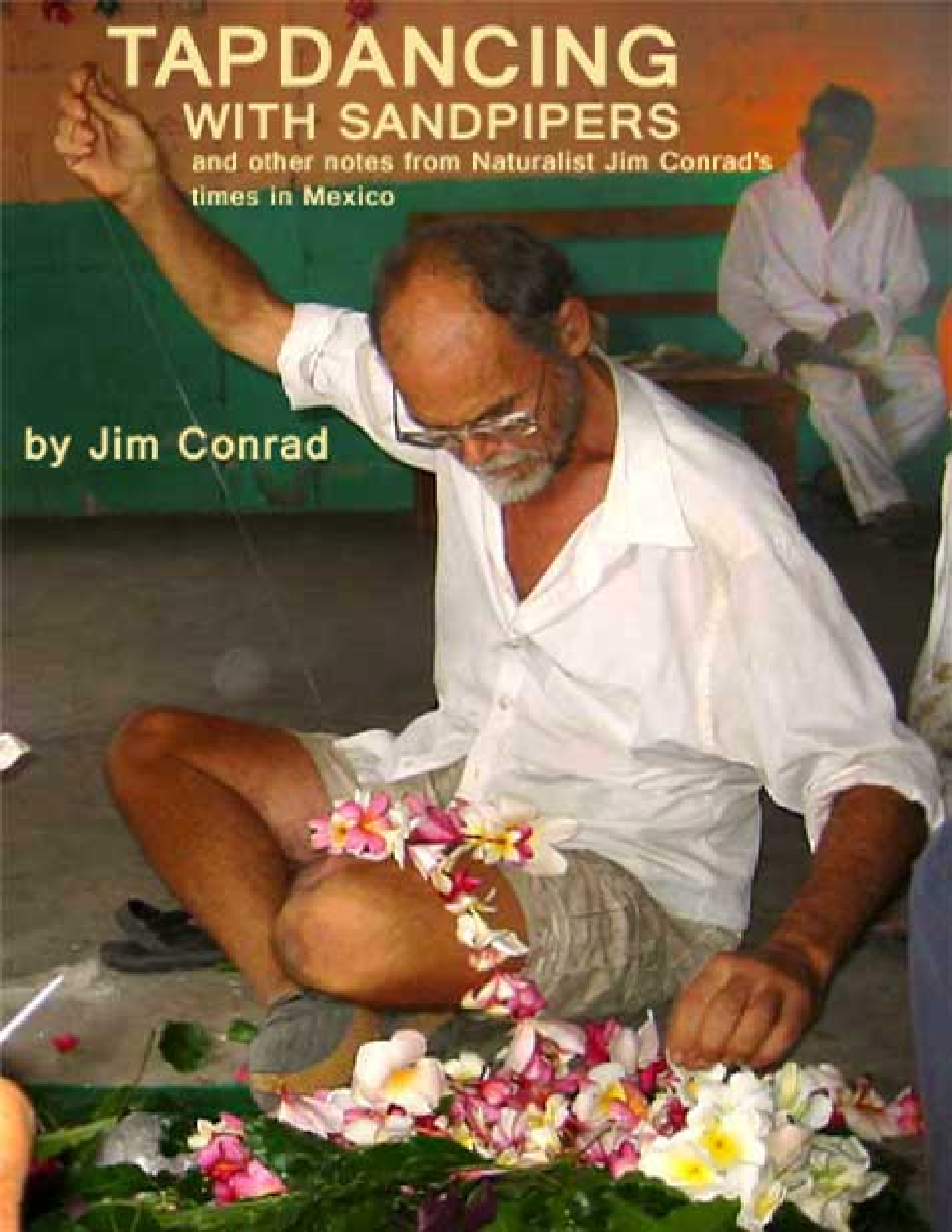
TAPDANCING WITH SANDPIPERS

and other notes from Naturalist Jim Conrad's times in Mexico



by Jim Conrad

FOREWORD

Maybe 98% of the words I've published about Mexico have dealt with plants and animals. Much of that writing, often accompanied by pictures, is freely available online at https://www.backyardnature.net/mexnat/

This book is filled with words from the other 2%, the ones about Mexico's people, and my own feelings about being among them.

For the most part, the entries are arranged seasonally without regard for the year when the words were written. That's because that's how I remember it all, all those years mixing together into just one thing, only the events remaining distinct, like hard, glistening little seeds in one big, sweet Mexican watermelon, and both watermelons and my writings have their seasons.

Jim

GAS-FILLED BALLOONS & THE MAGI

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; January 12, 2007

Last Friday, January 5th, as I walked toward my apartment downtown, I noticed that I was gaining company as I went. I couldn't figure out what was going on until I passed a stationery shop with a handmade sign in the window translating to: "FOR SALE: Gas-filled balloons for sending your lists to the Magi."

Of course! The next day, January 6th, was "traditional Mexican Christmas," the day when people exchanged gifts back before gringo Christmas started taking over. In Jalpan most people, I think, exchange gifts the new way, though on December 24th and not the 25th, but in the more conservative smaller towns and countryside the old ways hold on and January 6th is still the main gift-giving day, and an important religious day. The idea with the balloons is that the Wise Men, the Magi, bring little kids gifts on the 6th, so if you're a kid you write to the Magi just like gringo kids write to Santa Clause, and since the Magi are in Heaven, how better to contact them than with gas-filled balloons?

Instead of continuing to the apartment I kept walking with the people -- town folks referred to them as "peregrinos," or pilgrims -- as they converged on the cathedral atop the hill. It was like a circus up there, toys being sold in new plywood booths, men circulating selling pink cotton candy, ice-cream, tamales, atole, just everything you could want, and there was lots of loud music.

People lay everywhere, some sleeping, some staring about as if dazed, everyone looking frowsy and pooped. I was told that many had walked long distances to get there. Cars, trucks and sidewalks along nearby streets also were crammed with sleepers and gazers. I asked what was going on. People were waiting for that night's mass, which would go on the whole night, I was told. And people especially wanted to spend their nights praying to the "Santo Niño de la Mexclita" -- The Little Jesus carving with its gold crown and two missing fingers -- who performs miracles for the faithful.

I asked if they'd be ringing the cathedral bells all night. Sí. Would rockets be exploding? Sí. Would even a lot more people than this be coming in? Sí. I headed downhill to my apartment, strapped on my backpack, and that weekend camped in the mountains.

NORTHERS

Written at Hacienda San Juan Lizárraga one kilometer east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán, January 13, 2006

As I issued last week's Newsletter at Hotel Reef a classic norther was blowing in. People here call them "nortes." This norte had been in the air for some days.

Most of the week before had been scorchingly hot and glaring. Then for two days clouds came from the northwest, not from the northeast, as they usually do. The day before my Reef visit it grew cloudy and much cooler, probably not breaking 80° the whole day. On Friday, my Reef day, the sky was even darker and the wind even cooler, surely never hitting 75°.

The wind was magnificent, roaring, shaking the Coconut Palms like pompoms, sending ripples of sand migrating onto the hotel steps, and blanketing the lobby furniture with dust and grit. The ocean's crashing waves muddied the water nearly to the horizon. Focusing my binoculars on the horizon, out where the water was much deeper, hill-like waves with long white crests formed and crashed in slow motion. No boats were out there fishing that day, no tourist put a toe into the angry water, and no Brown Pelicans dived for fish offshore. Seaweed piled up on the sand and all that salt spray made my thin hair poke straight out during my evening talk.

I love the beach when it's like that. I love the way the wind howls, salt spray stings your eyes and sand peppers your body, leaving thimblefuls of sand in your pockets. Especially I like the dark, raggedy clouds and the feeling it all conjures in you.

A few seconds on the Internet explain what a norther is. When a norther is blowing through, just call up any weather map covering the entire US and you'll see slicing across the nation a slender crescent of snow in the north and rain in the south. Its top horn will be in the Northeast but its bottom one will reach deep into the Gulf of Mexico, even to here.

So, our northers are North American cold fronts reaching all the way down here. I've experienced them in Guatemala and I've seen them set frost on doomed banana trees in Chiapas. Once in Chiapas I heard an old Tzotzil-speaking man ask during a particularly painful norther whether it was true what they said, that across the next mountain range a volcano in Guatemala was erupting ice.

Tuesday morning a radio station in Mexico City reported 27° F at the university and in the northern state of Chihuahua there was a town with 1° F. Knowing the humble homes in which many people up there live, I can't imagine how difficult it was for them.

WORMS & MAGICAL REALISM

Written at Yerba Buena Clinic and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas, January 14, 2008

I was talking with one of our workers when he grabbed his stomach and almost fainted. After some questions I diagnosed his problem as probably a bad case of intestinal worms. From there the discussion drifted into traditional cures and from there into witchcraft and local legends touching on the supernatural.

Here native people in traditional dress walk among others wearing sunglasses and using cellular phones, and lethal poverty coexists with obscene excesses of richness. Powerful people display little or no education or talent. "Magical realism" of the kind García Márquez wrote about is in the air here, the sunlight, the very dirt we walk on.

I am surrounded by people of outstanding character and solid minds who at any moment of any day may tell me things the Northern mind simply can't accept. Impossible cures by barefoot curanderos, impossible feats of clairvoyance by neighborhood seers, impossible

transformations of ordinary people into beings with demonic strength or character...

One night this week our three forest-protectors told me about a local creature something like a half-formed, half-alive monkey with mere slits for eyes. It emerges at dusk and after three spastic jumps on the ground suddenly sprouts wings and flies off as a bat. If it's unable to finish its three jumps, it dies. One of the men had found remains of the thing with tiny wings sprouting in its armpits, obviously having died just before finishing its three jumps.

I've given up saying that snakes don't sting with their tails. Even my Grandpa Conrad told me about such snakes in Kentucky back in the 50s, about "hoopsnakes" who take their sharp, venomous tails into their mouths, form themselves into hoops, and roll down hills. Moments before spinning into your presence they straighten out and become poisonous spears that impale you.

In earlier years I have been here when level-headed eyewitnesses reported certain students at the Adventist university downslope becoming possessed, uttering impossibly bass-voiced blasphemies and fighting off teachers with impossible strength.

CHOPPED ONIONS AND HOT-SAUCE

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; January 15, 2012

At 7:45 this Sunday morning I leave the hut on my weekly fruit-buying trip to Pisté. It's 64°F (18°C), so chilly that my nose-holes feel wet and icy. Earlier, while preparing breakfast over the campfire, I didn't notice the smoke odor but, outside, the air has an acrid, ashy tang to it. Visitors say the hut's smokiness smells good, like a mountain cabin with a fireplace, and I wonder if I've become so used

to the woodsmoke odor that I no longer register it, except for this ashy smell when I step outside; I'll bet I leave a scent-trail of woodsmoke wherever I go.

Gardeners are watering the Hacienda's plants and as I bike past Daniel a summery, suburban odor of sprayed hose-water fills the air. On the road to the ruin pay-zone a bored taxi driver with droopy eyelids and black, greased-backed hair leans against his car, his slopped-on aftershave sending a nervous quiver through the morning air. Outside Mayalandia Hotel, odors from the kitchen are baking bread, cooking flesh, dill pickles and yellow mustard, the latter two smells down here just found outside places catering to gringos, for yellow mustard and pickles are not Mexican things.

Inside the ruin pay-zone no visitors have arrived yet so on the straight, white, unpaved road running past the big pyramid, here in the dry season the only odor is that of dust and dry, curled-up leaves. Outside the Administration Building a fellow setting up his pushcart taco stand creates an odor-bubble of chopped onions and hot-sauce.

On the highway into town there are exhaust fumes, especially after a motorbike burning lots of oil passes by. Even with closed windows a half-full minivan running between Valladolid and Mérida leaves behind that oily smell so typical of half-cleaned public vehicles: mingled linseed oil, dust and old sweat.

On a Pisté backstreet a small, one-room, cubicle, cement-block home is going up, still with no doors and windows hung, and the whole area smells of fresh cement. Down the one-lane, potholed street around the Tortillaría Gretty, itself a square cement-block structure with no hung doors or windows but crammed with a dragonlike, squeaking, clacking, tortilla-making machine with roaring burners, for half a block around you smell thin, flat circles of moist masa/corn-flour being fired into tortillas coming down rollers, and it smells good, homey and wholesome.

Cheap hand-soap down here is heavily scented, mostly rose and pine, and passing by many houses you smell it, rose or pine, plus what that pale blue laundry detergent smells like, and something like Pine-Sol, heavy-duty bathroom and floor sanitizer.

The forest north of town smells of dry leaves and dust, just that, nothing more.

Passing back through town later, the first odor comes on fast and strong, burning garbage, the universal burning-garbage odor no matter what the garbage, and it hits in a wave the same moment a Great-tailed Grackle screams his screeches, crackles and pops, and the sound and the odor perfectly harmonize.

Back at the hut at 11 AM it's 85°F (29°C), the odor of dust and dry, curled leaves, and just before stepping into the hut's cool shadows a hint of that homey woodsmoke odor people always talk about.

CABAÑUELA

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; January 16, 2011

Throughout Mexico, not just among the Maya in the Yucatán, these are days of the Cabañuela (ka-ba-NYE- la). During the Cabañuela, which coincides with the month of January, country folks learn what the weather will be like the rest of the year. Here's how it works:

Weather during the first 12 days of January is believed to forecast what the weather will be like during the rest of the year, each day referring to the overall weather of a subsequent month. If it's unseasonably chilly and rainy on January 10th, then October should be unseasonably chilly and rainy.

But the procedure doesn't end there. Weather of January 13th should correspond to weather the following December, same as the 12th, for now the count continues, but in reverse order, the 14th being for November, the 15th for October, etc.

Arriving at January 25th, we change directions once again, but this time the 12 hours before noon correspond to January, the 12 hours after noon to February, the 12 hours of the 26th correspond to March, etc.

That takes care of all of January, except for the 31st. On that day, midnight to 2AM corresponds to December, 2AM to 4 AM to November, etc.

I'm told that if the forecasts contradict one another, you average them out.

HOW I MET SALLY-D

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; January 19, 2007

In 1996 I made a birding trip through Mexico from Juárez on the northern border with the US, across sand-dune deserts, up volcanoes, through the mountains, all the way through Chiapas to near the Guatemalan border, and that story, with some of my own bird drawings, is online at https://www.backyardnature.net/mexbirds/

About a month ago a fellow wrote to me because he'd read my chapter about crossing Oaxaca's Sierra Mazateca and passing through the town of Huautla de Jiménez. That's where a special kind of sage grows, he told me, a real pretty one, Salvia divinorum, and he had greenhouses and wanted to grow it. Would I please go back

to Huautla, collect some seeds and send them to him, and he'd pay me real well.

It'd been hard getting to Huautla and the people there hadn't struck me as very welcoming. In fact, very unlike nearly every other Mexican village I've been in, I got the distinct impression that Huautla's folks wanted me out of town fast. Drugs, I assumed. I did leave and I told the fellow with the greenhouses that I didn't want to go back for any sage.

The man became so persistent about the project that I did some Googling. Turns out that Salvia divinorum is big business now in the hallucinogenic trade, and is known as Sally-D on the streets. Salvia divinorum traditionally was used ceremonially by the Mazatec people. Apparently it no longer grows in the wild as a self-reproducing species. It's found only in a few Mazatec gardens, and some seeds or sprouts might be worth quite a bit. In some US states it's illegal.

It sort of rubs me the wrong way that, after being out of economic circulation for so long, when a money-making offer finally comes my way it's inviting me to get into the drug business.

THE POTTER

Issued fromFrom Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in Amatenango del Valle, Chiapas, probably sometime in 1995

Some years ago I wrote a story for "American Forests" magazine (November/December issue, 1988) on the impact of firewood gathering on southern Mexico's highland forests. For that story I visited Amatenango del Valle, Chiapas, a village of Tzotzil-speaking Indians twenty miles southeast of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, some

sixty miles from the Guatemalan border. Today, remembering that much firewood around Amatenango was gathered to fuel fires for baking earthenware, I return there hoping to learn about the pottery business.

Amatenango lies at an elevation of about 6,000 feet (1800m), at the foot of a pine-covered mountain rising to the east. One interesting feature of life in Amatenango is that high up the slope, beside the highway, young men load the firewood they have just cut onto homemade, motorless, go-kart-like contraptions. Then they coast a mile or more, at truly breakneck speed, back down the mountain to Amatenango.

Amatenango, with a population of maybe five hundred, is a town of small wooden huts, mostly with dirt floors; its streets are unpaved and, typically, rather muddy. The inhabitants of many of Mexico's Indian villages speak Spanish and wear typical Mexican street-clothing. In Amatenango, all one hears is Tzotzil. The men wear regular street-clothing, but most women dress in traditional blouses, huipiles, and long, black dresses. When the women wish to appear formal, they fold a cloth a certain way and place it atop their heads. Amatenango's main square is graced with a pretty church, across from which stands a government building with a comfortable looking veranda; the town's men congregate there, sit in tiny wooden chairs, and gravely conduct never-ending consultations.

As a measure of each household's self sufficiency, in the whole town there is no regular store. Two or three houses informally sell sodas and crackers. Each household consists of one or two modest huts surrounded by a small courtyard containing, among other things, a congenial population of fruit trees, free-roaming chickens, washed clothing drying on bushes, piles of firewood, and -- always -- stacks of pottery. From what I can see, every household makes pottery.

As I wander around looking for someone to talk to, María López López peeps her head through a small courtyard's wobbly gate and asks in faltering Spanish if I want to buy pottery. I explain that I'd

rather buy an interview. We agree on a price, and I'm invited to step inside.

María leads me to a room with one open side, the paraphernalia of pottery work lying everywhere. An altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe, set with flickering candles, occupies the back wall. María's hesitant Spanish is very heavily accented with her native Tzotzil. Though she is very quick-witted and desirous of answering all my questions in full, she must always search for the right Spanish word. She never says one word more than she absolutely needs to, and she never volunteers an extra thought. Because I know so little about her primitive manner of firing pottery, it's hard to ask the right questions.

"I am forty-six years old," she says. "I began making clay animals to sell in the mercado when I was nine. I began working with these pots when I was ten. The whole family made pottery, and the whole village. My mother made pottery, and my grandmother. I don't know who first taught us how to do this. My mother taught me, and when I had children, I taught them."

Pottery from Amatenango is considered primitive because it is unglazed, or rough to the touch, and lusterless. I ask how the people in Amatenango bake their earthenware.

"The clay comes from over there," María says, pointing toward the west. "It's about two leagues (two hours of walking) away. There are two or three men there who dig out the clay, and it's good, clean clay. Then we... "

But now María begins using Tzotzil words, and speaking with such a heavy accent that I can't understand what she says. Something about mixing in sand, adding water, her hands hurting because of the cold clay when it's being worked.

"If the sun is good, then the pieces won't break in the fire. But if there is no sun, like today and most days, then many pieces break and I can't sell them. Eight days drying... "

I'm confused as to when painting the pottery takes place and I ask her to repeat the story, but after several failures of communication she looks so discomfited that I let it slide. She asks me to step into the yard and she supplements her words with pantomime. She shows me how she builds mounds of firewood, inside which she positions her pottery and clay animals to be fired. Therefore, she uses no kiln at all; when the firewood finishes burning, her fired clay objects lie among the ashes.

"The firewood is roble (oak)," I understand. "It burns very hot."

I ask her about the paint she uses.

"The paint is hard to find." she says. Now I understand that she does not use commercially produced paint, but rather natural substances that she herself goes into the mountains to look for.

"Sometimes three or four of us go for the whole day looking for it," she continues. "Sometimes we find it but sometimes not. But what we find is good. It doesn't come off."

She places before me several small lumps of rusty-red clay wrapped tightly in clear plastic. María pantomimes how she mixes this clay with water and then daubs on the reddish emulsion. No wonder this paint does not come off, for it is itself clay, like the pottery; once it is fired, it will adhere like rust on a nail. Now I ask about the economics of her business.

"We have to pay bus fare to San Cristóbal and Comitán, where we sell our things," she says. "We have to pay for every shipment, U.S. 83 cents for each costal (sack or large bag). It's expensive. The money that's left after we pay all expenses hardly pays for food."

These last words I understand very well. María asks for double the fee we had agreed on, because the interview has taken more time than I'd said, and I gladly pay.

Leaving María's, I do not go looking for someone else who speaks better Spanish, and who can make clear at what point the ocher paint is applied to the pieces. No, María has expressed herself adequately.

FOUR BROWN PELICANS AND A LAUGHING GULL

Written at Hacienda San Juan Lizárraga one kilometer east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán, January 22, 2006

It's normal to see individual Brown Pelicans flying up and down the beach 15 or 20 feet above the water and just offshore. Spotting fish they spectacularly dive headfirst into the waves. Usually they don't catch anything and then sit for a minute or so bobbing on the waves. Then, flapping hard while running atop the water a few steps before getting aloft, finally they fly off.

Sometimes the pelicans join into small flocks, however, and then their fishing becomes methodical, almost obsessive, in the manner of American football players during a close game. In these small flocks, after their dives they rest just a few seconds before taking off again, and typically fly only for about 15 seconds before diving again. The other day I watched four Brown Pelicans work back and forth in this manner before Hotel Reef.

It was low tide and the birds flew close to one another in a tight formation. They'd pass over a dark bed of seaweed, one would shift his wings showing he was about to dive, the others would do the same, and they'd all dive together, hitting the water at about the same time, and within just a few feet of one another. My impression was that instead of going after fish they'd spotted they were making random dives into the seaweed, maybe depending on the shock of

all their bodies crashing into the bed to cause fish hiding among the seaweed to abandon their cover. Sometimes one or two other pelicans would join the flock, but sometimes the flock was reduced to as few as three.

All the time I watched, a single young Laughing Gull in his second-winter plumage tagged along.

The gull always waited two or three seconds after the pelicans had taken off before he himself took wing. He'd follow behind the flock maybe 50 or 100 feet, then once the pelicans had dived he'd sail in among them maybe three to five seconds later.

Most of the time the gull would land atop a pelican -- usually on the back but sometimes atop the head! I think the gull's game was to catch stunned or wounded fish that might briefly escape a pelican's beak, or maybe the gull, like the pelicans themselves, was just trying to catch fish scared from cover by the pelicans' crashes.

The gull landed on different pelicans who didn't make much of an effort to keep him off, other than occasionally shuddering their bodies or halfheartedly tossing their heads. They seemed to have accepted the notion that if a seagull wants to land on you there's not much a pelican can do about it.

SAVORING THE SENSE OF LEAVING

Written at Yerba Buena Clinic and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas, January 28, 2008

I've decided to leave Yerba Buena. As soon as this newsletter is issued on Monday I'm strapping on my backpack, catching a bus, and the next newsletter will begin at that point.

Knowing that I'm leaving, this week everything around me has brightened, sharpened, quickened with the fact of my pending departure. It's astonishing how quickly one grows accustomed to hearing Tzotzil drifting through the forest, or the Brown-backed Solitaire's bubbling, mellifluous, haunting song accompanying me each dawn as I jog, or finding a new orchid blossoming in a tree next to my dwelling. How I'll miss these things!

I've left Yerba Buena after long stays before, so I know what it's like. In times past, within half an hour of entering the bus, already I was so far downslope that instead of the cool, pine-scented air I'd grown used to gushing through the windows, it was hot, heavy, wet air smelling of diesel, rotting fruit, mud and pig manure. Despite all of Yerba Buena's problems, it's always felt as if I were leaving behind a kind of Shangri-La glimmering high in the sky.

So, consciously I've been savoring these last days. As I walk from town one of the young, free-roaming horses permanently living along the road passes me and apparently just because he feels so good he starts galloping, bucking and kicking out his hind legs. Nothing less than a Universal-Creative-Force chuckle, this! A dirty-faced little Tzotzil kid wearing nothing but a Tweety-Pie T-shirt grins broadly at me from his hut's door and waves, as he always does, and I'll miss that kid. How prettily the clouds tumble over the ridge where the cloud forest is, and how I'd like to be up there right now as cloud-fog billows among big tree trunks, and gleaming dewdrops coalesce on bromeliad blades.

A butterfly flits by, as butterflies have flitted by every day since I've been here, but now each of its wingbeats detonates sparks of being alive right before my very eyes, right here, right now, and when it passes it leaves behind in mid-air a trail of poignant being-gone, good-by and I stand there dumbly looking after it, missing it mightily.

I hold my hand out, leathery red skin, wrinkles, blue veins, brown blotches but the forest beyond is green and wind blows through the boughs, so much life there, so much promise.

Yellow pagodas of male flowers dangle from oaks and pines almost more alive than I can stand.

MAKING MAYA PAPER

Issued fromIssued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; January 31, 2010

This week Don Pascual of the nearby village of San Felipe showed me paper he makes using traditional Maya techniques and employing fibers extracted from Banana tree leaves and Mother-in-law's Tongues, Sansevieria thyrsiflora.

When the Spanish arrived here during the early 1500s they found the Maya in possession of large numbers of texts written on paper, the main source of the paper's fibers apparently being the Amate, or Strangler Fig Tree. The Spanish destroyed the vast majority of the texts, but the knowledge of how to make paper from locally grown fibers, or at least the urge to do so, seems to have survived. The two plants producing fibers used by Don Pascual are both introduced species -- Banana from Asia and Mother-in-law's Tongue from southern Africa -- so his preparation may differ from the ancient technique.

The paper Don Pascual produces is stiff enough to keep its shape when held by hand, semi-translucent, the texture of grade-school construction paper on one side and smooth and a bit glossy on the other. Some people buy it for making their own envelopes for very special occasions and others draw and paint on it. For Don Pascual the problem is that not enough people buy it to encourage him financially to keep making it.

MOVING 55 MILES SOUTHEAST

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, February 4, 2008

Last Monday morning immediately after issuing the Newsletter I strapped on my backpack, took the blue suitcase in hand, and flagged down a bus. Leaving Yerba Buena wasn't exactly like I described in the previous Newsletter because in past years I've always left by descending the Gulf Slope to the Tabasco lowlands. This time I headed south, not north.

By late afternoon I was sitting in the park in San Cristóbal de Las Casas watching tourists and nibbling tostados. I see so few gringo-type persons that I'm always astonished how succulent, pale, cool and reserved they look. That night I slept in a hotel room for the first time in many years, a perfectly good one with access to a hot shower, for $5 US.

Tuesday morning friends conducted me first eastward toward Guatemala, passing through mountains with fields whitened from the night's heavy frost. Just before Amatengango del Valle we turned south and began descending into the great Central Depression of Chiapas. Growing warmer each minute of descent, soon we entered sugarcane-growing country.

Roads deteriorated until finally a dirt/gravel trail brought us into the community named 28 de Junio, meaning "June 28th," at ± LAT 16° 18'N, LONG -92° 28'.

I'm only about 88 crow-flying kms southeast of Yerba Buena (55 miles) but here I'm at about 800 meters (2600 ft) in elevation, less than half as high as Yerba Buena's 1740 meters, so it's much hotter here, getting into the 90's each afternoon (mid 30s Celsius). I'm in a valley between mountain ranges, so it's arid -- in rain shadows for weather fronts coming off both the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico. Non-agricultural vegetation is mostly low, spiny forest similar to that

of the Jalpan Valley back in Querétaro, though not quite as dry, and with many extra species with Pacific-Coast and Central American affinities.

The idea here is for me to help the community develop an ecotourism program and teach certain classes. In return they give me a cinderblock house all to myself surrounded by similar houses. The community stores corn in a room of my house.

I'm back to sleeping beneath a mosquito net at night, which I've not done since Hacienda San Juan in the Yucatan. Geckos crawl on my walls again. I miss many things about Yerba Buena, but not the perpetual chill.

This area is a bit unstable politically. Two official international human-rights observers always stay in the community, a different pair arriving each fifteen days. Currently we have one from Austria and another from Oregon. That's all I intend to say about local politics and recent history from here on out, and you who know this area can congratulate me for showing at least that much sense.

PICKING PUMPKIN SEEDS

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, February 4, 2008

Thursday morning I was wandering through the fields when I came upon Don José sitting amid a big pile of pumpkin-squash, scraping seeds into buckets. I write "pumpkin-squash" because Northerners think of pumpkins as orange Halloween things, and squash as soft-fleshed items such as yellow crook-necks or zucchini, but the Don was working with in-between things.

Actually there's no good line between pumpkins and squash. They're all members of the genus Cucurbita. Moreover, the single species Cucurbita pepo produces such intergrading cultivars as Halloween pumpkins, yellow summer crooknecks, scalloped or pattypan squashes and even egg gourds.

The Don had planted his pumpkins traditional-style in the cornfield beside us, and surely he'd planted bean vines there, too. I asked him if I could help scoop seeds from his pumpkins awhile, and he seemed pleased with the idea.

It was messy work but not at all unpleasant. On that hot, sunny morning we sat in the cool shade of a big tree heavy with fragrant flowers, its frilly leaves rustling as a nice breeze blew off the field next to us and birds called from everyplace. We chatted about different animals we'd known and of course we touched a little on politics. An hour passed like fifteen minutes.

Don José explained that he sells his seeds to a company in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, which dries them, fries them in oil, and sells them for people to munch on. Nearly all the pumpkins themselves he feeds to his cows, a dozen of which patiently waited just across the fence from us, chewing their cuds. Of course people here eat the pumpkins, too, but there's just so many that no one can eat them all.

PULQUE BREAD

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; February 9, 2007

Last Saturday Roberto and I made the two hour trip up to the trailhead to high-elevation La Trinidad, but when we got there it was so rainy we decided against the climb. We'd had cold rain for three nights, which is pretty unusual for this time of year.

The trip to La Trinidad wasn't a total loss, however. On the way there we passed through a little town where a certain lady operates a roadside stand at which you can be served hot atole made from finely ground sunflower seeds. It's a wonderful, high-energy drink, and we always have some when we pass through that town. Last Saturday the lady also had on her shelf a basket of "pan de pulque," or "pulque bread," pulque being the traditional, slightly fermented drink people here produce from maguey's sweet sap, maguey being a giant, agave-like plant.

In pulque bread, pulque is used less for its taste than for the fermenting organisms it contributes to the bread batter. A little pulque is less expensive and less troublesome than dealing with baker's yeast. Pulque's fermentation microorganisms cause the bread to rise by breaking down the batter's sugars into ethanol and carbon dioxide, the later being a gas that forms bubbles in the bread, making it light. The fermentation process's simplified formula is:

$C_6H_{12}O_6 \rightarrow 2\ C_2H_5OH + 2\ CO_2$

or

sugar yields ethanol plus carbon dioxide gas

Ethanol, also known as ethyl alcohol or grain alcohol, is the intoxicating ingredient in alcoholic drinks, as well as the product that may become the main fuel for future cars.

Anyway, I wanted to bake pulque bread in my solar oven so I asked around where I could buy some pulque but no one would sell it to someone they didn't know. Some told me it's illegal to sell it here, though the issue seems to be debatable. Whatever the case, finally I asked Don Gonzalo, the reserve's gardener. He got a big smile on his face, and first thing Thursday morning I was met by a beaming Don Gonzalo who proudly produced from his shoulder bag a two-liter (half gallon) plastic Coca-Cola bottle filled with milky, foamy pulque. It cost about $1.40 US.

Spume bubbled from around the rim of the bottle's cap as, inside, the bottle's fermenting organisms worked and worked. In my hut I immediately poured wheat flour into a bowl, added a mixture that was one-fourth pulque and three-fourths water, and made a doughy mass which I pressed into the oiled, concave bottom of my solar-oven bowl. Into the dough's concavity I dropped the contents of two eggs, sprinkled them with shredded cabbage and chopped cilantro, set up my solar oven, and put the glass dish with the dough and eggs inside into the oven, and waited.

The only problem was that during the baking process Don Gonzalo and his helper worked near my solar oven and when the odor of baking bread and frying eggs drifted across the area around noon, it drove them crazy. The midday meal-siesta here begins around 2 PM, so for awhile they had a hard time focusing on their hammering and sawing.

A PUDDLE OF BEES

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; February 19, 2012

South of Pisté I took a little dirt road off the main highway, just exploring. About a hundred yards inside the woods some honeybees turned up moving about and buzzing on the ground. When bees swarm they do so in much greater numbers than what I was seeing, however. Sometimes smaller "afterswarms" take place, but they're larger, too. I guessed that here I was seeing drones competing to mate with a new queen on her way into the world to found a new colony.

However, once I was on my belly looking closely, it was apparent that these weren't drones; they were female worker bees. Drones

are larger, their middle body section (thorax) is nearly as large as the rear section (abdomen), and their compound eyes are joined. With this discovery I issued an involuntary "Ha!" which apparently I do when I discover something. The little puff of hot air accompanying that "Ha!" was my undoing.

For, instantly several bees darted at my face and one stung me on a cheek. I've done lots of bee watching, though, so I just stayed very still, let them settle down, and watched, trying to figure out what was going on. A few minutes later several bees out of nowhere began circling my head, buzzing more loudly than you'd expect, and even though I remained very still one got me on the forehead. Other bees entangled in my beard until I broke my stillness and combed them out.

For me this was strange behavior so I figured I'd better get away. Calmly I walked a few feet but the swarm followed me, clearly upset. As I've always done in such cases, I draped a bandana over my head, sank to the ground, and just lay there quietly until they went away. They did leave, but only after buzzing around much longer than I'd expected.

In a few minutes I was about to get up when a bigger squadron than before arrived, behaving and buzzing even more threateningly. One got beneath the bandana and stung me behind the ear. Others clustered atop the bandana, sometimes dive-bombing and bumping against it. Eventually I realized that when I exhaled they got angrier. Finally they went away.

Five minutes later another wave came, larger and yet angrier and this time I got it on the arm and, when the bandana slipped off, on the forehead over an eye. I just lay there, the bandana covering my face, gradually realizing that a trend was shaping up in which I was visited by ever larger, ever angrier swarms. My old strategy wasn't working.

And then it occurred to me: These were not the bees I grew up with. These were "Africanized bees," what some call "killer bees." What if I

were near hives with thousands of them... ? I peeped from beneath my bandana, looked around and, sure enough, through the scrub the white of painted hives showed up about 30 meters away.

I stood up, was surprised to not be attacked as I walked briskly to the bike, mounted the bike and left as fast as I could, getting stung only twice more as I passed the little cluster still on the ground, and even still I don't know what the ground ones were up to.

WAITING FOR TOUCANS

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; February 20, 2011

In late afternoon a friend and I sit in grass beside a Chinese Banyan hoping toucans will come and feed. The ground is chilly and moist but the grass is emerald green, the kind of greenness possible only with lots of watering and heat. In the sunlight, translucent grassblades glow almost violently while beneath them starkly contrasting black shadows impart to the lawn a vivid three-dimensionality. The grassblades' underlying darkness is like a deep contrabass pulsating beneath excited violin soarings.

The odor of crushed grass pools around us. An unhurried late afternoon breeze gathers into itself odors of moist air, of damp, moldy soil, and lemony-smelling Lemoncilla flowers, their waxy-white little blossoms nestled among darkly shadowed tree-branches. The breeze mingles these perfumes with our own oily odor of skin sizzling in sunlight.

I look at my friend between the sun and me, soft moist flesh as black silhouette silver-rimmed with sharp sun-sheen, round nose-tip, sloped forehead, angled cheekbone, plunge of neck, all black with scorching silver halo, and this silhouette moves, something very

alive here beside me, alive and unfathomed. I put my hand against the sun to see, but sun-splinters splatter between fingers, fire-edged silhouetted fingers, light flashing, shifting, stabbing deep grass, slicing Limoncillo fragrance, jabbing into my eyes and I look away.

Green, green the grass, looking into the grass, not really interested in toucans, just need the grass to stay as it is, just need me to stay right here, nothing to change, keep this moment steady and quiet like a grassblade-tip dewdrop unwilling to fall.

A THUNDERING EARTHQUAKE

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, February 25, 2008

Paty in Connecticut writes asking if I felt the strong earthquake she'd heard about that hit Chiapas a couple of weeks ago.

I hadn't felt it because it came during my dawn jog. However, when I entered the house at the jog's end to find the tin roof rumbling like an unbalanced washing machine during its spin cycle I knew instantly that we had a quake, though still I wasn't feeling anything. I stepped outside and the whole landscape was rumbling as if a very large waterfall lay nearby.

Everyone else I spoke to reported similar experiences -- seeing or hearing the quake's effects, but not feeling it. Lucio, a human-rights observer from Italy, saw the dangling light-bulb in his room swinging. Elsewhere a cabinet door opened on its own.

LETTUCE FEELINGS

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; February 27, 2011

One daily job I look forward to is that of supplying a big bouquet of freshly picked leaf lettuce for the kitchen. Picking the lettuce is a sensuous experience. Chilly, early-morning dew on the leaves wets my hands. A lettucy fragrance blossoms around me as I break off the leaves, feeling in my fingertips the faint but fatal snaps of petioles yielding to my force. As I return to the hut to wash the leaves I can't take my eyes off the visually pleasing essay before me, one commenting on the theme of simple but crinkly-edged glowings of yellow greenness contrasting with interior black shadowiness.

Sometimes it's hard to hand over the bouquet to the kitchen staff. By the time I get to the kitchen door I'm sort of bonded with that bunch of lettuce, even to the point of identifying with it.

For, when I'm picking the lettuce I'm doing that slow-simmering kind of reflecting on life everyone does when engaged in non-thinking jobs. And the lettuce's radiant yellow-greenness emerging from silky, deep-rooted blackness, and even its odor of bruised herbage, somehow strike me as exactly matching how I've been feeling lately -- not to mention how each leaf petiole gives that little snap when I pick it, like the thousand little losses one feels every day while aging, leaving behind hair, hearing, sight, strength, memory and more, and sometimes just plain giving up on this or that.

Looking at the lettuce in my hands is in many ways like taking a good look at my own feelings.

And, the destiny of that lettuce... I'll bet that most leaves get thrown away -- a bug-eaten hole on this one, that leaf a little too pale, this one with a small tear, that one with a brown spot, one after another just not good enough for a fancy restaurant. Well, if we're developing a metaphor here, at this point it would be easy to overdo it.

But, sometimes, I do wish I knew what happens to what I bring to the kitchen door. I wonder what the use is of such fragile, translucing,

yellow-green, crushed-herbage-smelling, baroque-fringed gifts... if the one you're giving them to mostly just throws them away.

WEDNESDAY IN NUEVO LIMAR

Excerpt from Jim's online "Yerba Buena, Word-Snapshots from a Missionary Clinic In Southern Mexico's Indian Territory," from notes made during a medical expedition into the isolated (no roads) village of Nuevo Limar, northern Chiapas, written in late February, 1988

In the evening another meeting is held; but this time only about fifteen worshipers show up. Once again the Pastor preaches mostly about "clean living," backing up his assertions with quotations from Scripture. When at the sermon's end he asks if anyone has any questions, a man in his fifties raises his hand and says,

"All these things you talk about -- washing our hands, keeping our animals out of our homes, the eating of plants instead of so much pork -- these ideas are very different from what we are used to. I'm not sure I understand much of what you say. Please, can't you stay a little longer to show us what you mean?"

A pained look comes into the Pastor's face as he explains that tomorrow we absolutely must return to Yerba Buena. It's too bad the nurses had been unable to come with us as planned, for part of their job on such tours always is to give talks on healthy living.

In the night the half-full moon lies straight above us. While the worshipers sing psalms I step outside to walk around and soak up the night's feelings. Carrying a microcasette recorder in my pocket, I record what I see and feel. Here are the very words I speak into the recorder as I stand in the middle of the moonlit dirt street before the church:

"People singing inside the temple, no musical instruments, the songs simple and repetitive... Katydids calling from shadowy bushes... Visible in the moonlight, pale woodsmoke filtering through cracks in the pole walls of the hut next door... Lightning bugs flashing in a banana grove next door... Silhouettes of palm trees on the horizon... Horses standing tied outside the church.... In moonlight, the cumulus clouds above us are like dark blue bunches of cotton surrounded by black sky and twinkling stars.... Up and down the street, inside every hut, a candle or kerosene lantern is burning, an orange glow visible through the chinks between wall-poles... "

SUNDAY IN SAN LORENZO

Excerpt from Jim's online "Yerba Buena, Word-Snapshots from a Missionary Clinic In Southern Mexico's Indian Territory," from notes made during a medical expedition into the isolated (no roads) village of San Lorenzo, northern Chiapas, written in 1988

Among the fifteen or so people of various affiliations in the household (children, children everywhere, crying, whining, vomiting, playing, running, screaming...) is a woman of about forty who says that her fifteen-year old boy has had severe stomach cramps for several days. Would we please look at him? He's lying there in the corner... Gudulia diagnoses the trouble as "inflamed intestines" and suggests mudpack therapy. She asks the woman to go dig up some clean mud. At 9:00 PM we'll return and show the mother how to make mudpacks.

At 9:00 PM sharp we return. In a yellow, plastic bucket the mother presents Gudulia with a ball of yellow-brown mud about six inches across. It looks like wet putty. Gudulia adds two inches of water and with her fingers begins mixing the mud and water, sometimes adding more water. Fifteen minutes later the mud is of the consistency of thick, creamy mayonnaise. Onto a clean rag about l8 x l8 inches in

size she dips three handfuls of mud, creating a layer of mud about half an inch deep, and nowhere coming closer to the rag's edges than three inches. Then she folds the rag into a neat rectangular package. This is placed on the boy's stomach. Finally the boy and his mudpack are covered with a heavy blanket. Coldness from the hardening mud is supposed to be beneficial, plus the mud itself will "draw out poisons." Among Gudulia's further instructions are these:

* Make such mudpacks four or five times daily until the stomach feels better, then reduce treatments to two or three daily applications, until the patient is well

* Keep the mudpack on until the mud hardens, unless it causes discomfort

* Don't apply a mudpack until at least two hours after eating

Furthermore, Gudulia suspects that the boy, as well as everyone else in the family (and probably all of San Lorenzo), is heavily infested with intestinal parasites -- worms -- so she advises the following:

* Each day eat five to ten raw pumpkin seeds. (Pumpkins here are completely different from what we have in the U.S.)

* For several days, each day drink the juice of two lemons

* Take several enemas of "tea" brewed from garlic and the commonly available herb called Epazote (Chenopodium ambrosioides, sometimes called Mexican tea in U. S. botany books).

ORANGE BLOSSOMS, AZAHAR

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; March 2, 2007

We're at the peak of orange season here, large bags of oranges being fairly cheap in the market. It's good to see all the dark green orange trees so loaded with big, shiny, somehow friendly-looking oranges.

Even before most of the fruits are ripe, many orange trees are producing waxy, white blossoms among the oranges still on the tree. If you have ever smelled orange blossoms you know that their fragrance is painfully wonderful.

In English we say "orange blossom" or "lemon blossom" the same way we might say "dandelion blossom" or "chickweed blossom." In Spanish there's a word in common usage applied just to orange, lemon and citron blossoms. It's azahar. If a language tells something about the people who speak it, then azahar probably says something about Spanish speakers. And maybe in English the lack of such a word for these spectacularly fragrant, dream-evoking blossoms reveals something about us, too.

ANTONIO'S "CARLOS SANTO" & "RIÑONERA"

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, March 3, 2008

The other day my friend Antonio accepted the task of going to dig up a medicinal herb next to his pasture, to be transplanted into the herb garden. Along the way he couldn't refrain from pointing out other useful plants. One of them was a yellow-flowered prickly-poppy, genus Argemone.

Antonio called it "Carlos Santo," or "Saint Charles," and said that there's nothing better to give a woman in labor having a hard time getting the baby out. I wouldn't be surprised if it really works, for

prickly-poppies belong to the same family as Opium Poppies, whose opium in small dosages tends to calm down and make drowsy.

Like Opium Poppies, prickly-poppies when cut exude a milky juice, orange-colored in our species. The book Las Plantas Medicinales de México mentions uses for Prickly-poppies ranging from curing diarrhea, to clearing clouds in the eye, to suppressing coughs. Also it's been used in hospitals as an aid to hypnosis, and to calm nervous patients.

Moments later Antonio plucked another plant, which he called Riñonera, or "Good-for-Kidneys." If your kidneys are inflamed, drink a tea of this.

THE BASIL COLLECTORS

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken just south of Cuautla, Morelos, probably sometime in 1995

On the south side of Mercado Sonora, near the Merced Market, in Mexico City, there's an herb stall operated by Jaime (pronounced HAI-mee) García Galván and his wife, Paulina Rivera García. Usually Jaime is found arranging his herbs. Paulina always sits on a tiny stool beside the stall taking care of sales and keeping the herb heaps organized. One day Jaime invites me to go with him and Paulina on one of their herb-collecting trips.

As we make our plans, Jaime always does the talking, but he ends almost every statement with a glance at Paulina, and an "Isn't that so?" Usually Paulina quietly nods in the affirmative, but sometimes she adds the absolute minimum needed to clarify or correct. During several pre-trip visits, sometimes I find Jaime sitting low in the stall, briefly resting with his head on a pile of herbs, but Paulina always

works, almost obsessively, if only looking for brown or tattered leaves. Both Jaime and Paulina are about thirty-five years old.

Jaime and Paulina specialize in just a few kinds of herbs, so they are unlike those vendors in the Sonora who perch next to great heaps of dozens or even hundreds of herb species. Throughout the year Jaime and Paulina deal mainly in zacate limón, known in English as lemon-grass or citronella-grass, and naranjo agrio, or sour or Seville orange, which they cultivate and harvest themselves. They also sell most any other herb or plant product if they happen to stumble onto a good deal.

As soon as Jaime, Paulina, and I leave the Sonora's southern loading zone in their old truck, I begin seeing some of the business's realities: The loading zone attendant at the gate requires nearly a dollar for a parking fee. Then we tank up on gas.

"We make this trip almost every day," Jaime explains, peeling off small-denomination bills from a huge wad. The service-station attendant greets Jaime and Paulina by name, and seems to know all about their personal lives. The gas costs U.S. $14.67. I stand there remembering that a kilo (2.2 pounds) of zacate limón brings the family 33 cents, and, especially in the afternoons, sales as large as a kilo have been few and far in between. Each day Jaime must sell over 44 kilos (98 pounds) of zacate limón just to pay for the gasoline...

"Operating expenses just never end," Jaime begins to complain once we're cruising down Calzada Ignacio Zaragoza, heading southeastward out of town. "We had to pay U.S. $4,167 for our little stall in the Sonora, and of course we're still paying on that. If we had wanted a larger stall inside the building, it would have cost $13,333. We could have rented our little stall for $33 per week, or a big one inside for $133 per week, but we decided to do what we did. Besides this, we have to pay $12 federal taxes each month, and every day the police come around wanting a contribution of 33 cents. Since Paulina works with me and can't fix lunch for us, each day we pay three to six dollars for food. And I'm probably forgetting about lots of

other expenses. Of course the old truck breaks down every now and then, and it's always needing new tires. We get up at 5 AM and work until about 6 PM every day, every day, seven days a week, and with that there's hardly ever enough money left to feed us."

"Trabajamos para comer," he says gloomily, paying a couple of bucks at the toll booth at the entrance of Mexico 190-D: "We work just to eat."

Cruising down 190-D, we pass another pickup heading out of town, loaded high with close-packed bales of herbs.

"It's almost a certainty that he's also coming from the Sonora," Jaime surmises proudly. "He's a wholesaler, probably going to Puebla where he'll resell the herbs at a little profit. There's just nowhere where you can get better deals in herbs than at the Sonora."

Moments later we pass yet another pickup truck loaded high with bales of herbs, heading in the opposite direction.

"He's heading to the Sonora, too, to sell his crop" Jaime laughs. "If you're a serious herb dealer in Mexico, you just have to deal with the Sonora."

Today we're going to harvest zacate de limón from a field Jaime and Paulina rent just south of Cuautla, Morelos, about seventy miles south-southwest of Mexico City. We take the first exit off 190-D and continue south on Mexico 115. The first couple of miles are flat and barren, but at Chalco the whole landscape tilts upward and the old pickup's engine starts straining.

As we climb, tall, slender pepper-trees with their gracefully hanging branches line both sides of the highway. All three of us feel cheerful and relieved being out of Mexico City's never ending noise and air pollution. We drive with the windows down, just gulping fresh, cool air. Having begun in Mexico City at an elevation of about 7,350 feet, at Amecameca we reach 8,102 feet. Behind Amecameca, to the east, the landscape slopes upward into a hazy sky, and we know

that from here on rare clear days it's possible to glimpse the snow-capped volcanoes of Iztaccíhuatl (17,343 feet/ 5286m) and Popocatépetl (17,930 feet/5465m). Unfortunately, today, as usually is the case, Mexico City's famous smog completely obscures those majestic peaks.

At Ozumba we reach 8,200 feet (2500m) and stop at the mercado to eat blue, salsa-drenched huaraches so hot that steam rises from them in the chilly air. The old woman who prepares them knows Jaime and Paulina by name, and she asks how Jaime's mother is doing. A torrential rain comes out of nowhere, and within a minute a raging, foot-deep river of brown water floods Ozumba's main street, stopping all traffic. The orange plastic tarpaulin above the huarache-lady's portable stove sags dangerously. She pokes at it with a broomstick and the water cascades in a gigantic silver curtain that the wind blows onto us. However, no one but I seems to notice what is going on; they say nothing about the flood and keep eating their huaraches. Apparently such storms are completely normal for this mountain-crest village. Despite my resistance, Jaime insists on buying all our huaraches.

Jaime and Paulina live in the house of Jaime's parent's in Tepetlixpa, a couple of miles below Ozumba, and we need to stop there. Here Jaime reveals that we've come the whole distance from Mexico City with hardly any brakes at all, and that now since we're starting to descend to Cuautla, he needs to bleed his brakes and adjust them. We chug up an incredibly steep, one-lane cobblestone and mud street hemmed in by eight-foot-high adobe walls.

We park, pass through a small wooden door in the wall, and enter a very pleasant, well kept courtyard surrounded by low buildings painted blue and yellow. With so many flowering plants such as geraniums, impatiens, bougainvilleas, and heliconias blossoming in rusty metal cans, cracked glass jars, earthen pots, and from the ground, it feels like a botanical garden. Three canaries and a babbling little boy fill the air with happy sounds. The seventeen-year-

old daughter and an older woman greet me graciously, and offer a refresco to drink while Jaime works on his brakes.

It occurs to Paulina to show me some of the plants in their backyard. She shows me muicle, cedrón, ruda, neldo, altea, níspero, nogal, magnolia, and aguacate.

When we return to the courtyard, a very old, bent-over, humbly dressed woman awaits us with an armload of muicle from her own backyard. Paulina pays her a few pesos and the old woman smiles warmly. Soon Jaime returns, apologizing for the delay. As we return to the road, I'm told some of the history of both Jaime and the old truck.

"During the first years after our marriage," he begins, "every day I'd harvest my zacate limón or naranjo agrio, bale it up and carry it to the bus stop with sweat running from under my arms. I'd take it to the Sonora and sell it. Doing it like that was expensive and took so much time, but that was the only way I had to make money, so I did it. Every day!"

"Years passed and finally I'd saved enough to think of buying a truck. Since I worked in agriculture, I got special papers from the government allowing me to import a pickup from the U.S. without paying import duties. Without that dispensation, I'd never have been able to buy it. When I got all my papers together, I took a bus to the frontier, crossed into Texas at Matamoros, and at Brownsville, Texas bought this old thing, a '75 Ford Custom. Now I can carry a lot more herbs, but my expenses are a lot more. We still have to live in my father's house, but at least I don't have to take the bus every day to Mexico City."

To prove the truck's gringo pedigree, Jaime points to a sticker on the cab's back window promoting the Oklahoma Farm Union. But Jaime has Mexicanized his old beauty by adding foot-high decals of cobras with spread hoods on his front fenders and, on the hood, a three-foot-wide decal of something looking like a bat with flaming wings.

He's also added fog lights, extra parking lights and brake lights, and maybe some Christmas lights as well. This old truck has class.

In Cuautla, Paulina enters a pharmacy and phones a fellow who sometimes has albahaca, or basil, for sale. The man says he just happens to have several bales ready for someone else to carry to the Sonora, but he'd be glad for us to buy three or four. We find the house, the two-foot-thick bales are stacked in front, and in this unplanned, informal manner we begin accumulating our day's supply. As we're about to leave, the man asks if I want to buy marijuana.

"It's big business around here," he laughs, "everyone sells it, and it's good."

It's late afternoon when we finally drive into the valley holding Jaime's rented field of zacate limón. The flat fields with mountains rising all around are beautiful. We pass fields of corn, sugarcane, rice, beans, and gladiolus. Guava trees grow along the irrigation ditch our one-lane dirt road runs by. Sunlight slanting into the covered back of our pickup truck heats up the basil we've just bought, and our cab becomes charged with this powerful, salady scent. We are in a wonderful mood and when we see an old man who has stolen sweet-corn from a cornfield, and is roasting the ears over a fire that's more smoke than heat, we all laugh like kids.

Jaime's 3-3/4-acre (1.5ha) field of zacate limón, which costs him $667 a year to rent, took fifteen days to plant, two years ago. Zacate limón is a large, lemony-tasting grass producing side shoots. Once the plant is mature, its several shoots can be separated and replanted. In such a way, Jaime dreams of enlarging his acreage year after year.

"Someday Paulina and I will have our own home," Jaime predicts.

Jaime bends over each clump of grass, gathers the loose blades with his left hand and with a special curved machete in his right shears the blades about six inches above the ground. He removes

the most conspicuous brown blades, then deposits the green ones in a pile next to the kneeling Paulina, who patiently arranges the material into neat hands. It's tedious but not unpleasant work. An odor like lemon meringue pie suffuses the late-afternoon air. Orioles, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Great-tailed Grackles sing from trees along the irrigation canal, and small frogs croak lustily from silvery rain-puddles in the field. It's a magic moment, peaceful and perfect.

Later, as Jaime arranges his harvest in the back of the old Ford, Paulina goes collecting toloache, or jimsonweed, from a neighboring field. She says the juice is good for pimples.

"Yeah, and if you put juice from its stem and roots onto a fellow's food, it'll make him go crazy," laughs Jaime.

We're ready to drive away, but Paulina insists on rushing to some guava trees and pulling off some leaves.

"Good for stomach pains, colic, and diarrhea," she says dead-pan, climbing back into the truck.

As we head back toward Cuautla, I ask Paulina where she learned all her information.

"When I was a child," she says, "I accompanied my grandmother when she went collecting medicinal herbs, which she sold in the mercado. But I didn't pay any attention at all to what she was doing and I didn't learn a single thing from her. Then when I married Jaime and started selling herbs, I saw that I needed to know these things, so I got books and started reading."

Her main book is an old classic that gets reprinted from time to time, Las Plantas Medicinales de México, by Maximino Martínez.

Returning through Cuautla, it's already almost night, but Paulina decides to call a certain family that a while back mentioned to her that they grow basil. She calls and we're invited to go pick the family

up, carry them to their field out of town, and they'll pick a few bales as we wait. We're all tired, but we do this.

On the way to the family's field, as we bounce down a very weedy, one-lane, dirt road between fields, something unexpected happens. A beautiful black and white sheep of a large, slender, muscular pedigree is standing in the middle of the road, and it doesn't budge as we approach. Jaime stops, blows his horn, but the sheep just stands there. Jaime inches the old Ford forward to nudge it. The sheep is hidden below the hood, but surely it's gotten out of the way by now, so Jaime continues very slowly, constantly looking right and left for the sheep, but it's just gone, obviously having darted into the roadside weeds. We speed up a bit, and then a man sticks his head from the hedgerow before us, a horrified look spreads across his face, and he starts screaming. Jaime slams on the brakes, understands that the sheep is under the truck, and backs back.

The sheep lies there not making a sound, looking as if it's peacefully digesting a recent meal, but unable to get up. One of its shoulders is dislocated and a whole leg sticks out crookedly. The man is very upset. He and Jaime debate whose fault it is when a sheep that is too dumb to get out of the way is allowed to wander loose on a public road and gets run over. As the argument proceeds, the family in the back of the truck piles out and heads to the field to begin work.

The debate goes on and on. The man wants U.S. $100, but Jaime says that that's impossible. With a sense that the debate is unfinished, we return to the truck and continue to the field.

Sometime later the man arrives with a friend and the debate continues. When it's fully dark and the family comes in the moonlight carrying bales of basil on their heads, finally Jaime agrees to buy the sheep. But he'll have to come back later with the cash because he doesn't have it now, and he'll have to talk to a veterinarian friend before he decides how much he'll pay. The basil family knows the sheep man and vouches for Jaime's honesty; but the mother of the family tells the sheep man that he should be ashamed for expecting

to be paid for a loss he brought upon himself by not properly watching his sheep.

Eventually Jaime pays the man a hard-earned $50, and a several-day feast of mutton follows.

TELCHAC PUEBLO AT DAWN

Written at Hacienda San Juan Lizárraga one kilometer east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán, March 4, 2006

Early each Saturday morning, on my way to Hotel Reef, at about 6 AM I walk into Telchac Pueblo about a mile west of the Hacienda. Until now I've arrived there well before sunrise, but days are growing longer, and now as I enter the sky is light enough to see the general shapes of trees and buildings.

The main street carries so little traffic -- during a walk maybe ten men on bicycles will pass me, and three or four vehicles -- that it's easier to walk in the street. Mostly the sidewalks are too narrow, irregular, and obstructed to be useful. Walking down the middle of the street at dawn one glimpses vignettes of small-town Maya life.

Someone has mounted corrugated tin roofing sheets on poles and set up an informal, wall-less restaurant beside his house. Even at this hour long, red ropes of pig flesh drape over poles beside a rickety, homemade table. Two or three campesinos sit hunched over the table, their straw hats shadowing their faces from the single naked light bulb at the end of a wire dangling from the tin ceiling. I smell strong coffee, hot tortillas, and eggs sizzling in pig grease.

All around and from near and far roosters are crowing. Up in the trees Great-tailed Grackles screech, whistle, pop and rattle, and dogs bark on and on. Many houses, especially the small, one-room,

cubical ones of cinderblocks the government provided to families who lost everything during 2002's Hurricane Isidor, stand in one another's shadows. One resident of such a house has his door open and his radio on full blare, providing salsa music to the whole block.

Passing by the market building near the center of town, people inside are busily sorting colorful heaps of bananas, oranges, pineapples, papaya, potatoes and chili peppers. Certain stalls sell coffee and sweetbreads. They also have their radios on, and a single light bulb dangling from a naked wire from the ceiling. Everyone seems sleepy but in a good mood.

At the central plaza I pull myself atop a stone wall to wait with two or three others for Hotel Reef's little white bus that will carry us north. The stone wall is moist with dew and cold, but somehow it doesn't matter. Easy laughter drifts in from all sides and sometimes those powerful whiffs of coffee and hot tortillas float by. Great-tailed Grackles screech and rattle in the palm trees above us, and the palms become more than mere silhouettes against the bluing sky.

A WALK IN PISTÉ

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; March 6, 2011

In Pisté by late morning it's already hot and windy with summery cumulus clouds overhead. Coconut Palm fronds crackle in the wind, dust clouds swirl past, and heavy sunlight on sweaty skin feels good. Tourist buses stream through town headed for the ruins, pale faces peering from windows, but here on the backstreets mostly people are walking or on bikes. A pickup truck cruises by with a loudspeaker atop alternately blasting salsa music and praise for pineapples on sale.

An Achiote tree beside a low stone wall next to the street is loaded with brown, burry capsules. Break open a capsule, rub the reddish-orange seeds on your hand and you get reddish-orange stain, the color of spicy achiote paste used in many Maya dishes. Tangles of Night-blooming Cereus cactus scramble atop other stone walls. Grackles screech and clack and whistle from deep inside a big Strangler Fig, and Social Flycatchers, shrill and piercing, call t-CHEER-CHEER, chee-TIQUEER. Little boys cheer as their black homemade kite ascends skyward making loops in ever-gustier wind.

Gliding, gliding, gliding, feeling bodiless, looking at weed flowers, picking up silvery-winged Monkey-Comb seeds, passing gaudy wall posters announcing a dance in nearby Xcalacoop, images of light and color drifting by accompanied by birdsong here, blaring radio there, fragrance of citrusy Lemoncillo flowers here, the woosh of wind there, always the wind.

Honestly I'm not sure whether my friend and I are fighting when I interrupt our talk saying, "Look at that black dog smiling at us." Seeing the dog's sloppy smile and sparkling eyes directed right at us, she laughs so hard that I know we're not. She's just sending into me one of those probes of hers to see what's inside me, unconcerned about what she disturbs, or what the consequences might be.

Back on the main street it's hotter and much louder, and dustier. A lady's sidewalk rotisserie billows dense white smoke when juices drip from reddish chicken-halves being flipped. We walk through the cloud, my friend feeling good calls to the señora, "¡Huele rico!" "Smells good" and inside the smoke we enter another cloud, this of loud Mexican hiphop with such unlikely lyrics and joyful energy and sexy imagery that she looks at me and says, "Let's eat here."

In smoke and hiphop and with tourist buses rumbling over a speed bump just feet away my friend's orange-red chicken-half comes with rice, slices of red tomato, green lettuce, white onions, and hotsauce in a black stone molcajete. The giardia I've been battling for three months seems to be acting up today, sharp stomach pains and I'm a

bit dizzy and feel feverish atop all the heat, so I just drink cold water, and soon feel better.

Actually I'm not sure it's my giardia acting up, or just the way I feel when this friend shoots her probes into me, or when she's doing things like sitting next to me as vividly aware as I that this smoke and the diesel fumes and this crazy hiphop beat somehow is something worth cherishing, worth getting misty-eyed about when I think about it, something that's smiling and generous and good, and even though I don't like breathing smoke, don't like eating beside speed bumps with crossing-over buses and don't like nutty hiphop, I know that we're so profoundly lucky to have it all exactly as it is right here and now, never to be experienced just so, ever again.

THE COMEDOR WITH A BOUQUET

From Jim'sn online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in the Merced Market, Mexico City, DF, probably sometime in 1995

A comedor is smaller than a restaurant, but more substantial than a mere stove set up along the sidewalk. Food selection is usually limited to one or two main items, and you can order coffee and soft drinks. In a corner of the Super Mercado de Carnes, dozens of comedores stand next to one another, isle after isle. I walk among them wondering how to choose between them, and how, because there are so many, any make enough money to survive.

Finally I pass one with three bouquets on the counter, a four-foot high arrangement of bright-red gladiolus and white baby's-breath, another consisting of a glass filled with roses, and the last holding a large, deep-green shock of parsley. This comedor, like all others here, is about fifteen feet wide and ten feet deep. Inside, instead of the usual one or two cooks, there are six women and one man. Of

the six women, five are in their early twenties, and the other is a middle-aged woman whom at least one of the girls calls Mamá. Despite there being no customers, everyone keeps very busy, except for the young man sitting in the corner next to the money box, coolly chewing a toothpick.

The older woman possesses a handsome face reflecting strength and character; one sees that she has worked very hard in her life. Since her teeth are profoundly bucked and her upper incisors are rimmed with silver, her unreserved smile is simply dazzling. She notices my interest, waves me over, and enthusiastically summarizes the glories of her cooking:

"I choose the freshest vegetables and fry them in our secret batter, never too long, just enough to impart to them a perfect texture and flavor. A little salsa verde, or salsa roja if you prefer, on the top, and then the beans with just enough fried onion to make the flavor the way we like it. Our stew is the best, a harmonious blend of herbs... "

It's clear that the señora knows she's putting on a show, and she's loving the attention, and loving making all of us laugh. I pull up a stool and order bean soup. As I wait for my order, I try to talk with the girls, but they're so busy it's hard. Finally I ask one what it's like working in a comedor.

Obviously she has mixed feelings. She starts to answer several times, but always reconsiders. Finally she laughs and says, "Well, the good part is getting to dispense so much good food to nice people, and getting to know them, but the bad part is the hard work and long hours, and how easy it is to get fat!"

The dish I'm served isn't what I expected, but it looks great. It's a large bowl of very spicy tomato broth in which swim both a large hunk of deep-fried cauliflower, and a dollop of the lady's famous "onioned black-beans." A substantial mound of hot tortillas is served on a saucer covered with a pretty cloth.

As I'm being served, the señora asks if everything looks OK; as I'm eating she asks if it tastes good; when I'm finished, she asks if I enjoyed it. She also asks what a gringo like me is doing in the mercado, so I tell her about my writing project. When I rise to leave, she places her hand over her heart, smiles crookedly, and launches into another performance.

"Señor gringo," she says, "please write that we here in our little comedor in the heart of Mexico City's ancient historic section send our sincere greetings to your esteemed readers, and invite them to come eat with us."

The girls explode into laughter, and I promise to write her words. My meal's cost is 83¢. I try to pay a dollar because I received so much more than I had expected, but the tip is refused.

POVERTY, TOUGH PEOPLE & FORESTS

Issued from "Cyber El Profe" in Pantepec, Chiapas; March 8, 2005

A very old, toothless, white-haired, barefoot Indian woman with a body the size of a 12-year old gringo child staggered up the road carrying on her back a load of firewood I could not have managed. Her burden was held in place by a flat strap across her forehead. The woman veered to the side of the road and dropped her load onto a rock. With a hopeless look on her face she rested a long time, then tried to lift her cargo again. She couldn't. She rested more and tried more. After several attempts she got it lifted, and continued up the road, a pained grimace etched into her face.

Each morning several boys and men pass our hut climbing upslope to where they cut trees. The smaller tree parts they split or chop into sections, and carry downslope on their backs, or on homemade

wheelbarrows with wobbly, wooden wheels. The tree trunks they cut into very straight and well formed planks using chainsaws where the trees fall. These boards are also carried out on people's backs. The trail is so steep and rugged that I feel lucky to have suffered only one serious fall on it.

These people, mostly Zoque-Indian stock, are tougher than most of us can imagine and they endure discomfort, pain, disease and the humiliation of poverty with dignity and good humor.

It is also true that their tree-felling is destroying the ability of this land to support life. Most slopes, all the way to the top, are now weedy pastures, tangles of weeds or ragged secondary forest quickly being converted to pastures, or weeds. Small patches of decent forest survive only in the most inaccessible spots. A 25-year-old man told me how beautiful it was here, and how many wild animals there had been when he was a kid. A major ecological and human disaster is developing in these mountains.

GREGORIA ON THE SUN DECK

Excerpt from Jim's online "Yerba Buena,Word-Snapshots from a Missionary Clinic In Southern Mexico's Indian Territory," just north of Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas, written sometime in 1988

At l0 o'clock on a morning filled with sunlight and moist, warm breezes, I find eighteen-year old Gregoria Rafeala López Rodríguez from the town of Ixhuatán sitting on the Hospital's sun deck. Though she's in a wheelchair, she looks healthy in every respect, except that her hands and feet are slightly swollen and the skin covering these parts is peeling off. She tells me that she's one of eight children, that her mother works as a maid in a landowner's house, and that she's sorry, but she'll never be able to read the book I'm writing, for she has never attended school, and cannot read.

Now Doña Metahabel arrives to give the morning's massage therapy. She lifts Gregoria's left arm and with her thumbs very gently presses the hand's upper surface. Then she moves the stiff fingers, ever so slightly, back and forth.

"Ah, it feels much better today," says Doña Metahabel. "We only began massage therapy yesterday and then she couldn't even pick up a glass of water. But today I think she might be able to do that."

As Doña Metahabel works, Gregoria whimpers from the pain. She tries to be brave, but sometimes she just has to throw back her head, bite her lower lip, and hiss out her feelings. Tears run down her cheeks.

"We'll give massages for three more weeks, each day followed by a steam bath," explains Doña Metahabel. "Also we've put her on a low protein diet -- no meat, beans, cheese or eggs, and no salt. She can eat fruits, grains, vegetables..."

Arthritis is common in my own family; at age forty-one already my own hands and back joints sometimes ache. Now I wince as each of Gregoria's fingers must be moved, one at a time.

"Before Gregoria came to us, she visited a curandero, a witch doctor," continues Doña Metahabel. "The witch doctor told her that she was possessed by evil spirits, and that for a certain price he would drive the spirits away. His method was to put a little alcohol into a small cup, set the alcohol ablaze, and then quickly turn the cup upside down over the swollen areas so that the burning alcohol would create a vacuum inside the cup and suck out the evil spirits. But all that did was to burn Gregoria's skin. That's why the skin is peeling off her hands and feet."

Gregoria seems a little embarrassed to have this story told, so Doña Metahabel changes the subject.

"This reminds me of an incident we had here a while back," she says. "Among the Chol Indians, girls usually marry between ten and

twelve years of age, and boys marry when they're fourteen or sixteen. By the time a girl is thirteen she should have produced her first baby; if she doesn't, people will say that something must be wrong with her. Well, one day we received an unmarried eighteen-year-old boy who had been very concerned about not being able to find a spouse. Someone had told him that if he mixed a large quantity of chicken manure with cow's blood and ate it, he'd find a wife. So he did, and the mixture poisoned his system. He was here for three weeks, very, very ill... "

At the same time Gregoria both laughs and cries. Offering a brief recess now, Doña Metahabel steps behind her patient and unselfconsciously and systematically begins parting the strands of Gregoria's hair, looking for lice. In the villages this vital social grooming is done by a person's loved ones. Gregoria responds to the generous gesture by sticking her thumb in her mouth and holding her head to one side as if she were a child.

But, now the right hand must be massaged, and then each foot...

SWEETGUM & PINE-NEEDLE BATHS

Issued from "Cyber El Profe" in Pantepec, Chiapas; March 8, 2005

A firewood cutter dropped by our hut so I asked him which plants had special uses. The main trees around us were Sweetgums and pines, so he told me what his people did with Sweetgum leaves and pine needles: They put them in boiling water (one or the other, not mixed together) then when the water cooled to body temperature they bathed in it.

The young man smelled of woodsmoke and old sweat, for he had worked a long day cutting and carrying firewood. However, I knew that when he went to town he'd be cleaner than I usually am. And,

just think: Sometimes when he goes, he smells freshly of Sweetgum or pine.

CAMPFIRE PLANTAINS

Issued from "Cyber El Profe" in Pantepec, Chiapas; March 8, 2005

Pantepec's stores are small, dark and unimpressive - pretty heavy on crackers, sodas and the basics such as dried black beans and sugar. However, usually they do offer a good variety of oranges. So far I've had about five kinds. They are usually warty, greenish, and often bear dark blotches, yet they taste far superior to what's available up north. I like being among people who judge an orange by its taste, not its looks.

Despite the big banana plantations in the lowlands just downslope from us, bananas are hard to find here at this time. Instead, each store has a few black-and-yellow-skinned plantains. Plantains look like bananas, except that usually they are larger, more pointed at their ends, and have a relatively firm, almost waxy texture. They're meant to be fried or roasted, not eaten raw. Usually I don't bother with campfires and end up eating them raw. They taste OK raw, but they make you fart, which is no fun when you spend your nights in a sleeping bag.

Vladimir likes his hot coffee so he's been building campfires, and I've taken to placing my plantains atop his remaining campfire embers. First the skin splits and a little foam bubbles out. Before long you hear squeaky sizzling sounds, and finally you smell the wholesome roasted odor that to any mammalian nose declares "It's done!" Usually it takes 15 or so minutes.

I've eaten plantain fried in skillets and they provided more or less a novelty taste I could take or leave. However, our plantains roasted

over embers remaining from burning small pine twigs and cones are heavenly. Maybe the hint of pine resin is what sets their flavor off.

AN OLD FELLOW'S MEDICINAL PLANTS

Issued from "Cyber El Profe" in Pantepec, Chiapas; March 8, 2005

When an old fellow we met along the road learned of our interest in medicinal plants he invited us to drop by Sunday afternoon so he could show us a few things. Around his house grew a number of useful plants -- guava trees whose young leaves were used for brewing a tea employed against dysentery, oak trees whose bark provided an infusion for ulcers, and others.

I've learned that a good "curandero" is one who knows how to combine plants for synergistic effects. The old man knew a few such combinations. For example, for all kinds of bodily pains he prescribed mixing oak bark, Artemisia, a local species of wax myrtle and leaves of a red-flowered salvia, boiling them in water, then pouring the hot brew onto a cloth and applying it to the hurting part, taking care not to burn the patient.

He had a similar concoction made of plants I couldn't identify, used to cure "susto," or fright. The kind of fright he was talking about was the fear of the unknown, or lingering, irrational fears -- "the kind most people have at one time or another," as he said.

The old man said he used these cures when there was no money for medicine. I started to ask why, if the cures were so good, Western Medicine was used at all. However, then I thought better of it, and said nothing.

CORN-DOGS

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, March 10, 2008

The welfare of dogs isn't a high priority around here. Especially around garbage dumps you see large numbers of skulking feral ones. At night you hear them all across the landscape, sometimes barking communally, sometimes fighting, sometimes just howling like sad, hungry dogs with nowhere to go.

This community has its share of night-barking dogs. Doze off and dogs awaken you yelping. In the middle of the night whenever dogs in the next village start up a whole pack of ours comes running down the middle of the road, their paws pounding the ground like little horses' hooves, barking like crazy. I lie there in my mind's eye seeing their heads thrown back, their gleeful eyes amazingly large, tongues hanging out, big grins on their faces in the moonlight, damning them all, wanting to sleep.

During the day they aren't so active. The term "hangdog" comes to mind for every dog you see.

If someone throws a dog a tortilla, he feels pretty lucky. I've mentioned how ears of corn are piled knee deep in one of the rooms in my dwelling. If I leave my door open a certain dog has learned to sneak in and steal an ear. Then he lies around all day gnawing on it as if it were a T-bone.

The worst thing is how guilty the dog looks. A cat when caught doing something naughty can manage a "Who, me?" look or a "So what?" look, but dogs discovered misbehaving just get that doleful look that says, "I'm such a bad dog... " and that's pathetic. Especially when it's over a gritty ear of corn.

The other day a family here ground up some corn-ears, cob and all, to soak in water and feed to their pigs. When their backs were turned

a skinny dog came gulping down the dry meal as if it were gravy. The next day the corn was covered with a blue tarp. The same dog returned and gnawed a hole in the tarp to get at the meal.

WIND SINGING

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; March 11, 2012

I suppose that on the coast, down at Marcia's where we spent the last rainy season, wind blows off the Caribbean all the time now, day and night. Here it's been breezy lately, too, though not like there. Most of the year the only wind here is what's associated with rainy-season afternoon storms or the dry-season weather fronts we call nortes.

This is a different kind of wind, though. It's part of that big change that happens early each year when the Sun on its daily path across the sky starts rising high enough to banish the North's winter, and to set the stage for the rainy season. The breezes we're having nowadays, then, aren't local or even regional, but rather the work of a majestic planetary adjustment. Maybe that's why this wind, of all winds, to me is the most transcendent, the wind most likely to set me to watching it, thinking about it, and feeling it.

How delicious to lie inside the mosquito net in the hut, deep in the night or maybe during a sweaty mid-day siesta, when suddenly an unusually assertive, vagrant breeze rustles the roof's thatched fringe all around, causes the mosquito net's walls to billow or lean against my side, and cool air to ripple across my body.

Sometimes the billowing netting reminds me of the kites kids are flying nowadays in every village, homemade kites not bearing gaudy pictures of rockets or spiky stars, but maybe the kid's own drawings,

and maybe with cut-paper fringes that flutter in the wind, and maybe the kite has a knotty cloth tail that circles when the kite loops. Some people are like kites, I think, thinking about kites, in that they're always resisting life's wind and in doing so are thus destined to endless gyrations, soaring and diving and, inevitably, the come-downs, or crashes. Better to be the wind itself, I think, thinking about kites.

The other day for a few seconds a breeze rustled the thatch, blew the netting to one side and even stirred dust from my dirt floor. The commotion roused me from an early afternoon siesta. Rising onto my elbows, through spaces between the hut's wall-polls, I saw the little birdbath beneath the Tree Cotton outside my door. A Melodious Blackbird perched on a rock in the water, his feathers ruffled and wet after bathing, and he was looking around at the wind. Looking at the wind, feeling it on his wet skin beneath sodden feathers, on his moist eyes, seeing the Tree Cotton's leaves shake, the pink Cosmoses beside him heave, and I thought how beautiful it must be being a blackbird in the wind.

The Clay-colored Robins were singing then, too, their chiming, echoic, monotonously repetitive phrases some kind of sweet, hypnotic lullaby, their singing mingled with the rustling wind, and I thought about the robins silhouetted deep in shadows among leaves alive with the wind, the robins singing into the wind.

I would like to sing into the wind, but I haven't the voice for it. I try to do it metaphorically, I guess. In fact, I like to think that these words issued into cyberspace are my windsong. The thoughts formless, like the wind, not rooting anyplace, mental images swirling around insinuating themselves into random reality-crevices, not really having any meaning at all, just being, just flowing, finally calming down to nothingness.

OLD BEEKEEPER ALONG THE TRAIL

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; March 13, 2011

Speaking of the beekeepers, we're quite good friends. When they park next to my hut I give them potted plants and seeds and they tell me stories and give information, though always only in brief spurts. Among the Maya, nowadays the beekeepers nearly always are older, smarter, more traditional men who husband their time and energies and have little time to shoot the breeze with useless gringos.

Recently early one morning I saw a beekeeper coming down the trail I walk each day soon after dawn to visit the garden. The little man was carrying on his back an extractor, a barrel-like machine used to extract honey from its comb. With combs inside the barrel, you turn the barrel around and around so fast that honey slung from the combs splatters against the barrel's walls and drains to the bottom where it's collected.

The extractor is heavy and must be carried several kilometers over irregular forest floor. These old guys are tough.

XTABAY IN THE BONETE TREE

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; March 13, 2011

Bonete trees, a native, common component of the Yucatán's forest, are closely related to Papayas. They produce a torpedo-shaped fruit with a good Papaya taste, so the local Maya are often seen with long sticks knocking fruits off to eat.

The other day my friend Luis and I were talking about this year's big Bonete crop when he casually mentioned that in his village behind

his family's house there used to be an enormous one, one much larger than you ever see nowadays, but the neighbors started complaining about the Xtabay living in it, so they had to cut it down.

Well, everyone here knows that Xtabays (EESH-tu-BAIS), pose a singular threat: If you're a good ol' boy wandering home late at night drunk, you very well may meet up with a strange woman who'll entice you into a little fooling around, and then the next morning you'll wake up all tangled in a thorn patch, your clothes and skin torn to pieces, and feeling awful. You'll have been afflicted with the viento malo, or "bad wind," that leaves you with a terrible headache and innumerable indefinable pains and miseries that no doctor can cure, only a traditional curandero, who knows the right spells. All that is Xtabay work.

Though many say that Xtabays live only in big Ceiba trees, others like my friend know they also are found in all kinds of overly large trees, such as the cut-down Bonete. Everyone in Pisté knows where the Ceiba is in which the local Xtabay lives. And all across the Yucatán if you're a tree that somehow has survived generations of hurricanes, wildfires and all the rest, you're going to attract an Xtabay, and then the local good folks will have to cut you down to get rid of that Xtabay.

I've been thinking about how such a practice could have arisen. Maybe the Xtabay-tree-cutting impulse arises from the urge for uniformity that traditional, tightly knit communities impose on their members, to keep problems from arising because of inequalities of any kind. Super big trees draw special attention to the property owners, so the culture, unable to articulate such an abstract and debatable premise as the need for everything to be evened out, and being too dogmatic to make exceptions for trees, comes up with Xtabays, and cuts down the trees they live in.

Another way that belief in Xtabay might be adaptive is that by eliminating outstanding features such as super-big trees the community enhances it chances of avoiding dangerous,

unpredictable influences of the outside world by being overlooked because of its mediocrity.

Anyway, even understanding why the Maya may need Xtabays in their culture, thinking of those folks cutting down such a big Bonete because it had an Xtabay in it, I just want to spit.

THE BAKER

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken at Mercado 20 de Noviembre in Oaxaca, Oaxaca state, probably sometime in 1995

In Oaxaca, the market called Mercado 20 de Noviembre lies across the street on the south side of the more famous Mercado Juárez, which is located near the main plaza, where all the tourists gather. Mercado Juárez mostly sells fruits, vegetables, and handicraft, but Mercado 20 de Noviembre consists mostly of comedores offering cheap prepared food and stalls selling locally baked bread. One bread stall stands next to the other, and as I wander among them I gain the impression that among the breads of each stall there is always at least one bread unique to just that stall. I pause before one stall where basketball-size, glazed, tan-colored loafs are packaged in clear plastic bags. Inside each bag there is a printed label saying "Delfinita Bread."

On the label the words "pan con yemas de huevo" mean "bread made with egg yolk." The printed slogan "De lo bueno lo mejor" means, "From what's good comes the best." As I'm admiring the bread, a young woman of about twenty walks up. She is approximately as bubbly and giggly as a young woman selling bread can be. I ask for her name.

"Delfinita," she laughs.

"No, I mean your full name."

"Delfinita, that's all," she repeats, with a firmness indicating that, really, that's the only name she's willing to give. But she does say that since business is a little slow right now she'd be glad to tell me about her work, even though she can't imagine anyone having any interest at all in what she does.

"I'm from the town of Santo Domingo Tomaltepec," she begins, now looking rather serious. "We are a town of about 500 adults, and most of us are bakers, maybe fifty to sixty percent of us. My parents also bake, as do several other members of the family. Yes, we're a village of bakers. There are other baking villages around Oaxaca, but they bake different bread. If you're from Oaxaca and you see our bread, you know that it's from Santo Domingo Tomaltepec because all of us in Santo Domingo bake the same kind of bread. In Oaxaca there must be fifty different kinds of bread -- each with its own characteristic blend of ingredients, manner of being baked, and with its own unique shape. Our bread is special because it contains egg yolk, is flavored with anise, and topped with sesame seed. Also, though we do have some nice French-made machines that do our kneading for us, we bake our bread in traditional brick ovens, and use the firewood called encino negro (black oak)."

I ask if it's a very profitable business, and she just laughs, and begins quoting some figures.

"We have to buy that encino negro, which costs between U.S. $6.67 and $8.33 per load. With a load we can bake approximately 300 small loaves, or buns, and each bag of ten buns brings us 83 cents. We also must buy the sesame seed, flour, eggs, butter, and anise. Then atop that there's the cost of the plastic bags and the printed labels, plus we have to pay for transporting the bread from Santo Domingo to here, and we must rent two market stalls from which to sell the bread."

"In other words, I've figured out that I need to invest about 67 cents for every 83-cent bag of buns I sell. I have to bake, bag, transport,

and market an 83-cent bag of ten buns in order to clear 16 cents; of course that means that I'm making a profit of just 1.6 cents per bun. And you've been here for about fifteen minutes, and you tell me how many people have come by buying my buns... "

No one during the last fifteen minutes has bought any Delfinita Buns.

"I think about these figures every morning when I get up at 6 o'clock to prepare the dough, and I think about them every time I take the bread from the oven and the hot vapor just pours out, hitting me in the face, burning my eyes. It's so hot, so terribly hot. And then you go out in the cold air, and that affects you again. It's the drastic changes in temperature all the time that really hurt you... "

THE HALTÚN

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; March 14, 2010

When I first arrived here Don Philomeno, in his 70s and Hacienda Chichen's longest-serving employee, showed me around the grounds. We came into an area where soil was completely missing, exposing nothing but an expanse of white limestone bedrock. The Don knelt beside a water-filled depression in the rock, about the size of a yellow dog, and proudly told me how he vividly remembered the day when it was he who discovered this very depression.

In the Maya language such water-holding holes in limestone bedrock is called a haltún. In Maya culture the haltún is important for the simple reason that when you're wandering in the forest and find one, you can drink its water. At least older Maya are still acutely aware that humans need unpolluted water, and that if drinkable water disappears, living becomes impossible. For older Maya like Don Philomeno, the haltún demands great respect. Don Philomeno spent

several minutes explaining to me the proper way to clean one and protect it, and I felt honored to be initiated in such a way into the mystical realm of the haltún.

I'm thinking about haltúnes nowadays because most days I pull up a few buckets of water from the 80-ft-deep well where Brittle Maidenhairs live, to keep each haltún in the area filled, and to water various saplings we want to bring through the current dry season.

Also I'm thinking about the haltún because if you want to see birds you can't do better than to position yourself nearby, and just watch the stream of species come in from the forest and settle there for a drink.

The haltún is a wonderful thing.

"DON"

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; March 17, 2007

I know that some of you wonder why so many men here have "Don" in their names. In this and the last Newsletter we've met Don Gonzalo, Don Tacho and Don Emerterio, plus you've heard about Don Juan and, if you remember the old Zorro movies, Don Diego.

The word "Don" reveals a lot about the very social, friendly, family-focused Latin culture. "Don" is a title like "Mister," except that it's more informal and friendly. To translate "Mister" you use the word Señor, but if you want to show a man that you feel friendly toward him, but at the same time wish to show him respect, then you use Don. It's a concept we simply don't have in English. In practice, any male beyond a certain age, no matter how scroungy he looks, if you

which to express friendliness and/or respect toward him, you call him Don.

Sometimes kids in the street who have no idea what my name is, but want to address me in a way that's both friendly and respectful, call me Don.

"Eh, Don. ¿Adonde va?"

By the way, the "¿" is required in Spanish the way I've used them. I love speaking, knowing that upside-down question marks are issuing from my mouth.

And while we're at it, "señor" is pronounced "sehn-YOR" and "jalapeño" is "hal-ah-PEN-yo." In Spanish "ñ" is a letter all by itself, not a variation of the letter "n," and it's pronounced "EN-yeh."

"THE BITE"

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, March 17, 2008

Every six months I must acquire a new tourist card in order to remain in Mexico. The last few times I renewed on the Texas/Mexico border but now I'm much closer to Guatemala than the US. Therefore, last Monday morning I took three microbuses and a taxi to the Guatemala border, taking two and a half hours.

On the Texas border if you have a US passport the Mexican customs agent just gives you your card. Down here, at customs in the Mexican border town of Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, I was told I couldn't have a tourist card until I got an exit stamp in my passport from Guatemala. So I entered Guatemala in order to leave. The Guatemalan officials told me I couldn't have an exit stamp until I'd been in the country for three days.

However, for 500 pesos, about US $50, they could arrange something special. When I indicated that I'd just camp nearby for three days I was shown that day's newspaper full of gory photos of bloody bodies from the previous day's shootings and stabbings, to make the point that getting to someplace safe and staying for three days would make a $50 investment seem like a good deal.

One printable name for bribes down here is "la mordida," which means "the bite."

With a new six-month tourist-card I was back in Pujiltik by 2 PM that same day, having NOT paid $50, but being unable to say publicly how it was arranged.

HAPPINESS

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, March 24, 2008

Last Monday after issuing the Newsletter from Pujiltik and buying fruit at the market I was hiking up the dirt trail to 28 de Junio, the sunlight stinging and the heat heavy. A fellow stepped from a sliver of shade below a sugarcane wall, proposing to accompany me awhile just to chat.

He'd spent some time harvesting tomatoes in Florida so he knew a bit about the US and he came up with a thought I've often played with: That, relatively speaking, life is much harder here but somehow people here, on the average, seem happier than up there. To make his point he told me how delicious it'd be when he reached home in a few minutes and could sit beneath a shadetree with his shirt unbuttoned enjoying a few breezes and, since it was Easter Week, maybe he'd even splurge and split a beer with his brother-in-law.

"And some tortillas and some chili, ¡chiiiiiin-GA... !" he said with an ain't-life-wonderful tone of voice.

THE BEEKEEPER'S SMILE

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; March 28, 2010

With the arrival of the dry season, Maya beekeepers acquire a new chore: They must keep troughs next to their hives filled with water. Often the hives lie well away from any road, so deep in the forest you meet these beekeepers trudging down trails bent beneath large, heavy plastic containers of water sloshing on their backs, held in place by tumplines around their foreheads.

I find that beekeepers in general are smarter, better educated and more philosophical people than average. Moreover, there's something else about them that until recently I haven't been able to put into words. That matter deals with a certain bittersweet disposition most of them seem to have, often expressed with a sad-seeming smile.

I think the basic smile arises from experiencing firsthand the bounty and richness of Nature. Why wouldn't one smile who spends his time gathering honey from forest and fields, who everyday beholds the mysteries of honeybee lives, who habitually sees golden honey transluced by sunlight, and who tells just by tasting whether a honey mostly comes from mango or acacia flowers?

And yet, these smiles are never exuberant or even long lasting. Always a certain air of sadness shades them.

Maybe it's because nowadays few young people show interest in such demanding work that pays so little. Maybe it's because

ecosystems that once produced honey bounteously now produce much less, or because the honey they produce now lacks the delicate and nuanced flavors its once had. Maybe the greatest loss of all, however, is that nowadays few of a beekeeper's customers can recognize an exceptional honey when they taste it, the new notion simply being "the sweeter the better."

So, these old beekeepers keep plodding the forest trails, bent beneath their heavy loads, ever quick to flash a little smile if they meet you, but never eager to spend much time talking, and seldom smiling for more than a flicker. And somehow this beekeeper persona strikes me as a model I can admire.

UP BIG-CROSS HILL

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, March 31, 2008

On the horizon there's a mountain I've always assumed to be of volcanic origin but until I visited it this week I wasn't sure. This week, as I ascended the hill, with my handlens I looked at the first freshly exposed rock surface I could find and there they were: sandgrain-size crystals of quartz and mica, but no calcite. This rock started out as molten magma, not marly sludge at the bottom of an ocean. In this landscape with almost entirely sedimentary limestone bedrock, I was climbing an old volcano composed of igneous rock.

Locally the hill is called Cerro de Cruz Grande, or Big-Cross Hill. The town of Venustiano Carranza occupies its lower, southern ridge. I was ascending it because most of the families of 28 de Junio come from Venustiana Carranza, some consider the hill sacred, and they want it featured on their website. So last Monday Don Andrés, a member of the community, guided three international human rights observers and me to the top.

Ascending the slope, in various places you pass by four altars where you may burn incense and pray. The incense is made on the spot from resin issuing from machete wounds on the trunks of trees growing nearby. The trees are called Incenso or Copal, and are members of the genus Bursura of the Bursera Family. Where incense has been burned in a natural niche among boulders beside an altar, people leave offerings appropriate for what is being asked in their prayers. Someone had left an ear of corn, asking for a good harvest. Another left a plastic bag holding ballpoint pens, hoping for an education, or good grades. There were also bags of squash seeds, of beans, chili peppers, of weaving yarn and other items.

Toward the top it became cooler and a fine forest of widely spaced oak trees appeared. Don Andrés explained that people didn't cut firewood there because the hill was sacred. It looked a little wintry at the top because we're still in the dry season and most trees are leafless, which helps the trees avoid water loss.

Don Andrés wanted to continue to another peak about 20 minutes to the north, joined to ours by a sagging ridge. Since a car was waiting for us below I suggested that we'd already seen enough. However, Andrés insisted that the next peak was too special to ignore and that something important was going on there, so we went on. Midway the connecting ridge he stopped at a certain stone and said, "Beyond this stone no pregnant woman can pass, because the strength of the peak we are about to climb is so great that it would cause the baby to abort."

The second peak was pitted with holes dug by people looking for jewels.

"The ancients buried their dead here," Don Andrés explained. "Their jewels were buried with them. Sometimes in the night if you come here beams of light shoot out of the ground where treasures are hidden, but only certain people can see them, the ones the ancients are willing to give their riches to."

At the very top we were shown an incised rock slab.

"We found this here," Don Andrés said, pointing not far away. "The lines on it were full of mud and we could hardly make them out, so we cleaned them and chiseled them deeper, but we don't known what they mean."

I was asked to interpret it.

Years ago I studied Maya iconography a little so after awhile I had some ideas. Immediately below the cross at the top was what I regarded as a Quetzal headdress, the Quetzal being a sacred bird of the Maya, whose resplendent feathers only the royalty and high priests could wear. Below the Quetzal headdress I think the wavy lines represented water running away from the hill. Thus the hill wears the headdress. Since only those close to the Deity can wear such a headdress, I thought I understood:

"The stone says, 'This hill is sacred,'" I said.

Andrés was enormously pleased. And I was pleased, too, thinking that if the community knows how sacred the hill is, maybe they'll hold off a little longer cutting its wonderful oaks for firewood.

EMELIA'S BOUQUET

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; March 31, 2007

Last Sunday I explored dirt roads on the other side of town, going down little valleys and up scrubby slopes, past handsome orchards of orange and guava, and ramshackle, dusty ranchos sometimes not much more than a few cinderblocks topped with rusty corrugated tin sheets and with a hysterical dog tied at a post.

I happened to pass one such rancho just as a señora with two little boys was closing the gate. She held a big bouquet of violet-

blossomed Chinaberry flowers, Melia azedarach, and eyed me suspiciously. After exchanging "Buenos díases" I continued around the bend, saw that the road ended, turned around, and found the señora still standing there, not willing to leave the rancho with a gringo wandering in the neighborhood. When I got even with her again I said that her Chinaberry bouquet was pretty, and asked if she was going to grace her table with it. No, she was going to church, and it was for the Virgin.

She asked me the usual questions and when she figured out that I was harmless, a birdwatcher, as we walked together toward town she launched into a complicated story about how she loved doves, how once she'd fed the horses and dropped some grain, then doves came (certainly White-winged Doves) and she thought they were so pretty that she began throwing grain there every day and before long she had lots of pretty doves and that made her so happy and then one time her husband's friend came and asked about all those doves and said we ought to shoot and eat them but she said no, no they are too beautiful to kill and the man just laughed and said well do what you want but mole de paloma, or dove mole (pronounced MOHL-leh), sure is good, and she just shook her head no, no, nobody is going to kill those doves.

As she spoke, two Sharp-shinned Hawks, permanent residents here, circled above the valley sharply yelping KYEW-KYEW-KYEW! as if they were courting spring birds flying above a broomsedge field in Mississippi. Seeing the birds, the two little boys exploded with excitement and, though the birds flew much, much too high for them to ever hit, threw rocks at them, yelling that they'd almost got them, almost knocked them from the sky.

I asked Emelia, for that was her name, if I could photograph her pretty bouquet, to show my friends in the north where it was so cold and gray that here in Mexico we had pretty flowers. She hesitated, then handed me a single blossom and said to photograph that, but then she realized that that's not what I wanted, and at the same time I understood that she was embarrassed that she wasn't prettily

dressed, wearing a blue sweatshirt so stained that no amount of washing would ever make it look good, and after having two kids she was fat and lumpy. I was sorry that I'd asked, but then I saw her rearranging the leaves so that her bouquet looked better and she stuck out her arm as far from her body as possible and looked away grimacing saying take the picture now.

MAN CALLED CYPRESS

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; March 31, 2007

Back in town I had to cross the little river on a kind of metal suspension bridge of a type common in this area. You walk on metal plates and the whole thing sways, but both ends are well mounted in monumental concrete landings and the steel cables are very thick, so you feel safe.

I happened to arrive at the stairs up to the bridge at the same time as a mature, well-dressed man wearing a red-white-and-blue baseball cap reading AMERICA across it, and with a huge zipped bag slung across his back. He gave those steep steps a look that clearly said, "Maybe I can make it up you this time, but I'm not sure how many times I can do it again... "

He saw me behind him and quipped as we started across, "And now we'll see if this thing falls down." By the time we'd crossed we'd exchanged several jokes. He leaned up against the landing, found a support for his bag so he could stand there without straining, smiled and started asking the usual what's-a-gringo-like-you-doing-here-in-little-Jalpan questions. When it was his turn to talk, here's what I learned:

He made his living walking door to door in all the little towns in these mountains, selling clothing from the big bag on his back. On this Sunday morning, that was exactly what he had been doing in this barrio next to the river, and as kids crossed the bridge and passed us he showed how he knew the nickname of every one of them, and they all recognized him and spoke to him like an uncle.

He was a full-blooded Otomí Indian from a little village much higher up in the mountains, he spoke Otomí absolutely fluently but his children didn't speak a single word, feeling that "not speaking the language, they are someone of a certain social level, and it's a sad thing, Señor, yes a sad thing, for the Otomí language is beautiful, yes Señor, beautiful," and then he taught me some rough-sounding words for "good morning" and "where are you going" and "thank you," but the sounds were so unlike those of Indo-European languages that by the time I'd learned one phrase already I'd forgotten the last one, and he was just as inept at learning English.

He said his name was Sabino. "You mean, Sabino like the name of these big-trunked Mexican Cypresses around us here beside the river," I asked. Yes, he shared his name with those trees and would I please tell him what his name was in English.

"'Cypress,'" I said, "Your name is "Cypress," and what a fine name that is, a name of a kind I wish I had." He nodded and said that yes the name was a solid one and it even sounded good in English, and he wanted me to write it down. "Cypress," he said, "Cipreeeeee," already forgetting it, the sound already slipping away.

A WETBACK'S SIMPLE QUESTION

A story from the border town of Matamoros, Tamaulipas, issued in the Newsletter of March 31, 2007

At daybreak on Wednesday morning I was wandering streets around the bus station in Matamoros, waiting for my departure, when a man about 50 years old approached me.

"You speak Spanish?" he asked. "You live here? You crossing to The Other Side... ?"

He was finding it hard to ask me what he really wanted to know. Finally, after coughing, rubbing his face, looking around, coughing again, he put his hands in the air and said:

"I have to cross to find work on the Other Side, and I don't know how it's done. Can you tell me anything at all?"

He was from the southern Mexican state of Michoacán, an area so overpopulated and politically out of control (some refer to it as a narco-state) that the whole region has been on the verge of insurrection for years. I told him that it was easy to cross the river and go through holes in the fence, but then a few miles inside the US there's another line of customs control, and that's harder. You can try to go around stations and escape the constantly roving Border Patrol by going deep into the desert, but you can die there. In fact, unless you have friends helping on The Other Side, or you're smuggled professionally by "coyotes" you can trust, or someone has paid off a US border official (I'm surprised how many people have told me lately that that's how they get in), getting to where the jobs are is very dangerous, much harder than it used to be."

His face indicated that he'd heard the same from others, and had hoped I'd say something different.

Inside the bus station at Matamoros, where I overheard scraps of several conversations of people trying to get to The Other Side, the walls were hung with large posters aiming to dissuade people from crossing illegally. One picture showed a tight little band of folks about to wander into a hostile-looking, seemingly endless desert, each person carrying only a small bag and a plastic jug of water. In big letters at the top the poster asks "How far can you get on a jug of

water?" The words below say "Taking three days to cross through the desert can bring you to a fatal destination."

You don't really need to know what the words are saying in order to understand what's going on. The people's body language and the desert say it all.

Other posters show in gory detail people who have been abandoned by their "coyotes" and who died of exposure, women raped by their "coyotes," and drowned bodies.

THE WOOL WEAVER

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in Gualupita Yanhuitlalpan, Mexico State, probably sometime in 1995

From Toluca, about thirty miles west of Mexico City, I take an early bus eastward across the chilly, dusty valley floor, and after about twenty miles come to Tianguistengo, at an elevation of some 8,800 feet. On Tianguistengo's outskirts I ask to be let off at the road to Gualupita Yanhuitlalpan. After walking five minutes I enter a pretty little town with an ancient-looking church, a placid park, streets still deserted at 9 AM, and an inordinate number of tourist shops selling all kinds of brightly colored, 100%-wool, locally produced sweaters, ponchos, serapes, and other cold-weather clothing. I had expected this; Gualupita is known throughout Mexico for the woolen goods its artisans produce.

The whole landscape east of town tilts upward, eventually culminating at the summit of the volcanic mountain chain called the Cumbres de Ajusco, rising like a north/south-running wall between Toluca and Mexico City. Sheep have grazed the slopes around Gualupita for centuries, bestowing their wool on Gualupita's weavers, but also causing a monumental ecological disaster; now

the vast slope lies barren and eroded, just rocks, dust, and closely cropped grass.

Gualupita is a town obsessed with weaving wool. In a courtyard a woman quietly sits beneath a pepper tree fashioning a lacy ribbon, surely to be added later as the ornamental fringe of a poncho or serape. At the next house the bitter odor of cooking dye wafts onto the sidewalk. At the next, a loom's wooden parts systematically knock against one another.

In the courtyard of the next house I ask an old man doing something with a pile of serapes in the shade of a splotchy-barked eucalyptus tree if he will talk with me about his life of working in wool. He declines, but says his neighbor is one of the town's best weavers, and he is somebody who talks to people like me. I am directed down the street to a small wooden door in an adobe wall along the sidewalk. I rap, the door opens into a lovely courtyard, and am greeted as if I had been expected.

Señor Fidel Nava Medina, looking in his late fifties, at this very moment has ended his breakfast and is leaving for his day's work. I am invited to accompany him across the street, where he unlocks and opens a roll-up, corrugated steel door. Inside a room maybe fifteen feet by ten, a large, wooden hand-loom spares little space for anything but itself. Sr. Nava slides onto a wooden stool behind the loom, his back assumes a certain comfortable looking curvature, and his hands automatically reach for the shuttle. He begins mechanically passing the shuttle with its weft through the warp threads; the pass finished, he firms up the new weft by moving the comb forward. As the big loom passes through its maneuvers, it makes the wood-on-wood sounds I've been hearing from dozens of houses this morning. The movements and sounds seem to mesmerize Sr. Nava. After a lengthy period of work, he suddenly stops, looks at me, smiles, and says that we can talk as he weaves.

"I've worked in wool for about fifty years," he says in an almost gentle voice. "Yo fui bien joven cuando aprendí -- I was really young when I learned. And when I began, my older brother already knew

the work, so it was he who transmitted to all us brothers the teaching. He had learned it all from a good friend... yes, a very good friend. But my brother died in 1952."

The memory of his brother's death throws a shadow across Sr. Nava's face, and a deep furrow across his forehead. But he keeps talking, explaining that right now the piece coming to life in his loom is a mañanita para señoras, a woman's pretty little thing, something traditional for which the Spanish had no name, so today the original Aztec word is used; it's a quexquémitl, something like a poncho with a hole in the middle for the head, but made to be worn with the sharp corners descending in front and back.

"Most people in this town work in wool," he confirms. "But, basically, there are just three families doing the most important work. We make serapes, torinas, mantles, capes, ponchos, all kinds of things, and of course we all have the maximum of pride in what we do. I've been in Oaxaca, I've been in Querétaro, and I've been in museums where they displayed handicraft like ours, and they had some good things, but there was never anything to compare with what we produce. It's always simpler than what we produce here in Gualupita."

I ask him if he does more than work at the loom -- if he knows the entire process of turning raw wool into beautiful textiles.

"What a joke it would be if I didn't understand the whole process," he laughs. "The carding, the thread-making, the dying, the weaving, the marketing, we must know how to do it all. We have neighbors with sheep, so we buy their wool, and do everything needed to turn the wool into our goods."

I ask about the origin of designs he weaves into his creations.

"Some are our own, but others we borrowed from the great masters who don't weave any more, and maybe a few come from others in this town who know as much or more than we do of this art."

Does he use natural dyes?

"Some people do use natural dyes," he says. "Natural colors aren't as bright as those produced with industrial dyes, but they do last for the life of the material. And, well, the store-bought dyes we're using are permanent, too. Some of our dyes are made in Germany. Look, here's a picture of a cape that's forty-five years old, and its colors are just as good today as when new."

Where are the woven items sold?

"Some are sold around here, but it's more common for us to sell wholesale, in bulk. That doesn't mean that you can find our work in any tourist store. There are only a few of us doing this work by hand; what's sold in stores is usually mass produced by machines, and that's simple work compared to ours. Our work is superior to factory work because the colors last longer and the material is finished better. The threads in commercial textiles are a lot more loosely woven than ours. Ours threads are very compact, so the material will last for twenty-five years or longer."

How can someone who is not an expert determine the quality of a woven product found in a tourist store?

"Mainly, look to see if the threads are woven compactly. Only a weaver paying attention to every thread can create a textile woven the way it ought to be. Beyond that, the most important thing is whether the dyes are fast."

But how can we know that?

"You just have to ask, and have faith in the clerk. You just have to hope that if the colors are likely to fade, the clerk will say, 'Well, frankly, we can't guarantee these colors.'"

How long does it take to weave these items?

"This quexquémitl I'm working on takes a week to finish. Others with more detail can take two weeks. This one will bring me U.S. $200 to $230, while the ones with lots of designs bring around $300. And

when I speak of weeks, I am referring to long days. Especially when we're behind in orders, I can work twelve to fifteen hours a day, or even more. There are times when I sleep only three hours a night."

Do the often-repeated motions needed for weaving damage the body?

"Besides tiring the arms and shoulders, this work produces dust that damages the lungs. When we make thread there's so much dust that we must wear masks."

Finally I wonder if Gualupita's wool-weaving tradition may be a disappearing art.

"Well, maybe this possibility exists. In our family we have two nieces studying how to do this work, but the other young people prefer book study -- they hope to work in offices instead of breaking their heads with this weaving. Yes, there's a real chance that when my brother and I die, and the other weavers in town die, the knowledge of how to produce this art will die out. This work is pretty, very pretty, but it is tiring, very tiring."

THE GOAT HERDER

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; April 7, 2007

Between Cuatro Palos and Bucareli, it's uninhabited, almost. There's a little rancho about halfway and a miner's hut, and that's it. About half an hour before reaching the rancho we encountered the goat herder. It was a young woman. We'd been hearing her songs echoing through the valley an hour before we saw her, a kind of high-voice singing you only hear among people used to being alone nearly all the time, with towering slopes all around. I've heard it in

similar valleys in the Andes of Peru and Ecuador, and in the Alps of Austria and Switzerland.

When we saw her, she looked like all the others I've seen, wearing bright red, coarse clothing, with dark skin from all the sunlight, sitting on a rock in a manner that gave the impression that she'd been rooted there for ages, somehow channeling a never-ending song from the Earth itself into the Sky.

She was a cousin of Chucho and Vicente, who were cousins themselves, but they exchanged no words, in the manner of people used to being isolated, who think it's enough to look and understand, and to be seen and let your own appearance convey. I said "Buenas días" but she just looked at me, maybe the first gringo she'd ever seen, maybe not knowing what to say to someone like me, or maybe living in a space where greetings mean nothing.

But, we'd heard her singing, so we knew her, and she'd seen us coming a long way off, the boys sailing and me groping. Anything else said at that point would have been superfluous.

THE MINER

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; April 7, 2007

The trail went right through a little rancho, which consisted of one house and several out-buildings and goat pens, surrounded by lots of maguey and Nopal cactus. The rancho was about three hours of hard hiking one-way to the nearest settlement, and if you wanted to buy something beyond the merest necessities, another hour in the back of a truck to the small town of Pinal de Amoles. One guesses that these people eat a lot of cactus fruits and pads, drank pulque

from maguey, and eat goat meat. I saw just one man, a boy, and I heard women inside the building patting tortillas into shape.

The rancher was an uncle to Chucho and Vicente, and I thought I'd left the boys there for good. However, once I was on the trail again about 15 minutes, here the boys came running up behind me, obviously convinced that I'd die immediately without their guidance, though I don't think they'd ever been this far themselves.

They accompanied me another hour or so, until we reached a hut with a small garden and some goats. A man and woman probably in their 40s lived there, at first very wary, but then very friendly. Here I finally left Chucho and Vicente for good, but 15 minutes after heading off toward Bucareli alone, up behind me came the miner, also apparently convinced that left alone I'd die. No amount of talking could convince him that an experienced hiker can survive even in a land he doesn't know.

"We're in pure desert here," he said, sweeping his arms to take in the towering gray slopes all around us. "We're all alone here and if something happens you're just on your own. At night, what loneliness, just you, the stars and the owls. And who would think that someday a gringo like you would come walking right through here?"

The man said he was a miner: "Mercury, but also silver and gold. These hills are full of it. You should see the rocks in my house... !"

But then you could see in his face the thought that maybe he shouldn't be sharing such details with a randomly encountered outsider.

"But of course I have no means to work it. I just see it and it stays there, untouched.... "

He explained beautifully the rest of my trip, every right and left, and went with me in an arroyo bed until he could point out the very trail up the next ridge I was to take. For a man with such hardness in his face he emitted an uncommon measure of warmth and gentleness,

seeming to be surrounded by a sweet, peach-color aura as he explained to me in a soft voice every step of the way from there to Bucarelli -- a round pool of green water, with a horizontal pipe across it, here you take the trail to the right up the slope, cross the ridge, then down that slope into another arroyo, follow it about 90 minutes, then it meets the river with ankle-deep water... "

At the small pool of water with a pipe across it I found the trail, which was little more than a wildlife trail heading upslope, and I followed it across the razorback ridge, then down the other side, and on a peninsula of land extending into the valley I erected my tent. My camp area was surrounded by flowering Tree Cactus. Several times before sunset a female Broad-billed Hummingbird came visiting.

Atop this narrow peninsula of land jutting into the valley the two other conspicuous bird species were the many White-winged Doves who cooed prettily at dusk, and the Violet-green Swallows who one at a time swooped above my tent so close that their wings made sharp cutting sounds in the air.

WASP NEST, BIRD DROPPINGS, & DOCTORING TOADS

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, April 7, 2008

Friday, Andrés and I were hiking the reserve's perimeter when he pointed out a "panal," a large wasp's nest whose wasps are famous for killing people. Andrés swears that swarms of that particular kind of wasp will chase you five kilometers and the only way you can escape them is by diving below the water. The wasps, large black ones easily seen from below, strike terror in people's hearts here.

"Therefore all the bird droppings around us," said Andrés.

I didn't follow.

"Birds know to overnight near these panales," he explained. "They know the wasps will protect them."

Well, it was true: The ground all around the base of the tree holding the wasp nest was uncommonly white-spotted with bird doo. I'm not sure about Andrés' explanation, but the droppings were irrefutable.

Andrés revealed a lot to me on that hike. For example, that toads put animals back together once someone has hacked them apart with a machete.

"You cut the snake or whatever to pieces and you leave it on the ground," he said. "Then in the night toads come, they lick and lick the body parts, gradually the parts are shoved together and they fuse, and by dawn the animal is alive again, gets up and goes home. It's as if I cut myself with my machete, my compañeros come and carry me to the clinic in town, and I'm healed. Toads are Nature's doctors, the compañeros of wild animals. The only way you can really kill a snake with a machete is if you cut a thick, solid stake, sharpen it, and drive it through the snake's body, pegging it to the ground. This discourages those toads who come to help in the night... "

HOT, DRY AFTERNOON WINDS

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, April 7, 2008

As I type this at 3 PM on a typical afternoon in the community of 28 de Junio the temperature stands at 97° (36° C). The only sounds are an old hen clucking nervously two houses away, tinny poppings my tin roof makes when it's sunny, and wind up from the valley shaking

my roof sheets on their supports. The sky is a shiny silveriness, bluer overhead, almost white at the horizon.

To our north clouds gather around bluish highland peaks. Sometimes by now the peaks are obscured by white rain but today it's just white, billowy thunderheads overhead, but here there's only been two or three dust-settling showers since I arrived in January.

April is the hottest, hardest-to-deal-with month. It's the end of the dry season when everything is so brittle and brown that the landscape almost looks dead. Heat builds day after day as the sun's path irresistibly rises higher and higher into the noon sky. Maybe in late April or early May we'll have our first big storm.

"After that first storm, it gets worse," Don Bartolomé assures me, his shirtless, dark-red torso shining with sweat. "After the first aguacero the heat works with the rain's humidity and it gets harder and harder on us. But then the second storm comes, usually a bigger one, and finally things start cooling down."

By July and August, from about ten AM each morning, it'll be so cloudy that the sun won't heat things up so much. In October and November there may be days and days of almost continual rain, and then it'll be cooler. Everything will be green and mud will be smeared everywhere.

I asked Don Bartolomé whether storms come from the north, off the Gulf of Mexico 175 miles away, (280 kms) or from the south, off the Pacific 75 miles away, (120 kms).

"When I was a child, big rains with cool winds came up from the south," he said. "But now nearly all our rains come from the north. Everything has changed. On the average, it's much hotter now, not as many pleasant days as there used to be."

OUR ELECTRICITY GOES OUT

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, April 7, 2008

Last Tuesday morning I returned to my casita with a camera full of pictures for this week's Newsletter. When I set up my laptop, however, the electricity was off. We'd been expecting this. The previous week a man had come from the power company to cut the community's line because no one here pays. The man climbed a pole to unhook us but when three fellows from the community began walking toward him with machetes he got into his truck and left. The men had been going to cut sugarcane. Who knows what the lineman thought? Anyway, we continued getting our electricity. At least, until Tuesday morning.

I'm told that around here none of the Zapotista communities pay for electricity and few isolated settlements like ours do. Maybe officials think it's cheaper and nicer to provide free electricity to villages where families may have only a lightbulb, than to deal with a general insurrection because of the high costs of basics. Like so much in this part of the world, things just drift along ambiguously, occasionally reaching a flashpoint that may or may not change something.

One change that came about instantly Tuesday morning was in my own head. Suddenly I saw how my own relevance here depended on a very slender strand of wire strung across the sugarcane fields.

However, late that afternoon the power flickered back on, so the scare turned out to be a false alarm.

CUTTING BANANA LEAVES

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, April 14, 2008

Banana trees are good for more than fibers and bananas. The other day Andrés took me along to cut banana leaves whose blades later would be fashioned into flat squares in which tamales would be wrapped for steaming.

Arriving at the plantation Andrés removed from his side-bag a short, curved, steel blade with the cutting edge on the inside curve. This he fitted onto a long pole, and then he proceeded to cut banana leaves. It was a simple operation of positioning a banana-leaf petiole inside the curved blade, and jerking downward. The six-foot leaf would then flutter to the ground.

Once he'd cut about twenty leaves he began gathering dry leaf-clutter from beneath trees and piling it into a heap. "It's too cold, so we need a fire," he joked in the 97° heat. We'd just been joined by our friend Pancho, who'd come to cut bananas for his family, and he, lying on the ground watching us, laughed so hard he had to hold his stomach. Then Andrés set fire to the dry leaf-trash and began passing the banana leaves through the flames, scorching them.

Andrés knew I didn't understand why he was doing this but he didn't offer a word. Instead, after he'd finished he cut a small square of unfired banana leaf and crumpled it in his hand. It was so brittle that it crunched and tore. Then he cut a similar square of a fired leaf, crumpled it, and it made no sound, didn't tear, but behaved like a moist cloth. All was clear.

Pancho found the notion that a big, smart gringo such as myself wouldn't know all this simple stuff so funny that once again he broke into hysterics, actually rolling on the ground. Though in our community, unlike so many others in the area, drunkenness isn't a problem, I thought that Pancho surely was drunk. But, no, later I could see that he was just happy to lie on the ground in the shade with a good breeze blowing, watching his friends work as he poked good-natured fun at them. The man was simply happy!

Andrés began cutting the leaves' flat side-blades from their stiff midribs while I folded the resulting sheets per his instructions. Several time Andrés asked, "It's interesting stuff, isn't it Jim?" and I'd say yes, and Pancho would laugh even harder than the last time.

Sunday morning Andrés brought me some tamales wrapped in our banana leaf sections. Tamales are pillow-like packages of cooked corn stuffed with various ingredients. Mine were filled with a bean/tomato mix and wrapped in spicy leaves of Piper auritum, sometimes called Hoja Santa but here called Mu-mu. Then the Mu-mu package was wrapped in sheets of our banana leaves. During steaming the green Mu-mu leaf softens and blends with the corn package so I just bit through the Mu-mu as if it weren't there. The tamale was delicious and the Mu-mu flavor added a nice spiciness.

SIESTA

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; April 17, 2011

I think every day this week the early-afternoon temperature in the shade at the hut's door rose to over 100° (38°C). The humidity wasn't too high, though, so if you kept in the shade and didn't move around much it wasn't bad. In fact, since I jog well before dawn and spend an hour or two each morning shoveling out a hole for a septic pit, by the time it's that hot I'm ready for a brief snooze, and when I lie down it's actually very pleasant.

A breeze passes through the hut, blowing right between the wall poles, and the wind's sound soughing through the surrounding trees and rustling the roof's thatch is very soothing. Birds are relatively subdued, but still a few manage to call, especially doves with their moody, monotonal oooooooohs. When it's that hot you sweat all the time, but evaporation cools you off, and somehow it feels good when

the body reaches its sweat/evaporation equilibrium. Just lie there in the dim hut feeling the soft breeze, listening to the peaceful sounds, letting the mind drift...

But, of course, it's not that simple. I'm a gringo who came of age in conservative rural Kentucky where people were expected to work, not take Mexican siestas. During my early afternoon siestas I always feel a little guilty. Childhood programming is hard to undo, and if a genetic component against afternoon siestas comes with my blue eyes, that's hard to overcome, too.

One way I deal with the guilt is to ask myself just who decided for everyone that people are supposed to work eight-hour days, from nine to five, or thereabouts? Who decided that departing from "normal workaday schedules" was lazy, antisocial, and maybe even sinful?

Also, I keep in mind that my Northern culture not only sniffs at afternoon siestas, but also builds suburbs without sidewalks, and when houses go up, first the developer cuts all the shade trees, then ignores building orientation with regard to natural cooling in the summer, and solar heating in the winter. Nowadays up north even windows are sealed and can't be opened if a pleasant spring breeze is blowing.

Thinking like this, I nod off, in defiance, if nothing else. Then in a few minutes I awaken amazingly refreshed for such a brief rest. Maybe a dried leaf scraping in the wind against the hut's outside wall will have awakened me, or the soft chuckle of a robin calling from deep shade, or the little-feet-on-loose-dry-bark sound of a fly-chasing gecko scampering across the hut's pole walls.

And somehow I think it's a good trade. On the one hand I have to put up with the heat. But, on the other, I'm where no one blames you if you lie low during the day's hottest hours, and where a nice cooling breeze filters from shade trees all around, and passes right through your little hut's walls.

PARQUE EULOGIO ROSADO

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; April 18, 2010

Mérida in supposed to be very hot and glaringly sun-baked in April, so on Tuesday when I stepped from the porch of the Immigration Building into a cool drizzle it was something special. For the rest of the day showers came and went, stunning the town with unexpected cool freshness, with shimmering, silvery reflections instead of stark shadows, and a kind of overall pastel softness instead of the usual rambunctious commercial garishness.

In sprawling Mercado San Benito at a little sidewalk eatery I settled beneath a red table-umbrella with silvery water streaming over its edges and asked for my usual meal: Eggs scrambled with onion, tomato and chili pepper -- a la mexicana, as they say. The plate arrived not only with eggs but also refried beans, a nice salad and a stack of hot tortillas, for it all goes together here, just having scrambled eggs being quite impossible. Forty years ago the salad would have given me severe diarrhea for three days and nights but now my guts are so Mexicanized that I can eat anything with impunity.

When I paid, the middle-aged woman asked me how it'd tasted. I surprised myself by kissing the fingertips I'd held the tortillas with and crooning in English "Wonderful!" The robust, flat-faced lady flashed a smile like that of a child with a new puppy, and the friend she'd been gossiping with patted her on the back.

Nearby in tiny Parque Eulogio Rosado, so small it's not even on my tourist map, I found a bench that tree branches had kept relatively dry. Others hadn't taken the seat because overhead there cavorted an obstreperous flock of grating, popping, whistling and screeching

Great Tailed Grackles. Most people feared that if they sat there they'd be pooped on, but I was in the mood to take a chance, and in the end I got away in immaculate condition.

With bouncy, rhythmic music blasting from half a dozen colorful shops and stalls at the park's edge and a loudspeaker someplace droning on with a fellow hawking snake-oil good for everything from hemorrhoids to diabetes, an old Maya lady, fat, browned by the sun, wearing a lovely, traditional, white, flower-embroidered smock, or huipil, decided to take a chance on the grackles, too. She sat beside me, kicked off her shoes to reveal pink, puckered toes and soles, and spreading her toes and wiggling them in the cold drizzle moaned with such pleasure and smiled so that everyone all around smiled, too.

But, here's what interested me: That everyone in Parque Eulogio Rosado that day -- at least a hundred individuals -- was lavishly indulging in a kind of existential perfection seldom experienced by many people. Yet surely not one of those around me knew about the Six Miracles of Nature, nor did any carry in his or her head the image of the hand "casting dust into empty space, the dust proliferating, coming alive, blossoming into the Universe with all its dimensions, all its living things, more and more feelings and insights, and unseen currents of creativity... "

These folks worked hard, took siestas, produced babies, some drank too much, most ate too much, they belly-ached and laughed, fought and forgave, sometimes felt good and sometimes got depressed... and from my perspective beneath the bedrizzled grackle tree they presented a living tableau of nirvanic gorgeousness.

In cacophonous Parque Eulogio Rosado I saw the Taoist Yin-Yang Circle forming in the mist, the circle composed of black tadpole entering white tadpole, which itself enters the black one, black and white both marked in their hearts with their opposites, and it seemed to be saying this:

That life seeks understanding finally to understand that what was being sought had been at hand all along. Or, as St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) wrote, "All the way to Heaven is Heaven."

SOUR POZOL

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, April 21, 2008

Pozol (poh-ZOLL) is one of the most traditional of all indigenous American drinks. The basic recipe is to soak corn kernels overnight in water with a little quicklime in it, then grind the much-swollen and softened kernels to form a moist paste, called masa, stir the masa into water until a thin emulsion is created, maybe add a pinch of salt or sugar, and drink. Even today when backcountry Mexican farmers leave their villages for distant fields often they carry with them a handful of masa so they can make their midday pozol with springwater. Masa for first-class pozol may be flavored with ground-up cacao (chocolate) beans.

In 28 de Junio, pozol appears to be at the center of a certain tension between the old ways and the new ways. Traditionalists stick with pozol but the kids and modern folk insist on Coke and the rest.

In fact, our most dedicated traditionalists go a step further and insist that only a certain kind of pozol is best for you, and best tasting. It's called pozol agria, or sour pozol.

Sour pozol is made like the regular kind, except that the masa is allowed to rest for about three days before it's used. During this time microbial action imparts to it a specific taste. The taste is of rancidness, like milk that's been left out a couple of days.

Sour pozol's presence in the culture is easy to explain: Microbial action on the resting masa makes available certain vitamins and other nutrients not found in regular pozol, or found in much smaller amounts. Somehow once upon a time Maya culture became aware that sour pozol, despite its awful taste, nourishes the body better than the non-sour kind. It's an amazing example of a people sensing more than knowing that a less-pleasurable path was better for them than other options, and they chose the less-pleasurable, more sustainable.

The other day I was at Don Andrés' house in Carranza and was offered pozol. He presented me with a sizable plastic bowl of it. It was at room temperature and the ground-corn emulsion was reddish because the corn it had been made from was of the traditional blue, almost black, kind. And its taste was sharp.

After I'd drunk most of it Andrés placed a large, empty, plastic Coke bottle before me, made in Mexico but bearing the English words "Super Big." "Pozol is better than this stuff, right Jim?"

With kids standing all around waiting for my reply I had a flashback: Back in the 1950s, my family's tobacco fields in Kentucky, hoeing all day in the heat and humidity, sweat, dust, boredom, nothing but tobacco, corn, soybeans, the swamp, little woodlots for as far as the eye could see, and then up at the little general store late in the afternoon if my father felt generous the shear delight of an ice-cold, sparkling, syrupy-sweet 5-cent Coke.

And now today on this dusty, fractured, trashy, overcrowded, cacophonous slope, this rancid-milk pozol being compared to a Super Big Coke... ? It was a moment of truth in that family's cultural conflict and I had to pronounce one way or another.

But, this matter of taste is a tricky thing. For example, have you ever eaten so much rich food that for days you lost your taste for it? Maybe you decided to fast awhile, and then once you did start nibbling, instead of eating something sweet or creamy maybe you chose something simple, like a carrot stick. Remember how

surprisingly good that simple thing tasted, how its straightforward flavor somehow cleansed your palate, gave you a sense of starting over anew, maybe even cleared your mind? Suddenly you were Spartan, you had control of yourself, you had a vision of something better you could be... That carrot stick's simple, wholesome taste was good because it made you feel good.

I think sour pozol serves the carrot-stick function in traditional indigenous American cultures. It tastes "good" in the sense that people not only recognize its nutritional value but also, at least on a subliminal level, they associate sour pozol with their own cultural continuity, family cohesion, harmony, and hope.

"Sour pozol tastes better than Coke," I declared unequivocally.

WALKING PAST THE CONVENT

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; April 21, 2007

Several times I've mentioned the Mission de Santiago de Jalpan -- the big cathedral downtown -- and placed links to pictures showing its impressive facade and tower. This is a different place from the Santa Rita de Casia Convent on the north side of town about a quarter of a mile upslope. I've often seen the large, rock-wall-surrounded, white, barracks-like building from across the valley, so last Sunday I went to take a look at it.

I wasn't sure whether the convent was a ruin or still operational. When I saw the one-lane gravel road with weeds between its two tracks leading up to the building I began thinking it might be a ruin. However, as I ascended the road I saw that all the downslope-facing windows of the two-story building were hung with heavy white drapes, and some of those drapes were twisted at their bases in

such a way as to form what looked suspiciously like peepholes. When I passed by the convent's open front gate I saw that the building's front was very well maintained with a narrow lawn landscaped with handsome plants. It reminded me of an elegant, expensive hotel built in the colonial style.

When I heard echoic, monotonic chanting coming from within I knew that this convent was the real thing. Having read books such as Humberto Eco's "The Name of the Rose" I could just imagine the big building's shadowy interior ambiance, even though not a hundred yards downslope on that Sunday morning a young man in a dump truck was noisily unloading a pile of rocks. The truck was equipped with a sound system blasting Spanish hip-hop.

In a broad swath above the convent the slope's scrub had been cut and a trail led to a structure at the top. There I found the dried-up remains of a bouquet of bright flowers occupying an alcove on the right, while one on the left held a flickering candle with rocks piled before the flame as shelter against the wind. From the altar I enjoyed an aerial view of the convent below and was surprised to see that, far from being a ruin, the building was being enlarged with a whole new wing.

When I descended the road an hour later I fleetingly saw a nun dressed all in white except for a black head covering, or veil. The chanting continued, but all the peepholes had disappeared.

I was curious about the nun's all-white habit with a black veil. On the Internet I found a kind of "nun fieldguide" in the form of a website selling dolls dressed in the habits of nuns of many orders. Apparently the all-white habit with a black veil is typical of various Dominican orders.

Santa Rita de Casia is the patron saint of impossibilities.

FIVE HAIKUS FROM LAST WEDNESDAY

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, April 28, 2008

Breakfast campfire stew,

Swallows swooping all around:

They like silent smoke.

His ears being scratched,

Donkey's loose-hung lower lip

Trembles without words.

Afternoon whirlwinds

Can scatter scrub-hung laundry

Like thoughts when it's hot.

Woop-woop-woop-woop-woop

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl

Woop-woop-woop-woop-woop

Before the Moonrise,

Shimmering cricket chimes with

Thunderless lightning.

THE RAINY SEASON APPROACHES

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, April 28, 2008

Nowadays during most late afternoons, storms build over the highlands to our north, then as night falls there's a lot of thunder and lightning but usually no rain. Last Tuesday, however, a storm built right above us and we got the best rain for months, about a quarter of an inch.

It was a windy storm, too. Tin roofs blew off three homes in the village just below us. One sheet of tin severed the electrical wire serving both that community and us, so from Tuesday until Saturday we had no electricity in 28 de Junio.

On Friday a delegation of men from the community went to the power company asking for repairs but since no one pays for their electricity here the company declined help. Then the men went to a "pirate" who knew how to hook things up, and he restored power for everyone.

ALIVE ON THE BEACH

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo, May 1, 2010

At this new location you always hear waves breaking on the sand beach. In slow motion clouds come ashore, sometimes sharply defined, sometimes just vague curdles, but always moving, regrouping, coming and going. Nearly always a stiff breeze flows through the windows of my second-story room facing the sea.

Outside the window, always you see white-capped waves moving shoreward and, beneath the window, the tops of young palms and Tropical Almonds gyrating in wind. Walking along the beach, sand peppers your ankles, salt spray fogs your glasses and Frigatebirds float above you. Movement, movement, movement.

All that interminable movement affects the nervous system. It's not that it makes one nervous, but it does create in the spirit a kind of raw edginess. It's not unpleasant, but maybe it is a little intoxicating, even addictive. That's OK. It's OK like falling in love knowing that it'll all end soon. But, somehow you want, you need, the flowing, the churning, the blowing and breaking, the movement, even when you know about the hurt soon to come.

From experience I know that when finally I have to return far enough inland to not hear the surf, not feel wind off the water, where Frigatebirds don't hang in the sky, I'll feel some kind of void, an emptiness, the tragic end of something. Dumbly I'll sit or stand wondering what will take the place of all that obsessive, distracting agitation.

But, for now, I don't have to worry about that, for I'm in the midst of it all, addicted, obsessing, alive on the beach.

In fact, these days and nights, I do hereby exquisitely consciously and with utmost purpose declare my determination to exult in rawness of wind-blown wave-foam, edginess of Frigatebird silhouette in dazzling sky, do set forth my sweaty leg for windblown sand to stick to, do suck deeply this salty, fish-smelling wind and take it into me so hungrily and violently that it flaps my jowls and whistles down my throat into bottomless me.

Well, at some point on every beach walk you turn toward the ocean where it's deepest and there, long and long, you stand staring, so vividly alive.

That's where we're at right now.

LIVELY LITTLE TOWNS

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; May 2, 2010

Last Monday in Mérida, dealing with visa matters, I wandered for miles along little one-lane streets away from the main boulevards, and on the bus coming and going I looked closely at the little towns we passed through: Yokdzenot, Libre Unión, Holca, Kantunil, Hoctún, Tahmek...

One striking cultural difference between small-town Yucatán and small-town USA is that in Yucatán's villages small, locally based businesses still flourish. It's amazing how many tiny grocery stores, eateries, animal-food stores, hardware stores, barbershops, mechanics shops, etc. not only exist but seem to be doing a fair business. The Yucatán's villages buzz with activity day and night.

Riding the big, rumbling, orange and white Oriente bus on a hot Monday afternoon, the seats filled with sunburned old men wearing straw hats, women in white, floral-embroidered huipiles, young people chatting or listening to their iMacs, I asked myself this:

Did the vibrant, colorful, small-town America I knew as a child lose something of value when it changed to what it is today? If it did, was anything it got in return as valuable as what it lost?

EARTHWORMS & CUBANS

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in San Francisco Pujiltic, Chiapas, May 5, 2008

Cuba's development has had to progress along a path different from what it would have been if not for the US embargo that's been in effect for decades. The embargo restricted the machinery, spare parts, technology and the like that other countries had access to. One consequence is that today Cubans possess knowledge and experience with alternative technologies much needed in poorer parts of the developing world. Cuba now is the leading source of information and expertise with regard to tropical organic farming.

A while back a Cuban technician passed through this area teaching how to obtain high-quality fertilizer from earthworm farms. Now that a bag of urea costs about US $40 here and people simply no longer can afford it, they're desperate for cheap fertilizers. Using earthworm poop has captured people's imaginations. I'm told that Chiapas State Government is supporting the development of earthworm farms here. Already one is in operation down the road in Pujiltik, and a committee has been formed in 28 de Junio to start one here.

I've seen that worm poop is great stuff, high in nitrogen, but I wonder if enough can be generated for the big fields here. When I suggest that farmers return to mingling corn, beans, squash and amaranth greens the way their ancestors did, with nitrogen-fixing bacteria in nodules on bean roots providing the nitrogen, and traditional rotation providing food throughout the year, basically I get blank looks.

I know why: The traditional approach doesn't yield much cash for the money-based economy people have decided they want to participate in.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE DOG YELPED

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas, May 5, 2008

Last Wednesday during my campfire breakfast I witnessed the following:

A dog walked by a rooster. The rooster rushed at him, threatening a flogging. Maybe the rooster and that dog had a history. Whatever the deal, the dog yelped in surprise, then growled and the rooster retreated.

On the other side of the house a small pack of dogs heard the first dog's yelp. All the community's dogs had just gone through a typical night of unmerciful barking and howling so just hearing this yelp was enough to set that pack to barking again.

A third pack of dogs a couple of houses away heard both the yelp and subsequent barking, so here was proof of something big going on. They stampeded down the community's main thoroughfare kicking up dirt with their paws and howling, exactly as they do several times every night, when an owl hoots or bored dogs in the next community start barking.

The second pack saw the third pack stampeding toward them and decided that they were under attack for no reason at all.

Outraged, they tore into the attackers and pandemonium broke lose with unbelievable gnashing of teeth, snarling and howling.

Eventually they all limped off looking halfway outraged, halfway pleased with themselves. The fight had been such a normal occurrence that no human in the community seemed to have noticed, except me.

But I sat a long time eating my morning stew and thinking of all the trouble one grouchy rooster can cause.

HORSE RACES IN THE STREET

Written in the community of 28 de Junio and issued in Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas, May 5, 2008

I've had such trouble issuing Newsletters from cibers in Pujiltik that now I'm sending them from Venustiana Carranza, which is a little farther away but much larger and with better internet connections. Last Monday right after issuing the Newsletter there a Human Rights Observer from Germany and I were walking down the street toward the microbus meeting spot when two horses galloped lickety-split down the street ridden by young men resplendent in traditional Tzotzil costumes. After those two came another pair, then another, until about 20 racers had run the course. The end of the course happened to lie directly across from us.

The race was part of the celebrations going on last week, lasting nine days and ending May 3rd. After the races people congregated near the church and drank atole (roasted corn kernels and cacao finely ground and mixed with water to form a thin emulsion) from ceremonial jícaras, which are spherical, decoratively incised bowls made from gourdlike fruits of the Calabash Tree, Crescentia cujete.

Then the races were held again. At the end the best among the racers was chosen. I've seen ceremonies like this in other places, especially the Chiapas highlands and Guatemala, and always wondered how much of them was "real," and how much was staged for tourists. Last Monday it was clear: The German Observer and I were the only tourist-like people in town, and our main job was to stay out of the way. This was pure Tzotzil tradition manifesting itself, meant only for the homefolk. I almost felt obtrusive just being there.

Here at 28 de Junio each afternoon last week special prayer services took place in the little church, many flowers being bought to adorn alters, and many sizable rockets being set off exploding loudly in the sky.

Probably at no other time are differences in mindsets between us outsiders and the local people as apparent as during such celebrations. There's no question in the local people's minds about the need to spend what little money they have on flowers for altars, exploding rockets and feast foods. Visitors tend to envision other uses for the money.

THOSE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OBSERVERS

Written between San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico and Natchez, Mississippi, USA, and issued from the woods near Natchez, May 29, 2008

Several readers have asked about the International Human Rights Observers I've mentioned several times. They're stationed at 28 de Junio to dissuade aggression by people who want 28 de Junio and similar nearby indigenous communities to go away.

Last December two men in the community immediately below 28 de Junio were killed. People there assume that paramilitaries did it in order to destabilize the community and cause people to move. Last August, I think it was, the Mexican Army entered 28 de Junio with 500 soldiers and a tank, supposedly suspecting that the community might be a rebel camp.

These actions do destabilize communities and do make families move away. In 28 de Junio the common response has been for women and children to move to nearby Venustiano Carranza. In most cases even the men have left and commute to 28 each day, or come only rarely. During the last couple of weeks a rumor has been spread systematically throughout the area that the local gringos (the observers and I) had been looting the tombs atop sacred Yelem

Chem, and inoculating local people with the AIDS virus. Most people didn't believe it, but some did.

During my months at 28 de Junio only a few low-grade but unmistakable intimidations were experienced. However, on the day I left the community the last group of observers also left, and no one came to replace them. Last Friday, soldiers of the Mexican Army entered 28 de Julio and surrounding settlements for what was called a routine maneuver. Of course this upset families and kept the level of tension high. Somehow these incursions always take place during rare occasions when observers are not present.

If you speak a little Spanish and would be interested in being an observer -- young and old people, and couples all have come during my stay -- drop me a line and I'll put you in contact with someone who will set you up. I'm pretty sure but not absolutely so that as a soon-to-leave official observer you'd never be in much danger. At roadblocks, soldiers are usually very thorough with local people but hardly make eye contact with foreigners. They're obviously under orders to give us no problems. It's harder to judge what the paramilitaries might do.

Observers receive an orientation, watch things during two weeks at their assigned stations, and then give a report. They are specifically told to not participate in community projects, and to remain absolutely apolitical while at their stations. The stations are usually like 28 de Junio, however -- too hot, too cold, too flea-bitten, too hard to take a bath in, etc. Indigenous folks have been pushed into the most marginal places, so this is to be expected.

Inform yourself before considering becoming an observer. Things are happening in backcountry Chiapas that I can't report in this Newsletter without chancing possible reprisal against innocent people. Lots of information is available on the Internet, however. Do some searches on "Chiapas human rights" and "Chiapas low intensity warfare."

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Written between San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico and Natchez, Mississippi, USA, and issued from the woods near Natchez, May 29, 2008

On the morning of Wednesday, May 21st, I hitched a ride from 28 de Junio to San Cristóbal de Las Casas in the Chiapas highlands. At an elevation of 6,888 feet (2099 m), San Cristóbal's 68° F (20° C) felt as chilly as I remember 38° feeling in other times. I lost a bit of weight back in 28, so maybe that was part of it.

Until a traveler from California told me, I'd not realized that on the day I'd been planning to cross into the US the US would be celebrating Memorial Day weekend. Traveling Greyhound at that time would have been a horror, so I ended up spending four days and nights in San Cristóbal -- having plenty of time for long walks and writing in my little $5/night room. It wasn't a bad time at all. It was a ceremony appropriate for ending one chapter of my life and beginning another.

San Cristóbal was settled in 1528 by troops sent there by the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Hernando Cortés. The AAA Guide says, "The city center's narrow streets were designed for carriages rather than cars. Old houses with grilled windows give it a look that is stylistically Spanish, although the atmosphere is definitely Indian."

San Cristóbal's sidewalks aren't wide enough for two people to pass on without at least one person going sideways. Also, they're so broken up that you have to pay attention to your feet or you'll trip. But sometimes you can glance to the side just long enough to see through a door or portico a view that couldn't be in greater contrast with the gaudy, dusty, decaying walls facing the street.

There are lush courtyards with statues and artful grillwork, there are hallways with shiny wooden floors on which old women in impossibly intricately-woven black shawls sit looking back at you, balconies

from which cascade great tangles of exotic vines, there are caged parrots and flowering orchids, everywhere unbelievable elegance, and cafés catering to the young and cheek-pierced issuing the unmistakable odor of smoked marijuana. Of course also there are mediocre views and tawdry ones as well but somehow they just highlight the dazzling ones.

But of course you can't just stand there and gawk, blocking traffic, and you have to study your next step or you'll fall. You keep moving and as you move your memory bank of images grows ever more kaleidoscopic, the whole experience becoming more astonishing and stunning as you go.

And look at people's faces along the streets: Young Indian mothers with babies on their backs looking absolutely stunned and hopeless, young Indian men wide-eyed and exultant, the thought on their faces clearly that since they've made it this far, as far as San Cristóbal, the sky is really the limit. Beggars, peddlers of amber, Brazilian gold spread on towels along the sidewalk next to heaps of mangos and peaches, and so, so many sidewalk heaps of textiles with that zigzagging and geometric black and red stitchery so emblematic of Mesoamerican indigenousness, often sold by Tzotzil-speaking women knowing only their numbers in Spanish.

YUCATÁN'S RAINY SEASON

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo, May 29, 2010

As a kid on the Kentucky farm I thought of being someplace in the tropics with a rainy season about to break as about the most exotic and desired experience I could imagine. Kipling had taught me how rainy seasons arrive in Indian villages. There'd be weeks and weeks of debilitating heat and humidity, a sky's blinding, silvery glare, a

community's stunned quietness and an awful tension preceding the first thunder clap... Then, the downpour, the first cool air in months, streets and fields awash, kids, dogs and wide-eyed cattle ecstatic, old men in streets, their trouser legs rolled up, sipping hot tea in cold rain and laughing through toothless gums.

For years that mental image of a breaking Indian monsoon was so deeply rooted in my mind that I had to experience several rainy seasons here before it occurred to me that our rainy seasons aren't like what Kipling described.

Our rainy seasons begin and end more gradually, beginning about now and reaching a peak of frequency and severity in September or thereabouts, and then piddling out by late November or so. Hurricane and almost-hurricane storm systems also peak during the rainy season, in their own way making rainy seasons rainier.

Yucatán's rainy-season afternoon storms -- at least those in the interior -- are caused by the land growing frightfully hot from the sun shining almost directly down from above. All that solar energy dumped into a humid atmosphere creates enormous convection currents of unstable air that start curling around like big cats with increasingly upset tempers. These currents gather strength until they gurgle up through the landscape's steam and sweat like bubbles in cooking gravy. With such heat, humidity and unruly rushing air at play, rainstorms just happen.

But, that's what happens in the Peninsula's interior. Here on the Yucatán coast perpetually blessed with much cooler ocean air, something else is happening. I've already seen several storms develop inland and at sea, while we remained dry here. I'll have to watch things here a while longer before I can figure out how coastal Yucatán's weather works.

THE BASKET WEAVER

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in Juárez Market in Oaxaca, Oaxaca, probably sometime in 1995

In Oaxaca, through Mercado Juárez's open portal doors, I spot a young Indian woman, maybe twenty-five years of age, sitting next to a large pile of polychrome straw baskets, fashioning a basket with her fingers.

This is Francisca García Peralta, from San Luis Amatlán, Oaxaca, a small Indian village in the mountains six miles northeast of Miahuatlán, which by road lies about sixty miles south of Oaxaca City. Since Indian women in this area sometime only understand their native language, at first I speak very slow and simple Spanish with Francisca, but immediately I hear that she speaks Spanish much better than I. In fact, her quick wit, humor, and self confidence are very impressive. She's fun to talk to, and before long we're laughing and kidding one another like best friends. Francisca's charming personality keeps you from noticing how badly her eyes are crossed.

"My whole village makes straw baskets," Francisca begins, never pausing with her work. "I began weaving baskets when I was ten. Like everyone else, my grandparents taught me everything, not just how to weave fibers together with my fingers, but also all the designs. You get these designs in your head, and then they're ready to go here on the baskets. You just figure out which design you want to work with and then you do it. There are many, many designs in my head -- all those you see here before us, and many others. And they all have names. There's the pescadito (little fish), the paragua (umbrella), the carritos (little carts), the llave (key), the cohete (rocket), the platillo (saucer), the tres palmas (three palms), the redecilla (small net), the cadenita (little chain), and of course there's the cruz (cross). There are so many. When we say these names to one another, everything is clear, we understand everything."

I remark that it must be wonderful knowing so much about something, to know "tan mucho, mucho... " but before I end with my

second "mucho" she chimes in laughing "tan poco, poco... " -- "so little, so little... "

I ask if there's a danger that in her village this ancient knowledge will be lost because young people leave for the cities to work in stores and offices.

"No chance!" she shoots back. "That's because our young people never can study. We don't know letters. We haven't gone to school. We were... well, we are poor. That's why we make baskets. We don't go to work in offices and stores because we don't know how to. Well, that's it. That's why we're here with these baskets."

Francisca's face has become troubled. She takes a deep breath, forces a smile, and launches onto a different subject.

"The straw we use comes from a kind of tree, a palm, that grows in a town called Sola de Vega. We buy straw by the pinca. It's ten pincas, twenty, thirty pincas, until 100 pincas, and that costs U.S. $6.67; 100 pincas is $6.67. For a basket we need maybe seven or eight pincas. Then there's dyeing. We get the water boiling, put in the dye powder, add the palm, stir with a paddle, and then it's dyed. The dye is bought in a store, and we don't know where it comes from. Just that it's awfully expensive. A tiny soup-spoon of it costs U.S. $1.67, so if we want two colors, that's $3.33! And if you want yellow, or rose color, that's $5.00. If you want blue, it's $5.00, if it's green, $6.66. So, you see, with the cost of straw and dye, and then transporting the baskets all the way from San Luis to here, it becomes a lot of money."

"On top of that, it takes so much time," Francisca continues. "This little canister here (one foot tall polychrome, with top), you begin today and you end tomorrow. That big one there needs three days. You begin today, then there's tomorrow, and then, sometime the next day, you end. It takes time because it's by hand. That's the truth. Because, you have to worry with the design, get all the weaving right, and finish it so that it stays together."

"But then the people don't want to pay us much money. This little canister took a day to make but it only brings two and a half dollars, and that big one five to six dollars. Yes, as little as five dollars for three days of work. That's because, if we ask for over six dollars, people come, they look, and they don't take anything. It's because they don't understand how much work is involved. They just say, 'Oh, six dollars is very expensive,' and they walk away. They just don't know what it costs to make these, and how much time it takes. Well, then here we are, not knowing how to do any other kind of work... "

I ask if weaving baskets tires the body.

"Yes, and when we work all day long, our hands, our entire arms and shoulders, how they burn. And then if we go bathe in cold water, what awful cramps we get. But we take care of our hands, and when they burn, we wrap them in warm, moist rags, and never use cold water on them."

NOTES ON THE MAYA LANGUAGE

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; June 6, 2010

I've learned enough Maya to exchange pleasantries with my friends. As such, I've developed some general impressions about the language you might enjoy knowing about.

My Maya friends are fond of saying that Maya is more like English or German than Spanish. What they're referring to is that in Spanish a preponderance of words end in soft vowel sounds, especially a, e, i and o, and you seldom hear the hard fricatives and stops of English and German. Maya does have those hard sounds, however.

The other day I was watching tadpoles with my friend Santos, who asked me what a frog is called in English. In Spanish it's "rana," a name a little girl would give her imaginary, pink-winged fairy godmother. When I told Santos it was "frog," after not speaking English for days, that word "frog" sounded so harsh and alien to both of us that as soon as the word was out we both had to laugh. But, in Maya, a frog is a "mutsh," which is just about as harsh sounding.

An important feature of spoken Maya is that, like French, a lot of words are contracted. Also like French, certain letters, especially the l at the end of a syllable, are dropped in speech. I've often thought that word contraction and the dropping of letters in French help make that language sound pretty and elegant to many ears, by smoothing it out. I suspect it's the same with Maya, though with the Maya my guess is that the thrust has been toward making the language sound dignified, not pretty and elegant.

For me one of the most disconcerting features of Maya is that certain pairs of letters in many words are basically interchangeable. The most conspicuous habitual letter exchange is between the n and m when they occur inside a word or end it. When I'm teaching English, my students are likely to call the moon the moom and the thumb a thun. In their minds it's completely irrelevant whether a word ends in an m or an n. They also habitually exchange the c and k, the a and o, the a and u, and the o and u.

In Maya there's no word for "yes." If you ask someone if it's raining, the reply will be a rephrasing of the question. If you ask "Is it raining?" the reply may be "It is raining," but there's just no way to say "yes" unless you slip into Spanish. Maya seems to be a language assuming that you have the time and will to spell out your replies. Maybe it also reflects a society that enjoys the details of everyday life so that it doesn't mind repeating what's said about them.

In fact, there's a certain feeling to Maya that to me evokes oriental philosophy. For example, each morning when my friends greet me with a "good morning," they say "Bix a bel," which literally means

"How is your road?" A formal reply is "Hach toh in uol," which literally means "Very straight my spirit." An "evil doer" is a "lob u bel," or "bad his road." To be undecided is to be "ca ye ol," or "two-pointed spirit." To contemplate something you "nen ol," or "mirror spirit" it.

Habitually referring to their "road," the Maya at least rhetorically conceive of themselves as on a journey which, in an evolving Universe, we all are. By regularly referring to one's spirit, the role of spirituality in one's life is recognized, at least a little. Of course the Maya no more think of themselves as being on a spiritual journey when they speak everyday Maya than we really hope that the person we meet is having a good morning when we say to them "Good morning." Still, Maya consistently refers to people's "roads" and "spirits," while our Western languages don't, so there's something to think about there.

Maya strikes me as a profoundly more complex, richer and nuanced language than Spanish, maybe even more so than English and German. It's a shame that most young Maya are opting for Spanish with all those fleet-footed little words so predictably ending in a and o.

MOON CAMP

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; June 9, 2007

Last Saturday afternoon was awfully hot and I'd just finished a three-hour workshop teaching kids from a mountain village how to use computers. All that week I'd wrestled with computer code, setting up a program for the Reserve. My brain hurt and I knew exactly where I wanted to sleep that night.

I strapped on my backpack and headed to a windy point jutting into the reservoir where I pegged my tent with an open view of the sky. My tent has a netting roof so stars are visible when you lie inside. The Moon would be full that night. It made me feel better just thinking of lying in that tent late in the night, cool, crisp wind off the lake rippling my tent's walls, and that full moon lighting up my tent like a globe.

I fell asleep before nightfall came. Early in the night Pauraques awoke me calling hoarsely. The Moon still wasn't up but just edging over an eastern peak a light glimmered so brightly I had to look with binoculars to make sure it wasn't a bonfire or a car's headlights. It was Jupiter shining with a magnitude of -2.6, my computer's astronomy program told me later. With celestial magnitudes, the smaller the number, the brighter the object. The brightest of all stars, Sirius, has a magnitude of -1.47, so with -2.6 Jupiter was really putting on a show, much brighter than any star.

The next time I awoke the Moon was right overhead. I'd slept through its rising. The wind had stopped blowing and even the Pauraques were silent. A light overcast coagulated above me and the night was turning out heavy and muggy, not crisp and cool the way I'd hoped.

Well, we're on the very eve of the rainy season here so it's supposed to be hot and muggy. Most folks say the rains are late this year, as they were last year, but Don Gonzalo says we still have a May Moon, so it can't rain.

I lay in the tent sweating, remembering how as a kid I'd read Kipling's books about life in India, and how the days leading up to the monsoonal rainy season always had been hard ones, but when the cloudburst finally came the relief was exquisite. Thinking about the coming rainy season, of hearing raindrops on my casita and tent roofs, I drifted off again, content with the night's heavy, broody feeling.

When I awoke next it was morning. Clay-colored Robins sang and somehow I felt as good as if it'd been a cool, crisp night in a windy, moony tent.

ENRIQUE'S JUNGLE

Excerpt from Jim's online "Yerba Buena,Word-Snapshots from a Missionary Clinic In Southern Mexico's Indian Territory," just north of Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas, written sometime in 1988

On a Sunday morning my ten-year-old friend Enrique (one of Doña Lilia's nephews from a distant village) guides me downslope from Yerba Buena, to Linda Vista School, where we've been invited to hear the band practice. It's all downhill through thick forest in which pines and sweetgum trees are dominant. Each schoolday morning Enrique and his pals descend this steep, dirt footpath. Each day around noon they ascend it.

"There's a game we play each day," relates Enrique, his eyes shining with pleasure. "When you fall, then from now on, that's your terreno, and then later every time you pass by it, you have to pay. No, not money, just something. A rock, a stick, a feather. Look here, this rock we're going over has seven terrenos around it. Three belong to Nancy, two to José, two to Juan, and this spot, here, that's mine... "

Spots on the earth invisible to me are important landmarks to Enrique. Passing by one of his terrenos farther downslope, almost angrily he kicks a rock poking from the ground; earning that terreno must have hurt, or maybe the fall had been especially embarrassing.

"Ay, you stand there, to one side," he requests, using the formal or polite form of the Spanish word for "you." He climbs back up the slope about twenty feet, gets a running start, and then leaps from atop a particular limestone rock I hadn't noticed.

"Not as good as last Thursday," he decides, shaking his head after landing and appraising his distance traveled. "Last Thursday, ayyyyyyy, I just kept going, coming down real slow."

Near the slope's base a thicket of pepper-shrubs is cleared away to provide access to two forty-foot-long vines hanging like limber ropes from the top of a tall pine. The vines have been cut where they enter the ground so that now they can be swung on. Kids climb onto a fallen tree just upslope, then swing on the vines in an arc maybe thirty feet long. At the far end during their ride, they're about fifteen feet above the pepper-shrubs below them.

"Yeah, it's dangerous," laughs Enrique. "Once I fell right there in the bushes and everyone laughed, though I hurt a lot. But, when you're swinging, you go down for a while, maybe with your feet dragging on the ground, and then you go up and up, and then you just hang there out over the bushes, and that's scary. Then you start coming back down, and you have to figure out how you're going to stop yourself, for there's nothing here to grab on to. That's when it gets funny... "

And just thinking about all the sloppy landings he's seen, now Enrique runs on down toward Linda Vista, laughing almost as if someone were tickling him.

HARD TO HIDE AS A GUAVA

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; June 15, 2007

I'm reading a Mexican novel in which the characters speak down-home Spanish. "Hard to hide as a guava" is one colorful expression I've run across. Of course every Mexican knows why a guava is so hard to hide: Because of its powerful odor.

The other day Don Ereberto gave me a bag of guavas he'd bought at the market, shared with his friends, and now didn't want any more. It was late and I wasn't hungry, so I stored the bag on my desk. About midnight I had to get up and put the bag outside because the odor was so penetrating I just couldn't stand it.

It's one of those odors that at first strikes you as delicious and perfumy, with only a slightly musky undercurrent. But as time passes the muskiness takes over, grows heavy, smothers with its insistent fragrance, and I am sure there must be pheromones involved working at the subconscious level. The odor of ripe guava is too like the voluptuous love affair that reaches unimagined fulfillment and then deep in the bosom of a certain languid, exhausted night this question arises: Now what? Heavy, heavy, even suffocating, and I put those guavas outside where the night air could carry their fragrance someplace else.

BEACH JAZZLET

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo, June 19, 2011

The key: Early morning, showers offshore, on the beach just breezy enough to keep the mosquitoes down, high tide.

The tempo: Small, nervous, indecisive waves washing among rocks maybe every eight seconds.

Instrumentation: Wind-thump in ears, wave sloshes between rocks, constant breaker roar from offshore reef, woodpecker tapping on dead palm trunk.

Theme: The sun rising among slate-gray, tall-clustering cumuli, a thin layer of whitish, scaly altocumuli above them, pale blue sky above

that, and then the sea leaden at a distance, green-blue nearer, transparent at my feet, thus double themes trending toward ever greater clarity, except, at me, non-understanding, non-analysis, all stimuli filtering through getting confused and lost in passage.

Melody: A single white gull, silent, sailing up the beach, ever so slowly, gazing onto the line below of ankle-deep golden Sargasso washed ashore with a single green and red watermelon rind from someone's boat, the passing gull not noticing me, soloing on up the beach, then gone, as if never there, the empty sky and me on a rock, me.

Accompaniment: The process of increasingly whiter clouds with better delimited borders and sunlight increasingly hotter from a sun a little higher up; mid-session a 90-second rainbow beside a purple shower crosses the beach down below.

Improvisation #1: But, no metaphors, please, and no memories either, please, just rocks and clouds and waves and wind, please.

Improvisation #2: The sun, the wind, the salt spray toughens the skin, they say. But, that's only the skin, I say.

The end.

DISORGANIZED ZONE OF DISTURBANCE

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo, June 26, 2011

For over a week storms broke out all along the Nicaraguan Caribbean coast, but the system generating them never organized itself enough to be called a tropical depression, much less a tropical

storm. Forecasters dismissed it as a "disorganized zone of disturbance," explaining that it'd never amount to anything because of high upper-level windshear and low humidity toward the north. Eventually the disturbed zone drifted northwestward, toward us, and last weekend it moved across our area.

All day and night showers and downpours swept in off the water, and the next day and night, too. After so many look-alike perfect tropical days, what a change was all that wind-howling, those angry-acting waves, the raw chilliness in the wind whistling around corners, whirring among radio-tower wires, beating the big yellowish-green Coconut Palm fronds against windows, the windows themselves knocking against latches, and wind-driven rainwater bubbling beneath the frames, running down walls into shiny pools on tiled floors.

Two days and nights of agitation, of wetness and darkness, but it was all like the Bougainvilleas. I mean, in the subdued light, the Bougainvilleas' flowers exploded with eye-popping crimson heaving and slinging against the self-possessed chill greenness of everything else. I mean, when wind howls and thumps and screams, the call of a lone gull at sea is more plaintive than any other sound. I mean, when the sea rages and you walk along it exactly where the waves can't reach, and a crab is there in its den gazing out over the water, just like you, there's no other little brother as close to you as that crab in his den of cozy shifting sand.

So, "disorganized zones of disturbances" have their value, and I count myself as a connoisseur of them, if not one actually addicted to them. All evolutionary impulses root in disorganized disturbances. All rainbows, poesy and moving music start out as disorganized disturbances. In fact, I myself aspire to a permanent and glorified state of disorganized disturbance.

That, even though I know that all disorganized disturbances are almost by definition unstable, and unsustainable. For, ever so easily such a zone abandoning its Middle Path in favor of too much disturbance drifts into gratuitous destruction. Or, if it abandons its

Middle Path in favor of too much disorganization, it dissipates into deadening mediocrity.

But, how beautiful to be an eyeball on the beach as a "disorganized zone of disturbance" approaches, runs right over you, and heroically departs inland. How fine to be all ears when the howling commences, reveals itself as orchestrated genius, and then departs, diminuendo. How grand to be exactly here recognizing a "disorganized zone of disturbance" when I see it, and being ready to walk to the beach laughing to greet it.

AFTERNOON STORMS

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; June 27, 2010

The weather pattern these days feels like a Mahler symphony that goes on forever with such ponderous but beautiful and exactly right tones that even as the work oppresses with its heaviness and duration, it charms and pleases.

It's a typical rainy-season pattern beginning with a cloudless dawn, or with dense fog that as the sun comes up at first is chill and wet, but then as it begins feeling warmer minute by minute the fog starts glowing golden, and finally lifts to form dingy, fast-scudding coagulations scooting low above. Then when the fog is burned off there's the cloudless blue sky, and by ten AM you're wet with sweat, the sun awfully hot.

By that time usually a few white cumulus clouds hang in the sky, and hour by hour those clouds grow, pure white and billowy above but with slate gray bottoms, beautiful to look at in the ever darker-blue sky, and this also is when butterflies are flitting and I like to stand in the garden letting them drink the sweat on my back and arms.

Sometimes when a regular cloud passes overhead a few light raindrops fall and you wonder how rain could come from such a small, simple, isolated cloud. Lots of heat and humidity in the air, is the answer.

Despite that heat and humidity making it hard to move around, that's when I like to be out. The sheer, almost violent vigor of the moment is something I love, the way it beats down on you but you're able to stand there and face into the sky right toward the sun and keep looking at clouds and blueness and that sun there in the sky, God Herself at full throttle, almost able to hear the forest's photosynthesis, the processes of life their ommmmmmmmmmm all around, and your mere continuing presence there is prayer enough, if prayer be called for.

As hours pass, the clouds keep growing, and merge, and by two o'clock or so already you see where on the horizon storms are building, broad, dark-gray smudges like great bruises. By three o'clock distant thunder rumbles from one or more points on the horizon and by looking at which way the clouds are going you can halfway figure out whether on this day a storm will hit here.

Even when there's lots of thunder, nowadays the storms usually just skirt us, dropping enough rain to settle the dust but not enough to keep me from carrying water to the garden the next day. After the shower, or maybe nothing but lots of thunder, darkness and a bit of wind, it's much cooler, and it feels so good.

The concert is ended, the piece played to its end, the concert hall dark and empty.

With darkness I crawl beneath the mosquito net, and up where the thatch roof's steep sides form a peak, a firefly sits flashing again and again, even as lightning from the receding storm flickers between wall polls. The robins' day-long singing trails off, ending so slowly, diminuendo, and with such concentrated feeling that usually I can guess which note will be the very last note of all, the one note officially ending the day's chorus.

Black is the night, as the pygmy-owl calls, and crickets chime.

AMOOOOOOOOOOOR...

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo; July 3, 2011

Mid afternoon is when unnecessary matters go away and things that are left become most vividly themselves. By then morning's squalls from off the water have cleared out but late afternoon's big purple storms haven't formed yet, so above there's just simple blue sky and a few white clouds sailing by. A casual breeze halfheartedly twists Coconut Palm fronds back and forth, the mockingbird interrupts his singing with some scratching and looking around, and biting yellow flies hang hopelessly on the screen door. Nobody and nothing is fully awake, or really sleeping. Mid afternoon is just for being.

Down in the kitchen Fabiola has a certain CD she plays every day, again and again, some lady with a sharp voice that's both complaining and beseeching, the one word most frequently ending her phrases being "amor," or "love," and the word is sung strung out so that it hangs in the afternoon air like sticky saltspray, like the feeling that somehow we've gotten stuck in this exact time and place for too long, but, it's OK, kind of, no... yes... maybe... "amooooooooooor... "

And, why wouldn't the word "amor" be the very one right now holding this time and place together, this slender ridge of unstable sand pointing in opposite directions forever, the exalted, breedy ocean with its coral reef on one side, and horizon-to-horizon mangrove, just as exalted and breedy, on the other side, and in this in-between zone, same-charactered...

"Amooooooooooor... "?

What a curious sensation to vividly see plants and animals here on the beach intimately harmonizing with disembodied, shrill callings of a lady frantically complaining while beseeching on the theme of "amooooooooooor..."

What a curious sensation to recognize that the lady and her song, the song's sentiments and workings, and even the plastiky little CD player her words screech from are as much a part of irrepressibly evolving Nature as Sargasso heaped on the beach, Brown Pelicans winging by as I think these thoughts and, in fact, the very impulse that keeps me sitting here thinking, thinking, thinking.

What a curious sensation, pelicans and song, this mid-afternoon's mood and meanings, "amooooooooooor," alone on the beach.

ZEN SUFI HUT

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; July 4, 2010

Tropical Storm Alex passed over us last weekend so all day last Sunday it rained and was nice and cool. A friend agreed that hot tea sounded good and that she'd fix a pot of soup for supper if I'd tend the campfire. The topic of discussion was the question of what I, with my education, experience, and at age 62, am doing in a dirt-floored Maya hut with pole walls, staring in the face an old age without money.

But, it was a discussion with long intervals between words, so I put music on the computer, something to complement the sound of raindrops on the thatch roof, of robins singing in the rain, of the campfire crackling beside us.

It was a kind of meditation music, Zen in structure, the lone crystalline chime-tone suspended in space, its trailing, interrelating subtones and harmonics long-lasting, attended by random taps of dry wood on dry wood, the emptiness around the taps defining the shocking instance of each note itself, purifying it. I said:

The emptiness between this hut's dry wood wall-poles admits calls of frogs and robins from without. Those song-sounds are interrelating harmonics and subtones defining the shocking instance of my being here, and they purify me.

Then with campfire smoke drifting outside between the hut's pole walls, dispersing into wet greenness, there came Sufi music, music evoking the spiritual through dance. Hypnotically rhythmic dancing melodies easily and unendingly intertwining and unraveling, caressing and moving away, always there, more and more, but always letting go, the climax just beyond. I said:

My own dance of life, always simplifying, always intense, always letting go, has led me into this hut. My being here now is the music we hear as it is to us at this very moment, no past and no future, but is not its caressing and embrace and the dance itself a wondrous thing?

Soft, soft the night, without and within, the hut, the Sufi, the Zen.

A BIKE RIDE

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo; July 10, 2011

It's mid afternoon and a narrow lane of white sand and gravel leads south along the beach. Heavy sunlight, the gritty sound of bike tires on hard-packed gravel, glare and heat, the wind and I flowing

southward at the same pace so I don't feel this wind, just see it making waves and shaking grassblades and leaves, a moving, invisible thing that touches, like music, like me.

On the left there's blue ocean, sand and washed-up-trash, on the right, wild mangrove and, all down the coast, gringo winter homes, patches of strand scrub with Seagrapes and Beach Lavender, little coconut plantations, scalped or weedy real-estate lots, Mexican ranchos and fisherman shacks, and on the road there's the sense of going for the going, not for getting anywhere, and I'm glad I'm the one in that mental groove, glad to be a self-improvising theme in Mexican afternoon beach jazz.

Double-bass thunder rumbles behind me but I've already seen the big cloud with its dark bottom. It's passing to the north, though, so my eyes stay fixed ahead, not going to undo this mood, and I like the idea of storms moving around me as I navigate where I've never biked before, and maybe it'd feel good to get wet.

Waves splash not twenty feet away, nervous little curls of dusty, coolish breezes stir, electricity in the air, good how the body and bike just keep going, snare drum wave-splash clickity-click chain on gears.

It gets darker and lightning strikes close, flash and thunder sforzando disharmonious with gauzy, glossy gliding-with-the-wind-red-1965-Chevy-convertible feeling. But, keep it simple, eyes straight in front, bluesy saxophone in my head, the thunder stops and it doesn't even start to rain.

I'm biking a big circle so an hour or two later I'm headed back north chasing the big storm that's been acting up behind me. Now it's bruised blue, silent and spent. Now there's a headwind and I'm sweating hard, skin flushed red and hot, in the air pin-pricks of icy drizzle all that's left of the storm, big old brassy easy-gliding trombone dying away amid teeny little piccolo chirps.

Here it's been raining hard, odor of wetted dust and alternating pools of hot fog and dead chill, glasses fogging up, quickly clearing then fogging again, vegetation fresh-washed glossy green, birds and their after-the-rain calls and for awhile I rest beside a pond held in sepulchral chill dumbly staring at white waterlily flowers so perfectly formed and brightly gorgeous my mind can't digest them, can't right now admit such frozen elegance into my personal little storm of sweaty forward movement, something like a lonely strain of Debussy in a John Coltrane set that's gotten turned into a Sousa march.

Back at Marcia's, it's been a real downpour, and I missed the whole thing, saxophone, sweat and waterlilies.

SUNDAY MEAL AT A MOUNTAIN RANCHO

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; July 13, 2007

We returned from the cave hike in mid afternoon, hot, sweaty, dirty and dog-tired. We plopped into chairs, some handmade from whittled wood, others all-plastic lawn chairs, others of similar miscellaneous sorts, and were served sweet agua de melón, or blended water and melon, the melon tasting like cantaloupe. A delicious breeze blew among our shadowy figures beneath the tin roof set atop rough poles. Roosters crowed, dogs scratched

themselves and chased pebbles thrown for them, several soft, musical conversations took place, and we were served a meal set on two picnic tables placed end to end.

My meal consisted of melon-water, hot, freshly baked corn tortillas, quartered avocados in a bowl, and a white bowl filled with soupy beans and scrambled eggs. the eggs fixed with onions, tomatoes and hot peppers. White queso ranchero, or ranch-cheese was available for crumbling into the soup.

In the table's center lay a bag of small plastic spoons but I noticed that Pancho and his family didn't bother with them, so I didn't either. They tore their tortillas into sections, adroitly folded the sections into scoops with which they scooped up beans and eggs, and did so without their fingers touching anything but the tortillas. My efforts to make tortilla scoops with one hand the way the family did was a source of hilarity for all. At meal's end I'd learned the technique but I'd splattered the whole area with bean juice.

In Mexico corn tortillas are gradually being replaced by more expensive, less tasty and far less nutritious wheat-flour tortillas, the wheat imported from the US. When I asked Pancho why this was so he said that people go to the US to work, see people up there eating white bread, and return here wanting to eat wheat, not corn.

HORSEFLIES & RACHMANINOV

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; July 18, 2010

Whistling "As Time Goes By" from the old Humphrey Bogart movie Casablanca I enter the dirt-floored hut, summon Rachmaninov's Cello Sonata Opus 19 onto the computer, bring her picture onto the screen and mix myself a stiff pozol, the Maya drink of water and

cornflour. I stare at her as the robins' singings just beyond the pole walls mingle with earnest cello and piano. A horsefly drawn by the light lands on the computer screen right atop her lovely ear and as afternoon thunder rumbles deeply on a purple horizon and Rachmaninov's melodies keep knotting up and disentangling I sit sweating and gazing, the odor of mildew drifting up from stained and tattered shorts, and the looming storm's first lightning flickering between the hut's pole walls.

What a thing to be alive and to feel all this, and even to be ready for more once Bogart and Rachmaninov have had their say, the chilly rain has run the horseflies off and the odor of mildew is replaced by the fragrance of the forest's wet herbage and the mud around the hut. I am alive, and memories of this woman haven't killed me yet, and after the rain there will be swallows in the sky and maybe a few rays of sunlight before sunset, and frogs croaking, and maybe then it'll be Bach and Mississippi Leadbelly singing the blues, me lying there inside the mosquito net on raw cedro boards smelling tragically and honestly of resin.

Alive, alive and yearning, not really worried about my time running out because anymore I'm not even sure time exists or that "I" am something apart from everything else with a beginning and an end, just alive, feeling, looking around, soaking in, digesting, holding on, very, very alive.

Here's why I'm telling you all this: This kind of being alive I've come to only after a great deal of simplification and getting rid of stuff. In previous more cluttered, secure and comfortable lives I've tried living exquisitely but always distractions and the laziness that accrues to security and comfort kept me from it, took the edge off things, and of me.

Is the horsefly/Rachmaninov kind of living better than the coffee-maker, big-TV-on-wall one? Except that my style impacts the planetary biosphere much less destructively than a life in which consumption of goods and services is a main feature -- in which case it is indeed better in an important way -- I'd say no. That's

because I believe in diversity, so if others have different priorities and choose different living styles, that difference not only is to be respected, but cherished.

However, the world is hog-gung-ho awash with messages that we all must consume, consume, consume, and that's killing the planet. So here are words from a different world, one of biting horseflies, Rachmaninov, pozol and that goodbye woman with her gypsy dresses and two-toned eyes:

Simplify, simplify, simplify, then with what's left over, savor, savor, savor!

CANÍCULA

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; July 20, 2007

Two weeks ago our rainy season suddenly turned dry again. For about a week we went without a single good shower. I mentioned the matter to Don Gonzalo and he said things would change with the Canícula. Canícula was a new word, so I looked it up.

It turns out that there are as many opinions about what a Canícula is as there are how a burrito should be concocted. Don Gonzalo says that this year's Canícula began on July 15th and will run for 40 days more or less to the beginning of September. The person who wrote the Spanish Wikipedia page about Canículas says it begins on July 20th and lasts until August 25th. Other sources suggest other dates.

Everyone seems to agree on this, however: The Canícula occurs -- at least in the Northern Hemisphere -- during the hottest, rainiest part of the year. Vegetation is lusher then, the bites of insects and reptiles are most venomous, skin wounds are most likely to fester, and

people are most likely to get sick. That's how most people here think of the Canícula -- simply as the rainy period when natural things, especially those which can cause trouble, get more intense than usual.

I like Don Gonzalo's beginning date for the Canícula because on that date of July 15th, for the second and final time this year, the Sun passed directly above Jalpan. You'll remember from my May 26th Newsletter that on May 26th the Sun's ecliptic passed directly above Jalpan as it moved northward to the Tropic of Cancer, which it reached on the Summer Solstice, June 21st. Now as the ecliptic moves back southward it passed over us again on July 15th, on its way to the Tropic of Capricorn, exactly above which it will stand on the next Winter Solstice.

The word Canícula has good roots. It's based on the constellation name Canis Major: Canis --> Canícula. During the Canícula the Sun is in conjunction with Canis Major, which means that the Sun looks like it's passing among the stars constituting Canis Major. We can't see the stars because the Sun is so bright, but people who plot astronomical charts know what constellation the Sun is in even if they can't see the stars around it.

Also, the Latin name for the star we call Sirius, or the Dog Star, is Canicula.

By the way, on the day Don Gonzalo said was the first day of the Canícula, a downpour restarted our rainy season just as he'd said it would, and it's rained every night since then.

THE ROBINS FALL SILENT

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; July 25, 2010

I've mentioned how for months the Clay-colored Robins' pre-dawn to after-dusk, ever varying, sometimes echoic or chiming song-phrases filtered through my hut's pole walls, their notes mingling with music played on my computer, and with my own whistling. For months these songs created a shimmering musical ocean engulfing my hut-ship, texturing everything I did, thought and felt. Sometimes I've felt like an incidental little melody merely wandering through this monumental, effervescing rainbow of sound.

This week, the robins' nesting season over, the singing has ended. A few calls linger here and there, especially their special mewing at dusk, but there's no doubt that the grand performance is over. Melodious Blackbirds have become the most conspicuous callers with their liquid but relatively mechanical WHEE-choo, WHEE-choo, WHEE-choos, but, it's not the same.

At least while the robins sang I was smart enough to know that something magical was going on. I took pains to listen closely every day, and to be thankful. I said to a friend in the darkened hut one evening just after dusk, "Listen to the robins, for you'll never hear anything like this again, and you'll never feel as keenly and lovingly about a robin's song and a night's darkness as we're feeling about them here, right now... "

Already that night I was filled with a powerful longing for the robins' song cycle to begin over again, in fact for everything happening those days to start all over so I could concentrate on every detail and fleeting nuance of statement and deed with even greater intensity than I had up until then. But, of course, even if it had started over, I'm always too much of a blockhead to fully grasp and hold what's being offered. And now, finally, it really has ended.

Just how do you deal with losing something as grand and majestic as all that?

Sometimes my Maya shaman friend José tells me about his dreams, like the one where he saw four bright and different-colored pyramids floating in the sky, and at breakfast as we scoop chilied bean paste

into our folded tortillas he tells me about the Mayas' cycles within cycles and how the cycles are immutable, but the plants and animals populating the cycles have their own paths, sometimes giving the illusion that the cycles are broken, but that's what it is, illusion, and we humans must conduct appropriate ceremonies and live correctly for the cycles to cycle most beautifully, and then I see that he already knows what I'm learning like a baby for the first time, about the cycles, the cycles within cycles, their beauty and eternalness and the attention they deserve, and require, if we are to live honorably and be sane.

So, that's how I cope with losing the robins' songs. The robins' song cycle will return again next spring, even if I am not here. Meanwhile, there's the cycle of which the rainy season is part, crescendoing to its most effusive, violent expression in September, after which it'll trail off through November or so, and its rebirth will mesh with the robins' returning song cycle, the singing coming with the rain. Plus there are cycles in the garden, in the forest, cycles of migrating birds in the sky, and of ceremonies that must be attended, and cycles within myself, cycles of lucidness, of creativity, of yearning and of dreaming.

"DON'T PLANT SQUASH & CUCUMBERS IN JUNE & JULY"

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; August 1, 2010

Luis, the new man hired to plant the traditional Maya cornfield, or milpa, next to the organic garden, is turning out to be a mine of information. At age 35 he carries in his head the knowledge and beliefs every milpa-growing Maya needs. I told him how I'd lost all my cucumber vines and squash to worms.

"You don't plant cucumbers and squash in June and July," he said. "Too many worms."

Well, yes, I had to admit...

"Starting in August you can plant them, when there are fewer worms."

Cucumbers, squash and watermelons are all in the same plant family, thus might be equally vulnerable to caterpillars, so how come he's been sowing watermelons in July?

"They wanted me to sow watermelons so I did. I just don't know if they'll survive or not."

Then I confirmed my suspicion that things like lettuce and onions shouldn't be planted now during the rainy season. And that my tomatoes' fungal disease is normal for tomato plants living in these hot, rainy times. One should plant tomatoes when it's drier, and use local seeds, which form small plants but produce a lot.

Finally, now I've learned that one reason I've been unable to get locally produced seeds is that tradition dictates that you don't sell seeds. You give them away or trade them for something.

Step by step we're getting things together. Just takes time.

THE WOMEN OF SANTO TOMÁS

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in the Merced Market, Mexico City, DF, probably sometime in 1995

At 2:45, happily expecting a refreshing storm, I find myself on Santo Tomás between Carretones and A. Gurrión, right across the Anillo from the Merced's main entrance. A crowd of people stand in the

narrow, one-way street, so something special must be going on, and I go over to see what's up.

Between 150 and 200 men, maybe eighty percent in their twenties, form a long oval ring about 200 feet long, wedged between the walls of the narrow street; thus flattened, the ring crosses the street in two places. Most men lean against walls, with curious looks on their faces. Inside the ring, about twenty prostitutes walk counterclockwise, prancing as if in a beauty pageant. One woman, smiling vivaciously, coyly approaches a young man, walks her fingers up his chest, tugs at his collar, rubs his groin area, and says something. A middle-age fellow stands just outside the oval, so I walk up and ask what's going on. He looks at me unbelievably.

"Business," he finally replies.

"Well, they're prostitutes," I continue, "but I've never seen anything like this. Is this some kind of ceremony?"

"No, man," he laughs, "the girls are just drumming up business. They're trying to get the boys' attention, get them excited"

"Why don't they just go stand along the street?" I ask.

"Well, it's specialization," the man says. "Here it's faster, but cheaper. The average price out there is US $12.50, you go to a hotel room, and it takes a little time. Here, they ask US $8.33, you go into that little room over there, get about five minutes, and then it's over. Hey why don't you show a little spirit and get one yourself? You're a gringo, you can afford it."

"I worry about AIDS."

"Oh, we all use condoms; it's OK. That's no good, but for such a low price we just use condoms and exercise our fantasies. So, go get one, anímate!"

"I'm in love with a woman I don't want to betray," I say, and this stops his urging. After a while he continues:

"It's a hell of a lot of money, isn't it? You can see how many are using that room, and I can tell you that half the money goes to the organizers as soon as you walk in. I've been there. I know. And this is just one place where this goes on, and it goes on every day like this, every day... "

He tells me of five other streets in the general mercado area where the same event takes place daily. Each location has its own specialty. In one, the girls are expensive but you get more attention, in another they are especially pretty, and in another they know special ways to treat you.

"It's the economic situation," he sums up, getting a philosophical tone in his voice "There are more girls every day, you see it, more and more every day. And they're getting more aggressive, and cheaper. Over on the Reforma, it goes on round-the-clock. One shift goes to sleep, another comes onto duty. Anything you want."

Without thunder or wind, a cold rain begins falling. The crowd breaks up. We scatter and black water with garbage floating in it pools against the curb.

3 + 4 = 7

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; August 1, 2010

My friend José the shaman came to show the hut I live in to a writer from New Zealand. I'd expected the usual spiel about how each pole in the house is the trunk of a specific tree species chosen for a specific structural purpose, but this time José was in mystic mode

and began by pointing out the Maya woman's presence in the hut as exhibited by triangles -- the woman's number being three, which taken together form a triangle. He pointed to the triangle formed by three limestone rocks upon which the comal rests as tortillas are baked, and the triangle above the comal created by the big beam joining the walls and the two other beams above it forming the roof's crest.

"The feminine three complements the male four," José continued, pointing out the four strong posts upon which the whole roof rests, which also represent the four directions toward which offerings must be made, and then we saw that in the hut's structure there were many triangles and many quadrangles.

"And three plus four equals seven," José smiled, as if he were a magician successfully pulling a rabbit from his hat. "Seven represents the family," and then he went doubling, multiplying and dividing threes, fours and sevens until all the seasons and the entire cosmos and all life in it revealed themselves as rooted in and governed by those numbers, all pretty self-evident, when you hear José talk about it. In fact, as we left the house he spoke of the seven illnesses:

"We are all born with the seven illnesses inside us," he reminded us, "but they lie latent and only express themselves when things drift out of balance, as by eating or drinking unwisely."

At dusk I sat in the hut, my head swimming in threes, fours and sevens, trying to put myself into the mind of untold generations of Maya men and women in similar homes, similarly cocooned in numbers that define and either fulfill or sabotage us. And how would it be to manfully be all the fullness of a four-cornered square, to support and wrap around the feminine three-cornered triangle as this hut wraps around 3 + 4 for its magical sevenness?

THE FOUR POINTS OF BEING A MAYA MAN

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; August 8, 2010

Last week I mentioned the Maya belief explained to me by José the shaman that Maya women are associated with the number three while Maya men are associated with the number four. This week I asked José, "Why three and four... ?"

The three points about Maya women, I learned, are that they are born, they bring forth life, and they die.

The four points about Maya men are that they are born, they take charge, they listen to and learn from Nature, and they die.

Though many up North would find this thinking unacceptably sexist -- I personally believe that with today's realities women are better equipped by genetic predisposition to "take charge" than men -- I was blown away by the notion that one of the four things Maya men are supposed to do is to listen to and learn from Nature.

I asked José how this listening works. He looked at me as if I'd asked how a dog barks and then explained:

"You go into the fields, into the forests, you listen, and things talk with you... "

José had told me before about plants and animals talking to people, as when that mysterious little snake sometimes curls on a limb beside a trail speaking human words. Plus there are aluxob (ah-LOOSH-OHB, the "ob" being the plural suffix for the singular "alux"), or fairylike beings, who are guardians of specific parcels of land such as cornfields, and must be kept happy with offerings if the land is to

prosper, and those aluxob certainly speak if they want. However, this wasn't the kind of Nature-talking José was referring to.

The communication just comes into one who listens, like a feeling or sensation, José said.

When asked what plants and animals talk about, José said that they say we must respect and protect Nature.

TENTING

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo; August 8, 2011

The other night I pegged my tent on the beach not far from the northern rocky point, about ten feet from the waves. As I put the tent together, stiff wind off the water kept ballooning the walls out, dragging me into a downwind Icaco bush. Pegs stuck in the loose sand hardly held at all. Weighing down the tent's corners with driftwood, eventually it got built.

The moment I pulled myself inside the tent I knew it'd been worth the effort. Here in the tropics it's hard to ever feel "snug," but sitting cross-legged gazing through the netting of the tent's entrance, a wave of peaceful snugness swept over me.

It was dusk and out over the Caribbean seven well defined thunderheads lined up on the horizon, all drifting shoreward, and most had lightning flashing below them. Waves broke right before me, white foam rushing up to the door. The tent's nylon sides flapped explosively in roaring wind. Cozily cocooned inside the tent, the world around me seemed to tingle with a sense of anxious expectation.

Once it got dark, the fast-cooling air flickering with electricity, I laid back on the tent floor. Sand beneath the floor was hot from a whole day's glaring sunshine. As dark, chill, wet air washed around and through the tent, my body seemed to float atop a solid, glowing bed of shimmering heat.

Suspended between the air's chill, impersonal commotion and the Earth's own warm, nurturing radiations I reflected that the sand's heat was stored-up solar energy, yes, but also the seven approaching storms similarly were packets of solar energy poetically releasing their energy as rushing air, rain and lightning.

In fact, there inside the tent between two dancing vocabularies of energy transfer, it grew clear that I myself was a transient expression conjured by something aiming to facilitate energy flow: For me, it's food-energy in, then that energy is lost during thinking, feeling and moving.

These very thoughts you're reading, then, are my own lightning, my own upward billowing cumuli, my own shimmering warmth.

At dawn the next morning, cross-legged facing the sea with its towering columnar cumuli red-edged by the sun behind them, all around me crabs confidently and unthinkingly returned to their holes in wet sand. But, I had to consciously compose and analyze the illusion of a man with a tent needing to be vacated, before I could get up and do just that.

A RAIN IN MEXICO CITY

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; August 10, 2007

Late last Saturday afternoon I was killing time before my 9:30 PM bus back to Jalpan left by wandering backstreets in Mexico City's central zone. As it should during the rainy season, around 5 PM dark clouds gathered on the horizon in preparation for the afternoon storm.

First the wind came, not real strong, but strong enough to blow yellow cottonwood leaves (probably the much-planted Fremont Cottonwood, Populus fremontii) down streets along with swirls of dust, discarded napkins, Styrofoam junk-food boxes, etc. Here in mid summer with no hint of autumn in the air, why should yellow cottonwood leaves so conspicuously blow down Mexico City's backstreets?

When the cold rain began I joined a mumbling old street-man who'd taken his bagged belongings into a corner the rain couldn't reach. Over his shoulders he wore a plastic garbage bag with a hole in the bottom for his head, like a poncho. But wind usually changes direction during a storm's latter half, and when it did it began drenching us. Mumbling to the sky the old man moved into an alley a bit too seedy looking for me, and I went to beneath a closed taco-stand's overhanging customer-roof.

From there I saw all kinds of people doing everything from cringing in corners as if the rain were killing them, to those putting on a show ignoring the rain, getting absolutely drenched, like two guys washing their own portable taco stand. A car hit a pothole full of rainwater splashing four women dressed for Saturday night on the town, and they all laughed uproariously.

I saw lovers making the most of intimate moments in the rain, dogs grinning as rain dripped from their tails, taxi drivers suddenly aware of their importance with heroic looks on their faces, a fat old woman in a purple dress watching everything through a coffee shop's window, half smiling, indulging the pleasure of a special moment.

THE SERAPE VENDOR

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken at the ruins of Teotihuacan just northeast of Mexico City, Mexico State, probably sometime in 1995

About thirty miles northeast of Mexico City there stand some of the world's most spectacular ancient ruins, the 2,000-year-old remains of Teotihuacan. Two pyramids dominate the landscape, the largest measuring 500 by 400 feet at its base, and looming 140 feet above the surrounding flat, barren landscape. In the ruin complex visitors see interesting frescos in beautifully decorated temples, and visit a good museum. Hordes of international tourists visit Teotihuacan each day, and every visitor is approached by several Mexicans peddling everything from "authentic Aztec clay flutes" to fine silver jewelry.

An unfortunate dynamic often develops between tourists and souvenir vendors. Especially because visiting the ruin involves hiking long distances in bright sunlight, usually a time comes when the tourist is just too tired to be bothered with looking at souvenirs; yet the peddlers keep coming and coming. The peddlers, in turn, regarding themselves as hardworking folks simply trying to make honest livings selling superior goods at low prices, resent the visitors' aloofness and occasional grouchiness.

On the morning of my visit to Teotihuacan, perhaps the tenth souvenir peddler to approach me is a man between thirty and thirty-five years of age, with a foot-thick collection of woolen serapes slung over his shoulder. His name is René Hernández Juárez, and he's from the local village of San Juan Teotihuacan. When he sees that I'm a friendly fellow fluent in Spanish, he seems to decide to get some things off his chest:

"Our big problem is that nearly all the tourists who come here are brought by agencies," he begins. "Well, the agencies in North

America are in contact with Mexican agencies, and they work together, so when the agencies bring their people here they stop at certain stores and restaurants along the way. The guides tell the tourists that the stores' serapes, sculptures, etc. are the best quality, so the tourists buy their souvenirs there. Well, those guides not only get to eat for free in the restaurants, but they also get a 20% commission on all sales. Then the tourists arrive here not even knowing about us artisans selling our own handicraft, and they don't have money left to spend on the things that can only be bought here."

"And most of us are artisans. In my town, about half the people are involved in producing handicraft sold here. For example, I'm a third-generation serape maker. My grandfather, Don Bifas Hernández Moreno, was a famous serape artisan from Santa Ana Chiautempan, Tlaxcala, and you know that Santa Ana is world famous for its serapes; the National Serape Fair is held there each year. My father saw the potential in selling serapes at Teotihuacan, so he moved here, and when he was established, my grandfather followed him. We are proud of our art, and we work hard to make the very best product."

"But, you know the very first thing the tourists do when I start walking toward them? They grab their wallets because they think I'm going to rob them. Well, think how that makes me feel. I'm just trying to earn my food, doing what my family has done for three generations... "

COLOMBIAN BOTTLES & RIGHT SHOES

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo; August 14, 2011

I've been reading Curtis Ebbesmeyer's Flotsametrics and the Floating World, which describes the author's career as an oceanographer studying the oceans' currents, especially with regard to what floats on it, flotsam. That got me to thinking more analytically about the mountains of garbage, mostly plastic, perpetually washing onto our beaches.

So, Friday morning I looked closely at the trash along the kilometer of beach between Mayan Beach Garden and what I call the Northern Point. Relatively few items bore labels revealing their country of origin, but enough did to provide a general feeling from where the trash comes from.

The home countries of 33 items could be identified, and garbage from 15 countries was found. The nation providing most garbage was Colombia, with 9 pieces, or 27%. The next most represented country was Mexico itself, with 5 pieces, or 15%, and then Venezuela with four pieces, or 12%. Countries contributing 2 pieces, or 6%, were Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname and Honduras. The remaining countries sending only a single piece of trash each were St. Lucia, Haiti, Guatemala, Netherlands, Singapore, China, USA and Russia. I'm guessing that items from the last four countries were dumped from passing ships. Probably the item from the Netherlands entered waters of Dutch-speaking Suriname.

Clearly a one-way trash superhighway operates between here and northern South America. If you consider the island nation of Trinidad & Tobago part of South America, then 17 pieces, or 52%, originated in South America.

On a separate issue, Ebbesmeyer -- who has beachcombed here at Mayan Beach Garden -- points out that right shoes and left shoes display such different sailing dynamics that during long floats right shoes may drift one way, left another, eventually causing certain beaches to specialize in catching one shoe type over the other. Here some of us have been pretty sure that on our beach right shoes predominate. On my short walk I noted the dispositions of 57

washed-up shoes and sandals. Of those, 31 were right (54%) while 26 were left (46%). That's not much of a statistical difference, but the exercise does remind us that sometimes we can start believing things for no good reasons.

THE CASTE WAR

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; August 15, 2010

I'm still wrestling with Mexican bureaucracy for a visa permitting me to stay here longer, so lately I've needed to make a couple of bus trips into Valladolid, the central Yucatán's main city, located about half an hour to the east, on the road to Cancún.

Valladolid has seen its share of history, and one of its distinctions is that historians often say that the Caste War of Yucatán (±1847 to ±1901) started there, when three Maya men were executed for planning an uprising among the Maya. The uprising triggered by the execution at first sought to reclaim for the Maya their communal lands, which had been passing inexorably into the hands of private ownership. However, the war gradually became one of the Maya against their non-Maya, mostly European (usually Spanish or partly Spanish) overlords. It ended up mostly a race war.

At first the Maya enjoyed great success. By the spring of 1848 they'd completely cleared Europeans from the peninsula, except for the walled cities of Campeche and Mérida, and the southwest coast. But then the Maya lost their strategic advantage when many of their fighters went home to plant and tend their cornfields. By August of that year guns, money and troops from Mexico were pouring into the besieged towns, and Maya forces were pushed back from more than half of the territory they'd taken control of.

Then the war ground on for more than half a century, costing 40,000-50,000 lives. Its official end was declared several times, the last time being in September, 1915. However, Maya fighters and Mexican soldiers were dying battling one another as late as 1933.

Eventually hostilities came to an end less because of any decisive victory of the Mexicans over the Maya than from changing economic and political realities. In the peninsula's southern region where Chicozapote or Chicle trees grew, the Wrigley Company began paying men for the latex they drained from the trees, used for making chewing gum, and that provided an alternative to fighting. England, finding itself doing more business with Mexico than the colony of British Honduras (now Belize), appeased the Mexicans by stopping the flow of gunpowder from its colony to the Mayas.

Long wars always have their surreal features, and Yucatán's Caste War saw more than its share. Early in the conflict the Maya war effort got a boost from the appearance of the Cult of the Talking Cross, whose believers, known as the "Cruzob," thought that God was telling them through the medium of a talking Cross that the war effort should continue. Though later the Talking Cross was discovered to be the invention of a ventriloquist, and the cult fractured over such issues as whether Catholicism should be rejected, through all the conflict's later years Cruzob adherents were greatly responsible for keeping the war going.

TO SABACCHÉ

Written in Sabacché and issued from a ciber in nearby Tecoh, Yucatán; August 18, 2008

Monday morning after issuing the last Newsletter I backpacked up Mérida's historic Paseo de Montejo to the offices of the Yucatan Ecotourism Network (Red de Ecoturismo de Yucatán A.C.), hopped

into a car, and soon we were heading southeast of Mérida. Mérida is growing fast and urban sprawl is bad but the sprawl transitions suddenly into dense, spiny scrub ten to fifteen feet tall. The very pronounced dry season here keeps forests from growing much taller, even though now, during the wet season, there's more than enough rain to support much taller, Mississippi-type forests.

The last ten miles or so of road was asphalt about 1.5 lanes wide. Land here is flat but with modest risings, yet the highway curved crazily and you wondered why there were so many zigzags. As we approached our destination, -- the tiny Maya town of Sabacché (sah-bock-CHE) -- the road straightened out.

It's easy to imagine the thorny woods in this area as "virgin." However, inside it you'll find innumerable interconnecting stone walls about chest high built of neatly stacked, irregular, white, limestone rocks. Half a century ago nearly all the land here was dedicated to growing henequen, or sisal. Inside the scrub often you find equally spaced, old Henequen plants still surviving with no obvious problems despite being overtopped and shaded by trees. Henequen plants are members of the genus Agave, similar to the Magueys we saw so frequently in arid upland Mexico.

Sabacché is home to maybe 20 Maya families. Some houses are constructed of cinderblocks, others of irregular limestone rocks held in place with lots of cement, and others have walls of rough, vertical, wooden poles. Some roofs are cement, some of thatch, and some of thatch covered with tarpaper.

Most people in Sabacché speak Maya in their homes, though everyone speaks at least some Spanish, and many speak excellent Spanish, though with a Maya accent. Friday when I spoke with the Ecotourism Committee, Doña Martha, the President, translated my Spanish to Maya. Most people here are functionally illiterate, though some read and write well. From the very first I could see that people here are about the most friendly, gracious folks I've ever met.

Within moments after my arrival a community meeting was called so we could all meet one another. The women in their below-the-knees, white, prettily embroidered gowns spoke among themselves, then offered that each day I could eat in one of their homes, taking turns among them. I thanked them but explained about my morning campfires and how I nibble throughout the day, but said that I hope to visit all of them for a bowl of pozole from time to time.

After the meeting I was shown to my house, which is a small cinderblock one with a cement roof rather like the one I had in 28 de Junio, but this time instead of sharing floor space with the community's corn crop I'm with ecotourism paraphernalia -- boxed-up tents, snorkeling gear, lifejackets, a two-way radio and such.

REMOVING BAD WINDS WITH SIPCHÉ

Written in Sabacché and issued from a ciber in nearby Tecoh, Yucatán; August 18, 2008

Word got around quickly that I am pleased to know the value of local plants so when Don Vicente came down a trail deep in the scrub carrying a load of firewood and found me photographing a flower, he immediately put down his load and began pulling up plants around us to explain their uses. There was a pungent mint for stomach ache, another aromatic herb for washing babies, and then he stepped into the woods, snapped a branch from a ten-ft-high, flowerless bush with brittle, slender outer branches, and opposite, simple leaves, and began telling me about it. The plant was Sipché, which I'm supposing to be Bunchosia swartziana, of the mostly tropical Malpighia Family.

"You're walking through the forest and get into a bad wind, a malo viento," Don Vicente explained, stiffening his spine and his face going taut to suggest the dread consequences of encountering a bad wind. "You go to the shaman, the healer, and he removes the bad wind with a branch of Sipché."

{Later Doña Martha told me that bad winds stir at 6AM, noon, 6PM and midnight, and that they're left behind by the passage of alux (ah-LOOSH), or gnomes, who live in sinkholes, or cenotes. Bad winds give you headaches, make you tired and unable to think well. Alux aren't really bad, but they can be very mischievous and troublemaking. You just have to know how to deal with them.}

Don Vicente showed me how the Sipché branch was used, with a lot of shaking back and forth and working up and down the whole body, like using a feather duster.

What fascinated me was the way the Don lumped infirmities of the body with those of the mind. The manner in which he phrased his thoughts showed that to him, at least with regard to threatening situations, no clear boundary separated the biological and the magical worlds.

POACHING CONCH

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo; August 21, 2011

Despite the year-round poaching of conch by local folks along the beach, laws are in place to protect the Queen Conch. Here it is illegal to capture, buy, transport, sell or even eat conch from May 1 to October 31. Queen Conches are mating now, and that's why this week I got to see one so close to shore.

In the interior we've seen heavy, year-round poaching of deer and other wildlife, despite adequate laws being on the books. Here maybe the conch laws are taken a little more seriously and I think I know why: To the military who constantly patrol these waters, conch hunters at a distance look just like drug runners.

Still, since I've been here I've heard of three local conch-busts by the military. Last week a local man gathering conch along the beach near his house in Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve was arrested. The other two encounters were late at night when a military patrol boat stopped poachers offshore. Guns were fired in both instances, and one poacher -- who had been caught and released during the previous encounter -- was shot in the leg as he tried to escape.

During the last encounter, the poachers dumped about 500 pounds (225kg) of conch overboard to get rid of evidence.

HURRICANE DEAN

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; August 24, 2007

On Internet "regional-radar animations" I'd watched Dean since it was a gathering of peaceful-looking clouds over central Africa. Wednesday morning when it came ashore on Mexico's Gulf Coast after crossing the Yucatan Peninsula and the southern Gulf of Mexico, it had regained strength so that it was again a Level II hurricane, and its projected path carried it exactly over us in eastern Querétaro state.

Still, the Reserve's workers who were scheduled that day to go into the mountains to visit isolated villages didn't change their plans at all. Despite forecasts of up to 20 inches of rain in the mountains, I didn't hear of any evacuations around here. In fact, I didn't see any

precautions being taken by anyone at all, everyone saying the mountains to the east would protect us.

In the end, they were right. At the last moment I think the storm's center jagged a bit southward, just grazing us. Only occasionally during the storm's passage did we have a breeze strong enough to move tree leaves. But we did get rain -- five inches of it (12 cm) -- which was exactly what we needed, because our rainy season hasn't been nearly as rainy as normal.

For us in the Jalpan Valley, Hurricane Dean was something wonderful.

Don Gonzalo asked me why the revolucionarios don't do something about hurricanes. I said that apparently the hurricanes are more powerful than they are, and he seemed to like that answer, walking away smiling and pointing at the sky.

CRISTEROS IN A CAVE

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; August 24, 2007

I visited Cocos to check out a trail that might be interesting to ecotouring campers and backpackers. Near the trail's end there's a small cave with a small, vertical, partially closed entrance.

The men we found camping beside the pond told me that back in the time of the Cristeros some local people and their priests had hidden in the cave, to protect themselves from marauding Cristeros. When I returned to Jalpan I heard the same story from someone with an aunt who'd lived through the Cristero times.

This story doesn't make sense to me because the Cristeros fought to protect Catholicism at a time in Mexican history when the

government was trying to suppress it. Why should priests hide from Cristeros? I think this is an example of people misremembering history. They don't want to admit that their government not long ago tried to suppress their religion, but they do remember that Cristeros were fanatics who killed a lot of people, so a "false history" has become easier and more pleasant to remember.

Mexico's Cristero War took place between 1926 and 1929. About 90,000 people died in it, some two-thirds of them on the government side. Basically the conflict arose because Mexico's liberal 1917 Constitution contained five articles particularly aimed at suppressing Catholicism in Mexico. The religion was deemed as an influence keeping the country from modernizing, plus the government didn't want the Church to own so much property. Especially in the conservative countryside religious people rebelled on behalf of the Church.

The Cristero War is one of the most amazing events in Mexican history and it's remarkable that today people talk so little about it. One effect of the War was that as much as five percent of Mexico's population fled to the US.

CHICKEN CHACHALACAS

Written in Sabacché and issued from a ciber in nearby Tecoh, Yucatán; August 25, 2008

In late afternoon with the temperature in the upper 90s, the sun's brightness brain-numbing and the village just emerging from siesta, I strolled mad-dog-Englishman down the middle of the street. Doña Martha, buried in shadows beneath her Anona tree, almost whispered, but in a way carrying in the afternoon's deadness, "Look at the chachalacas... "

I'm half deaf and these Maya speakers throw Spanish phraseology at me I'm unaccustomed to so I'm always expecting what I think I hear to mean something other than what it seems to mean, but "Look at the chachalacas" was pretty straightforward. The problem was that chachalacas are wary birds. You hear them calling raucously at dawn from out in the scrub but then they're quiet the rest of the day, and in this area where hunting is the main male activity after gathering firewood (people eat chachalacas) typically you can't get very close to them.

With dumb incomprehension I looked at Doña Martha who smilingly pointed across the road where indeed two Plain Chachalacas, Ortalis vetula, calmly promenaded atop a neighbor's stone fence.

They were young chachalacas with their tails just beginning to develop but they displayed the basic features making them chachalacas. Namely, they were brownish, largish, long-legged, long-necked birds with chicken-like beaks, and with reddish, naked, loose throat skin. On an adult the tail is about as long as the body, minus the neck. The sexes are similar.

Once I understood that they were juveniles already I could guess what their story was: "Someone found a nest out in the scrub, got the eggs and put them under a broody hen," I suggested to Doña Martha, who nodded in affirmation.

SUSTO

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; August 31, 2007

In backcountry Mexico I'm always asking people how they use this and that plant. You'd be surprised how often I'm told that a certain plant, especially if it's aromatic, is used for curing "susto."

The dictionary translates susto as "fear," "shock," or "fright." Since my earliest days of traveling among backcountry folks in Latin America I've realized that susto is really much more than what we Northerners think of as fear, shock or fright. My first published book, On the Road to Tetlama, was about my experiences among a family in San Luis Potosí state, across the mountains from here, with roots in the Nahuatl-speaking culture.

While preparing that book one day as I sat writing next to the family's hut an old woman came trudging up the slope carrying a bouquet of herbs. She was a curandera, a traditional healer, come to cure the family's little girl of susto. The family explained that a tree had fallen trapping the girl's shadow -- not her sun-shadow, but rather a spirit shadow. As the little girl sat in a chair the old woman circled her several times shaking the herbs and brushing the ground with them until the herbs' pungent fragrance penetrated the whole area. The plant was some kind of mint. The curandera prayed and the whole ceremony was repeated again and again. Then the curandera left, and the little girl was cured.

Silviano here at the Reserve once was cured from susto he'd gotten by being swept away by a flooding stream. He slept all the time and couldn't eat, so a curandero was sent for. Silviano lay on the ground as the healer poured aguardiente (the local "firewater") around him, outlining his body on the ground. Then Silviano was brushed with branches from the common, white-leafed "Salvia," Hyptis albida, which is a pungent member of the Mint Family. Then dirt dug from inside Silviano's aguardiente-delineated outline was applied to his chest and back, and the whole process was repeated for a second and third time.

It cured Silviano instantly, he says, and he's sad the knowledge of such healing is disappearing these days. Don Gonzalo knows some of the old cures, he says.

FIREWOOD GATHERING IN THE SCRUB

Written in Sabacché and issued from a ciber in nearby Tecoh, Yucatán; August 25, 2008

When I first arrived here I couldn't figure out how people survived at all. Now I understand that a fair percentage of households have at least one person who works in another town, usually Mérida, staying there all week and returning only on weekends. Unlike most of Mexico, not many people from here go to the US.

Among men who live here all the time, by far the most important business activity is firewood gathering in the scrub. Each morning at dawn -- as I jog I meet them on the road even before the sun rises -- men filter out of town heading into the scrub. All morning, from all directions, you hear chop, chop, chop, chop...

The other day, kilometers from town, down a weedy trail I came upon a pile of firewood. By chance right then a man came out of the scrub carrying firewood on his back. The man, in his 60s, explained that each tied-together bundle of firewood would bring 7 pesos, about 69 US cents. When you see the isolated places the wood is carried from and how hard they have to work to remove spines, cut the trunks into appropriate sizes and split the trunks, you understand that the men work very hard for their 69 cents. When you learn that they must pay a large percentage of what they earn to have a pickup truck carry the firewood to market, you can hardly imagine anyone willing to work for so little.

"People need the firewood," the man explained. "Without firewood they wouldn't have their beans, tortillas, tamales and roasted pig!"

That seemed to be what kept this fellow going, even if he had doubts about how little money he was clearing. He knew he was contributing greatly to the community, and, in the end, he and his family

somehow survived, so it all worked out in the end, even at 69 cents a load.

DEER IN THE SCRUB

Written in Sabacché and issued from a ciber in nearby Tecoh, Yucatán; September 1, 2008

The other day I saw a mature, female White-tail Deer out in the scrub. I've never seen a deer in the Yucatan because people here hunt them year-round, despite the law against it, so they're rare. After firewood gathering, hunting seems to be the most important male activity here, maybe even more than working in the cornfields.

When I casually mentioned to a group of men that I'd seen a deer, they wanted to know where. I wouldn't tell them because I knew they'd go try to kill her. By now I think most males in Sabacché have approached me individually and asked where I saw that deer, but I've not told anyone. "The gringo's deer" has become a village joke, in a good-hearted sort of way, the men just shaking their heads over my obstinacy and peculiar thinking.

This scrub, being perpetually hacked over so that it produces endless browse right at deer-head level, is perfect habitat for deer. With the deer's top predators exterminated -- the Jaguars and Mountain Lions -- if people stopped killing deer, in very little time the scrub would produce a deer bounty. But men here will never give the deer a chance. Here wildlife management laws are viewed as unrealistic, classist, anti-family government intervention.

MAYA RAIN THAT BURNS

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; September 5, 2010

At the end of the dry season José the shaman brought me a potted Rue plant, warning that if I let the plant set out during the upcoming rains the leaves would "burn."

Also, once the rainy season was well underway, one week suddenly the rains stopped and I had to start watering the garden by hand again. One morning as I went watering, just to have something to say as I passed Don Filomeno, I said, "We need some rain, don't we?" Don Filomeno looked at me with a look of surprise and replied, "No! Rain will burn our plants. It's best to have dry days, and water each plant individually."

I've been asking my Maya friends what they mean by rain "burning" things, since obviously we can all feel that the rain falling each afternoon is cool, even chilly.

José the shaman, to be counted on for the "official" Maya line, like any good conservative, fundamentalist religious figure, interprets the words his teachers handed down to him literally. He says that rain falling through hot afternoon air soaks up heat and when it hits plants it releases that heat into them, burning their leaves.

Luis, who maintains the traditional milpa, or cornfield, and is as much a traditional Maya as José, has a different concept. To Luis, what burns our plants is rain that falls at night, and heavy dew. Afternoon rains don't burn plants since sunlight can dry them out. However, if rain falls onto an afternoon's hot ground, vapors rise and that's really bad news.

"The vapors carry the heat that's been stored in the ground and scald the leaves," he says. "When you first touch ice, you can feel that kind of heat; the ice feels like it's burning. It's hot coldness... "

The Maya fear of "rain burn" is so great that, José tells me, commonly Maya women after an afternoon rain go splash well or city

water on their most prized plants around the house, to wash the rainwater off.

Also José points to the fact that often, as with Spanish Plums, fruits with no holes apparent in their skins mature filled with worms. José explains this by saying that fruit worms start out as seeds, but when burning rain hits the flowers, the seeds turn into worms. When I tell him about insects laying eggs inside flower ovaries (the future fruits) with their very slender ovipositors, without losing a beat he counters that the worms always are there, but the hot rain activates them.

A Northern gardener looking at "rain-burnt" leaves recognizes classic symptoms of fungal disease -- dried-out, crumbling brown spots bordered by yellow on green leaves. Naturally at this time of year fungal diseases are rampant because of the combination of heat and humidity, which is exactly what fungi need to thrive.

A VISIT TO PISTÉ

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; September 5, 2010

At least once a week during the last ten months I've walked -- during the last month, biked -- into Pisté, mostly to buy fruit. By now lots of people along the way recognize me and we speak or nod to one another. I'd never thought that a place like Pisté might someday start feeling like a "hometown," but that's become the case.

Last Sunday morning at about ten o'clock, after a clear dawn, clouds already were curdling up for the afternoon downpour and the air was so hot and humid that drops of sweat constantly had to be shaken from the tip of my nose because they tickled. My blue shirt was dark-blotched wet, and stuck to my body.

In town next to the Frutería "Dorcy" where I buy my fruit there's a shaded clutter at the roadside where you can sit on the sidewalk and drink something cold, or go into the dark, loud tortillaría behind the sitting place and buy hot, freshly baked tortillas, or bucket-size masses of masa (moist corn paste) for baking your own tortillas over a fire, on a comal, back home. That's the way it is in Pisté, lots of unexpected juxtapositions, everything kind of a hodgepodge, really, all with a friendly, homey feeling to it.

Pisté extends two or three blocks away from both sides of the highway, which is Hwy 180 running between Mérida and Cancún. The farther from the highway, the more countrylike the streets become, the lusher the vegetation, the more thatch-roofed huts you see, the more goats and roosters you hear, and the more interesting the plants around people's houses. Streets generally end as weedy dirt trails continuing to ever-more rustic homes.

Actually, backstreet Pisté is vibrant: Gaudy-flowering greenery overflowing stone walls, kids everywhere playing, peeping around corners, sounds of tortillas being patted into existence or maybe methodical tapping from shops chiseling authentic Maya wood carvings for sale in the ruins, dogs barking, a little girl in yellow shorts and a pink Tweety-Pie T-shirt coming down the street holding a clear plastic bag of crushed ice in one hand and a liter plastic bottle of black Coca-Cola in the other, behind her a muddy pig chasing a dusty turkey... The animation goes on and on, never ending, never going silent, and one never tires of gawking, of letting the mind float down street after street.

In fact, I used to think I'd like to live somewhere like that, in a simple little hut amid such vivacious, colorful, congenial clutter. But, then I thought of the noise. If a house has a radio, it's played full blast, and the music is heavy on accordions unless there's a teenager in the family, and then it's hip-hop, boom-boom-boom, full blast. And on every street there's at least one dog barking all day and night, every day, year after year, and all those crowing roosters, bleating goats and sheep, gobbling turkeys, etc.

But, that's how life so often is: You're attracted to something, feel like you really need it, but then you get closer and it starts driving you crazy. In fact, every trip to Pisté, I'm always glad to experience the town's charm and friendliness, but then before long I'm more than happy to get back to my own world, which may not be as colorful and congenial-feeling, but at least I don't have to listen all day and night to accordions or hip-hop boom-boom-boom.

SUN-GOD & MOON

Excerpt from Jim's online "Yerba Buena,Word-Snapshots from a Missionary Clinic In Southern Mexico's Indian Territory," just north of Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; written sometime in 1988

When Antonio Díaz was a child -- and sometimes even now -- the San Andreseros mixed Catholicism with their traditional indigenous beliefs. Antonio's manner of speaking about those times is extraordinary. In a low voice he speaks profoundly slowly, emphasizing in one way or another the pronunciation of most every word. On about every fifth word he lingers languidly, humming a vowel sound. Also he speaks with something of a lisp.

Part of this interesting manner of talking can be attributed to his speaking Spanish with a strong Tzotzil/San Andresero accent, but mostly it's his own idiosyncrasy. When this man speaks of the old ways you sense that the feelings and insights he carries from those days somehow express themselves in the nuances of his strange speech. The following was spoken in Spanish that sometimes reminded me of a lonely owl hooting from deep inside a swamp at night, and sometimes of low thunder rumbling on the horizon, and always they were words being retrieved from what seemed to me an impossibly distant past.

"When I was a child, we did not know about the Word of God. We believed in the images of saints. That's what our grandfathers taught us. Once, for a year, my father took care of the images. They were made of cedar wood. They were painted. St. Andrew with his black beard... About a meter tall. The Virgin was small. Though we worshiped those images in a Catholic church, we didn't know anything about Catholic doctrine. My father thought that the sun was the Father, and that the moon was the Virgin Mary. We called the sun-god Cajuatík. Metík was the moon."

"Once when I was a child I wanted to learn how to pray to the sun-god. So one morning I went with an uncle and his wife and children when they went to pray. It was on the side of a hill. They got down on their knees and faced the rising sun. I got down on my knees with them. But they prayed for a long, long time. About forty minutes. They asked the sun-god to bless their cornfield and their beans. And their animals. And they asked to be forgiven. They knelt there so long that I almost couldn't stand it."

"For that reason, when one day missionaries came, walking about thirty kilometers up from Tabasco... It was a morning... My father was in the house... Those missionaries were looking for the path to Arroyamita. 'Ayyyyyyy, this is the path,' my father said. 'You're not going to get lost.' But those missionaries asked my father if he could read, and he said that he could read a little. Then my father said, 'Come on in my house.' So they went in and that man, the oldest among them, he took out a Bible. But we didn't know for sure that it was the Bible. Only that it was a big, red book. It was beautiful. And the man began talking about the second coming of Christ. And my father said, 'Really? Really? Really...?' And he was transfixed. He said, 'Sell me that book.' 'I can't sell it,' the old man said. 'But I want to study that book,' my father said. 'I can't sell this one because it's my own,' the old man said. 'But if you wish, the next time we come, we'll bring you one to keep for yourself.'"

"And so when my father had his own Bible, he began studying it. But the Bible was in Spanish and he understood only a little of what he

read. He kept finding the name Jehova but he couldn't figure out what that was. 'But what thing is this Jehova?' my father would ask. Then one day the missionaries came again and my father asked them what this Jehova was. 'It's the name of God,' they said. 'Ayyyyyy, and I thought it was the name of a demon,' my father said. And this is the way, little by little, my father learned the Word of God."

"One day a neighbor, a man called Lucas, came to my father. He said, 'I've heard that sometimes strangers come and talk inside your house. Is this good or bad?' 'Ayyyyyy, it's good,' my father said. 'If you want to listen, you come, too. They come every Friday.' Another day, a man called Manuel López came. One time Manual López and my father fought on the trail because Manual López had burned the forest. But now it seemed that Manual López had forgotten about that. 'I also want to know what you are learning,' he said to my father. 'You come, too,' my father said. 'It's the Word of God we hear here, and it's good.' So now there were three men, and that's all it was for almost twelve years. These were the only three men in the village who knew how to read. Then for years my father became a missionary himself. And I did, too".

NICHES IN ODD PLACES & MORE ON CRISTEROS

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; September 7, 2007

Especially in the mountains where car accidents often happen along narrow, winding roads, you see lots of memorials to people who died accidentally. This week I visited one occupying a vertical limestone cliff right at a sharp bend on a steeply descending road. Just looking

at it you could imagine how the accident happened, that if it were to happen anyplace on that road, it'd be there.

The memorial excavated into a limestone face contained a cross decorated with tied plastic bows. There was also a glass with a candle in it, also tied with plastic bows. When I walked up to the hole containing the cross, several butterflies flew out, having sought to escape the rain there.

At another spot there was a wooden cross decorated with red Poinciana blossoms. That cross was staked next to the reservoir, where someone had drowned in a very isolated, hard-to-get-to part of the lake.

Often there are free-standing memorials fashioned from cement or steel, looking like little dog houses with crosses inside, and maybe also they hold a picture or two, a candle and sometimes an empty pulque bottle.

I asked Silviano if the niches and memorials served any purpose other than to remind us of the dead people and he said no. However, while he was on the subject of dead people he told me a bit more about the Cristero Rebellion I mentioned a couple of Newsletters ago, and which took place from 1926 to 1929. Silviano is from Cocos, the town where I collected the Cristero-cave history.

Silviano says that near Cocos there's a mass grave of people killed by Cristeros. I explained my confusion, saying that because country people usually are very religious I couldn't understand why Cristeros, who claimed to be defending Catholicism, killed so many religious country people like those at Cocos. "They weren't religious enough for the Cristeros," he replied.

He also said that the federal troops trying to limit religious expression at that time used firearms, while the Cristeros fought with machetes.

Finally he said that there's a hole in the earth near Cocos where federal troops were buried alive. Apparently they were hiding there

when Cristeros sealed them in and covered over the entrance.

PREDAWN RAIN ON THE YUCATÁN'S EASTERN COAST

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo; September 11, 2011

As we approach the peak of this year's rainy season's raininess, I'm understanding how it works here on the Yucatán Peninsula's eastern coast. It's very different from what happens in the peninsula's interior, where the rainy season is expressed in terms of heavy, often violent afternoon thunderstorms. In the interior, mornings begin clear, by midmorning it's clouding up, then by mid afternoon storms break out here and there, maybe right over you. The peak comes in September and October.

Here on the peninsula's eastern coast, prevailing winds blow off the ocean in the east, so those interior storms that form to our west just drift farther westward. During the interior's rainy afternoons, storms don't form over us or the water because it's much cooler on and beside the ocean, and for storms to form you need stark temperature differences. You need warm surface air to bubble up through cooler air, to high altitudes.

For the last two or three months, even as afternoon rains drenched the interior, for the most part it's stayed dry here on the coast. Rains mostly came when tropical depressions or "areas of disturbed weather" formed in the Caribbean, then wandered over us, sometimes dumping several inches of rain over a period of days.

Lately a new trend has begun and Marcia says it'll develop more fully until things really get soggy in October. That is, right before dawn,

storms or showers form out over the water and drift over us. What's happening is that during the night air over the water cools dramatically, but the ocean water remains warm - - about 86°F (30°C) off our coast.

Therefore, right before dawn, air immediately over the warm water starts bubbling up through the night-cooled air above it, until it reaches an altitude where condensation occurs. Then rain falls as the cloud drifts over us, sometimes lots of rain, with lightning and thunder, just about when I'm jogging.

"HOJA DE XALAPA" WORM TREATMENT

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; September 14, 2007

I go barefooted a lot and when you do that in the tropics it's a good idea to give yourself a good de-worming every now and then. Certain intestinal worms can enter through minor cuts and abrasions on your feet.

Therefore, last Saturday morning when I passed by a dealer in medicinal herbs plying his wares on a narrow side street next to Jalpan's marketplace I asked what was on hand for expelling intestinal worms. The instant the dealer knew what I wanted he thrust his hand into a bag of brown, curled-up leaves and began telling me what to do with them:

"This is Hoja de Xalapa, also called Hoja de Cigarillo," he said. "Each morning for nine days brew some leaves in one and a half liters of hot water, and drink it."

In Mexico the name Hoja de Xalapa usually is applied to the pretty Four-O'clock that used to attract so many hummingbird moths at my last base in Mississippi. The leaves the man sold me weren't that, and the literature doesn't even mention Hoja de Cigarillo, which means "Cigarette Leaf." Maybe tobacco, but it seems he'd have called it tobacco.

In my solar oven I brewed up the first dosage and the first sip of the stuff convinced me that it would probably rid me of all intestinal parasites, tasting as bitter as you'd expect a powerful de-wormer to taste.

A few minutes after drinking the brew my stomach began feeling a bit cramped, and I didn't feel good the whole following night. I thought I might be getting the cold that's been going around because of all the coolish, drizzly days we've been having. However, soon after taking my second dose the next day the same cramps returned. The next morning I had diarrhea and didn't feel good at all.

I decided that if any worm could withstand that stuff and hang on through all my intestinal turbulence it was welcome to stay. I abandoned the treatment.

I suspect that a lot of traditional treatments are like that. They may work but it's always hard to judge what a particular dosage should be, especially since in natural populations there's always variability in everything, including chemical composition. And who knows how long the leaves had been dried, what effect the drying had, and what chemicals were in the leaves other than the de-worming agent? And maybe the guy didn't even know what he was selling.

I still don't know what the plants were, though some fruits were included in the medicine bag I came home with, and they clearly belonged to a plant in the Coffee Family, the Rubiaceae.

VICTOR'S PIG FEED

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; September 14, 2007

The other day during a banana-buying trip my friend Victor stopped his truck for a chat. He's spent some time working illegally "on the Other Side," has a smidgeon of English, and likes to practice when he can. I asked how things were going.

"It's getting harder," he said. "The price of feed for my pigs is skyrocketing and I don't know how I'll feed them. They say it's because after NAFTA Mexican businesses started importing most of their grain from the US. Because of your agricultural subsidies, big machines and relatively cheap fertilizers, it's cheaper to grow grain up there. But now up there they're making gasohol from their grain and that's driving the price way up, even for our locally grown corn... "

Victor is one of the best ranchers around. He grows tomatoes organically for sale, fertilizing them with his pig manure. His whole operation falls apart if he doesn't have affordable pig feed.

"I may have to go back north," he said, shaking his head, and I've heard him say how he misses his family and the countryside when he goes north. "But if I can't make it here doing the very best I can, what's the alternative?"

HOCTÚN'S CHURCH

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; September 19, 2010

Last Monday my long-enduring visa saga took me to Mérida again so once more I found myself on a rumbling Oriente bus headed west, stopping at all the little towns along the way, Holca, Kantunil, Xocchel... nice little places, so much color, so many random juxtapositions of incongruous elements, lush vegetation, scroungy dogs and smiling faces.

Several towns along the route are home to colonial churches that seem far too large for such small places. I've been told that usually such big churches mark centers which once served to "concentrate" the Maya, so the clergy and Spanish-blooded landlords could easier control them.

Hoctún, with about 4700 inhabitants, of which a third are children, has one of the largest churches. The earliest mention I can find of something happening specifically to the people of Hoctún was dated 1722, when the lady Doña Angela de la Fleguera Castillo was granted, under conditions of the Encomienda System, 269 Maya citizens of Hoctún.

With such a big church I thought that maybe Hoctún had served as an especially important concentration center, but I couldn't find reference to such a status, if it existed. However, in Terry Rugeley's 1996 book Yucatán's Maya Peasantry and the Origins of the Caste War, with most pages online via Google Books, there's a revealing story about an event in Hoctún in 1829, eight years after both Mexico gained independence from Spain, and the independent entity of Yucatán joined the Mexican Republic.

In 1829 the Yucatán had been divided into parishes. That year some Maya farmers needed new pastureland so they sent out scouts, who found good land in adjacent Cacalchén Parish. Wanting to proceed legally, they applied to Cacalchén's authorities for permission to relocate there, and permission was granted. Since in those days the Maya were obliged to work for the creole population -- creoles in this case being people born in Mexico but mostly of Spanish blood -- the Maya who moved onto the new land transferred their "fagina" (or fajina, pronounced fa-HEE-na) obligations to their new parish. The

Church-sanctioned fagina was a set of obligations each Maya worker was forced to fulfill for his creole overlords.

When Raymundo Pérez, priest of Hoctún, got wind of the situation, he wrote to the bishop asking that the peasants be restored to his own jurisdiction and his own tax rolls. The Church sided with Pérez, who'd argued that if Maya peasants could go where they wanted it would constitute a fundamental threat to Church/creole authority and the tax base. Pérez's argument had been based solely on issues of power and money, with no reference to the welfare of the Maya.

RUDOLFO'S HOLLERS

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; September 21, 2007

Last Saturday I hitched a ride with Rudolfo making his weekly weekend visit with his family in San Juan del Río across the mountains to the west in the arid highlands. This was a special weekend because Sunday, September 16th, was Mexican Independence Day. You should have seen all the trucks and cars flying Mexican flags with their red, white and green colors, the colors, people say, of tomatoes, onions and chili peppers.

The big moment of Mexican Independence Day is El Grito, which translates to "The Shout," the yell or call, or, as a Kentuckian might say, the "holler." The first Grito was given in 1810 here in Querétaro State when a priest called for Mexicans to revolt against Spain with the fiery words "Long live religion! Long live Our Lady of Guadalupe! Long live the Americas and death to the corrupt government!"

Rudolfo told me how his family would celebrate El Grito:

"Tonight we'll visit some friends' house and eat some tacos and drink a little, and then at 11:30 or so we'll give our own Grito, though the purest Grito is when you're in the town square and the Governor or even the President speaks from the balcony and the speech ends with the Grito."

Of course I had to ask what people yell and how they do it, so Rudolfo showed me, but he's a hopeless romantic so he didn't holler about politics or religion but hollered something like "¡Viva the indomitable spirit of the human will! ¡Viva friendship and love! and on and on, ending of course with "¡Viva México!"

Our little red Volkswagen Bug sped around unending hairpin curves climbing and descending walls of enormous canyons. Usually across the canyons at least one rainstorm loomed in plain view silently downpouring white torrents that never seemed to catch us. Because of a short in the wiring the little VW beeped each time we hit a bump, and with ebullient Huapango music on the CD, and moist wind fragrant with herbage of the heart-rendingly green and shadowy mountain slope and the odor of woodsmoke and toasting tortillas from roadside huts gushing through the windows somehow it was delicious hearing Rudolfo's Grito ending with "¡Viva México!"

THOUGHTS BENEATH THE MESQUITE

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; September 21, 2007

So what do you do at midday in the desert when it's 95° and sunlight on white limestone hills is blindingly bright? I found a mesquite tree with a breeze and finished a book from Jalpan's library about Mexico's Cristero Rebellion. Now I understand better how this 1926-

1929 conflict between the Mexican government and the Catholic Church grew to the point that 90,000 Mexicans died violently and up to 5% of Mexico's population fled to the US.

The interesting point is that the fervent, understandable but very disorganized outrage of Mexico's religious people was encouraged by landowners and business people. Encouragement took the form of channeling arms and funds to the Cristeros, and by publishing inflammatory propaganda. Landowners sought to destabilize the government because the new Mexican Constitution of 1917 provided for the acquisition, dismantling and redistribution of very large landholdings to small, rural communities as part of the ejido (eh-HEE-do) program (giving land to rural communities).

What fascinates me is that this same theme occurs again and again throughout human history. The theme has two parts. First, a tiny minority stirs up and directs unfocused discontent among the masses. Second, consequences of the resulting violence turn out to be disastrous for the masses, but advantageous to the minority.

Even before the Cristero Rebellion Mexicans experienced the full force of the theme when a tiny band of outside-funded Spanish conquistadores manipulated the discontent of the Aztecs' neighboring tribes and lead them into rebellion against the Aztecs. The results were that the tiny Spanish minority ended up dominating not only the Aztecs but eventually nearly all of Mexico's indigenous peoples.

It was the same with the Nazis -- their funding by German industry, the way they stirred up the mass's patriotism and appealed to their less noble impulses, the unceasing program of misinformation and propaganda, and the subsequent disaster.

Some would say we needn't look so far back or so far away for other examples.

The historical periodicity, the uncanny way the same elemental forces converge again and again in so many strange and unforeseen

permutations... It would be pretty the way a Bach fugue is pretty with its surprising variations on basic themes, were the theme's workings-out not always so very tragic.

That's what I saw so clearly when last Sunday I put my book down beneath the Mesquite near Higueras.

TAPDANCING WITH SANDPIPERS

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo; September 25, 2011

On online radio I hear a percussion showdown between a tapdancer and a drummer, and I decide that that's the way I want to do things, tapdance out the window onto the palmtree tops tap-tap, atop the seagrape tops tap-tap, onto the beach, the sandy beach with waves BOOM-swishhhhhhhh, BOOM-swishhhhhhhh, BOOM-swishhhhhhhh, tap-tap-tap down the sand sandpiper-peep-sixteenth-notes twittering peep-peep-peep twittering BOOM-swishhhhhhhh, BOOM-swishhhhhhhh, BOOM-swishhhhhhhh and me there spotlighted amid it all Bojangling, big wide eyes big wide smile arched eyebrows sweating bullets tapdancing the morning away.

For, something there is beyond lugging this flesh around, beyond getting anchored in history and future, plodding, keeping low and being oneself as others define you, and when you tapdance, you can tapdance anyplace, like I'm telling you I did right here.

But, here's the thing: You're out there and everything is tapdancing, all those rattly-tattly sandpipers and BOOM-swishhhhhhhh, BOOM-swishhhhhhhh, BOOM-swishhhhhhhh waves, and when you get your own thing going, how do you keep up with who's doing what?

But, here's the next thing: You do it, you coordinate and you feed off those other dancers, and then you see: It's all one thing. It's all one big dance and there's a beat down below wavesplash/wingbeat/foot-tap, something like ommmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.

So, there I was, tapdancing with sandpipers and the mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm began, and things came together, and things froze the way they were, and though I couldn't move my head or feet or anything I looked around, realized we'd forgotten to invite an audience, that we were doing all this just for ourselves, and I got tickled, and the sandpipers and the beach got tickled, and we all started laughing, and after we'd finished laughing we all just went back doing whatever we'd been doing before, just that now we'd done our tapdancing, had a good laugh, and now we'll see what comes next.

THE TALAVERA MERCHANT

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in El Parián Market, Puebla, Puebla State, probably sometime in 1995

In downtown Puebla; at 6 Norte entre 2 y 4 Oriente, Mercado El Parián doesn't look in the least like a traditional market. Mercado El Parián is a series of close-packed booths and stores clustered along both sides of a short alley, all jammed with Mexican handicraft displayed mainly for tourist consumption. Still, El Parián has existed since 1796, and therefore at least has deep roots as a mercado.

Surrounded by a group of English-speaking, camera-toting North Americans just piled off a tour bus, I pause before a stall with an especially striking display of mostly-blue plates, bowls, and urns. Immediately the store's operator steps forward. He is Javier Pérez Domínguez, a native of Puebla, about forty, well dressed and

businesslike. When he hears about this writing project he volunteers what he knows about the beautiful, mostly-blue ceramics he specializes in selling.

"What you see before you is a special kind of pottery for which Puebla is world renown. It's known as talavera." Sr. Pérez speaks as if he's made this presentation a million times before, and maybe he has. "The great majority of these works are bright blue because that's what's basic to talavera. The earliest talavera was strictly blue and white but, later, other colors were added, such as orange, white, brown, and yellow."

"Talavera originally came from Spain, from the town of Talavera de la Reina," he continues almost professorially. "During colonial times Franciscan monks brought the first talavera from Spain to here for adorning altars. Soon Mexican talavera was being made for other purposes. At first just the friars had it, but soon the rich began adorning their homes with it, and using it at their tables. Since those days the art of talavera-making has diversified tremendously, away from simple blue-and-white traditional patterns, to colors, mats, and forms that go far beyond the original utilitarianism, into pure decoration and ornamentation."

"One feature of talavera is that its handiwork is very fine, and done exclusively by hand. The pottery is baked at extremely high temperatures, so it is durable. It does not contain lead contamination, which many kinds of other pottery do. The clay of which talavera is made is reddish brown, extremely fine-textured, and extremely pure -- it goes through a purification process lasting twenty to twenty-five days. The clay must be so pure because, if it isn't, at the very high temperatures at which talavera is fired, if there is an impurity, the work will fracture. The clay comes from different locations around Puebla. After the purification process, they massage it, process it, then form the piece by hand on the pottery wheel. The artisan begins with reddish brown pottery, covers it with white, and then by hand adds the design in blue and other colors."

"The most critical part of making talavera is the preparation of the colors, because each color should be compatible not only with all the other colors, but also the enamel. Sometimes colors, once the object is fired in the oven, turn dark or react in an ugly way with the white part. One secret of firing talavera is getting all the pigments melting at the same temperature. Once the colors are applied, the pieces bake in the oven for an entire day. The family making the talavera is always busy with different stages of the production process for numerous pieces, so it's hard to say how long it takes for just one piece. However, you can say that it takes about a month from the time the purification of the clay begins until there is a finished product."

Javier continues his story without my prompting; he is a natural explainer, a spokesman for the excellence of his product.

"Since talavera is made by hand, every piece is different from every other piece; by no means is it a mass-produced product. Every talavera-making family has its own secret way of making it. And it's the same way with the colors; every color has its own secret formula which the family guards very closely, and which has been passed down from one generation to the other. After thirty years of working in this business, I can just look at a piece of pottery from Puebla and know which family made it. Right now there are about ten families in Puebla making talavera. From time to time individuals come along trying it, or the kids strike out on their own, but, more or less, there are about ten."

"Talavera lasts for centuries; it is something to present to the family. In Puebla, the old cathedrals have their cupolas covered with talavera. That talavera for 500 years has been exposed to sun, wind, rain, and heat, but today it continues to be bright and hold its colors; you can see this for yourself just walking around Puebla. Our handmade talavera is as long-lasting as any ceramic product produced by industry. I've had very fine ceramic pieces from Germany and Italy, but their colors simply don't match those of our talavera. Usually only dull colors survive the fiery temperatures used

by talavera, but our artists have figured out how to use bright ones. Even the Spanish who have the original talavera in their country buy our talavera, because our colors are prettier than theirs. They use only blue and white, so their talavera is very sober. We have many colors, which Mexicans like, so ours is very Mexican, and you have to admit, prettier."

DAWN RAIN

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; September 26, 2010

As the jog began Orion's familiar star-pattern twinkled overhead almost violently, but by the time I'd reached the highway already stars were fading as clouds moved in from the east. Rain hit just as I huffed past Mayalandia's horse stalls, where I ducked beneath a dense Bec tree hoping to avoid drenching my running shoes. If it hadn't been for the shoes, which already were falling apart, I'd have run in the rain, for the cold droplets felt good on my sweating skin.

In fact, that morning beneath the big Bec everything felt good. It felt good just standing in the darkness hearing rain move through the woods around me and listening as big water droplets cascaded down through the Bec. It felt good breathing in air that just a few seconds before had been heavy and muggy but now was saturated with chill, misty freshness, and charged with that electric tension that all rains carry when they first come upon you.

The horses whinnied through the darkness and I whinnied back to let them know who it was, and the rain carried their horsy odor over to me, and the odor of wet hay and manure, and mud. I liked thinking of the horses there in their thatch-roofed stalls calling to me, maybe twitching their ears as they smelled me.

Then all of a sudden a gust of wind burst out of nowhere, swirling the rain in under the tree and shaking the Bec's stored-up droplets onto me. There went my dry shoes, so now nothing kept me from running into the rain, splashing and listening to my breath, and to the wind and the rain in the woods beside me, as dawn's first light started washing the sky.

Times like this, you feel alive, feel that maybe it's right that all we're supposed to do as humans is just live our lives moment by moment, paying close attention to all the details, until it's over.

NAMELESS BABY AT LA TRINIDAD

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; September 28, 2007

Last Sunday Pancho, a visiting photographer and I went up to La Trinidad, the tiny mountain community famous as the jumping-off point for those wishing to visit Hoya de La Luz, one of Mexico's most impressive "deep pits."

At La Trinidad we visited a two-room house equipped with solar panels for electricity. The señora there invited us for coffee and tacos. As we talked she hand-patted her tortillas into existence using locally grown blue corn kernels, then she roasted the tortillas on a comal over a wood-fire atop a four-legged, elevated fireplace.

The photographer, seeing all the kids standing around, asked the señora, who looked maybe 35 or 40, how many kids she had. Thirteen. A baby was in the backroom on one of the house's two beds. The baby was a grandchild, the mother being one of the kids helping with the tortillas, and she was either 13 or 14.

The photographer asked what the baby's name was, but it didn't have one.

As we descended from La Trinidad I wanted to confirm my guess that the family was waiting to name the kid until they could get to town and have it baptized, so I asked about it. "I don't know why it's still unnamed," the photographer said. "It's not because of their religion. I've always wondered, is it laziness, or what? Sometimes I think it's just that the new kid is more like a new dog, just another body in the house. Thirteen kids in that house... ! Sometimes in these isolated communities babies go for two or three years before they get a name!"

I remember once reading about such a thing, maybe in a village in Asia. Someone explained that the mortality rate was so high among children that parents often waited until they were more or less sure that the child would live before they gave it a name.

Losing a named child somehow was harder than losing one without a name.

NEW ATOLE

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; October 3, 2010

Today, Sunday, I have two invitations to visit Maya friends celebrating the "Day of The New Atole." Atole (ah-TOH-leh) is a cherished, traditional, indigenous, corn-based drink found all across Mexico, drunk on many occasions. Sometimes it's sweetened and flavored so that it's really delicious, and pretty caloric.

What's special about today is that fresh sweetcorn is available to make it from. In fact, the Day of New Atole isn't a fixed date. The

celebration takes place when a family's milpa, or traditional cornfield, begins producing sweetcorn.

"This is one of the most anticipated days of the year," my friend Bibiano tells me. "Everyone has just been waiting, so now we'll pick the very sweetest, most tender ears of corn, cut off and grind the kernels to form the moist paste called masa. We'll knead the masa real well, then dissolve it while mixing in water until it forms a smooth emulsion. Then we'll cook it until it's just perfect."

The ceremony of the New Atole varies from family to family. Normally the New Atole is so sweet naturally and tastes so good that nothing is added. It's just sweetcorn and water. Often there's no ceremony associated with it, but Luis of the milpa tells me what his family is doing today:

"When the atole is ready we'll fill 13 jícaras (traditional bowls made from round, gourdlike fruits of the Calabash Tree) and carry them to the milpa, where we'll evenly place the jícaras all around. Beside each jícara we'll leave two of the largest, most perfect ears from the milpa. You'll have a jícara with two ears, another jícara and two ears, and so forth. We'll wait maybe half an hour so the Alux {forest gnome} can feast, and then we ourselves will drink the New Atole, and eat the sweetcorn."

People think of this celebration as marking that moment of the year when afternoon rains slowly begin petering out, the air becomes drier, and overall it starts growing cooler. The rainy season begins to end as the dry season begins to begin. In fact, right on cue, most of this week has been dry, and one morning it was so cool that I had to put on a sweatshirt. It was 72° F (22° C).

LAGO ENCINILLAS

Notes from a birding trip through Mexico, north-central Chihuahua State, between Júarez and Chihuahua City; October 6, 1996

According to the map a lake called Laguna Encinillas lies along the main highway some 210 kilometers (130 miles) south of the dunes. On the day my water runs out I hike back to the road and catch a bus south.

El Lucero, Ahumada, Moctezuma, El Sueco, Arados, El Carrizalillo... The map shows the highway passing through these towns between Samalayuca and the lake. On the map the nearest town to Laguna Encinillas is Arados, so that's where I tell the bus driver I want to get off.

But the bus driver, who must have driven this stretch a thousand times, says there's no town along the highway called Arados. I say that on the left there'll be a lake called Laguna Encinillas. He knows about a lake on the left, but it's not called Laguna Encinillas, and there's no town of any size even halfway near the lake. I ask to be let off as close as possible to the lake he knows about. I've seen maps list ghost towns before, just to fill up empty spaces in desert regions.

It turns out that along the entire road the only settlement with more than one permanent-looking, occupied building is Ahumada, where we stop for a break. With a population of maybe a thousand, Ahumada survives on a little ranching, some irrigated orchards, and the fact that it's the only stop for buses and trucks between Juárez and the Chihuahua City area, a total distance of 350 kilometers (220 miles). With empty desert all around, Ahumada is bustling, noisy, and self-absorbed in the manner of someone keeping obsessively busy trying to ignore their loneliness and vulnerability.

Eventually the bus driver nods to me in the mirror above his head and points with his chin off toward the east. Like quicksilver shimmering in the mid-afternoon sunlight, there's the promised lake maybe fifteen kilometers (ten miles) away, across an unbroken plain of small trees and grass, and just this side of a barren ridge rising into a meager cluster of clouds.

The driver asks if I'm sure I want to disembark in such a God-forsaken place. Hearing that this is exactly what I'm looking for, he dramatically, even theatrically, rolls the bus to a slow stop, looks at me as if I'm making a very big mistake, and opens the door.

RUNNING RARÁMURIS

Notes from a birding trip through Mexico, just south of Creel near Barranca de Cobre, in north-central Chihuahua State; October 9, 1996

Sometimes Tarahumara Indians enter the campground to accompany the two men theoretically renting canoes to visitors to the lake. When the visitors are younger than about fifteen years they're nearly always running.

The very moment young Tarahumara children see me, they run toward me full speed, come to a fast stop just steps away, then beg for pesos. As I hiked from town to the campground, for a good fifteen minutes I watched a Tarahumara girl perhaps five to seven years old running down a trail in the valley paralleling the road. She was barefooted and kept her back erect in good jogging style. When she reached the gate at the trail's end she simply turned around and ran back. In Tarahumara villages, the favorite toy seems to be a hoop, which children run behind, keeping it rolling with a stick.

Tarahumara are famous for their running. The name they call themselves, Rarámuri, means "those with fast feet."

PANUCHOS, SALBUTES & SOPES

Written in Yokdzonot and issued from a ciber in nearby Pisté, Yucatán; October 13, 2008

Yokdzonot's ecotourism committee was on hand to welcome me, about a dozen folks, and after a bit of talking they offered us a meal of panuchos. Actually, they were non-standard panuchos, for regular panuchos contain meat of various kinds, and my hosts were kind enough to prepare special vegetarian ones for me.

In Mexico lots of dishes look like panuchos. There's just something in a Mexican that likes the idea of heaping shredded and sliced tasty stuff atop a tortilla.

Panuchos begin with a corn tortilla stuffed with bean paste and hard-boiled egg. This is fried, then garnished in various ways. A typical panucho might have atop it macerated chicken breast and marinated onion strips. My special vegetarian one was topped with shredded onion, cabbage and a slice of tomato. The creation really comes alive when you smear it with fiery habenero sauce.

If you build a panucho but use a tortilla not stuffed with bean paste, it was explained, you get a salbute. On the other hand, if you do use a bean-stuffed tortilla but put ham and cheese atop it but no other kind of meat, then that's a sope.

I'm sure these concepts change from region to region so don't get upset if you think a panucho is a little different.

OFF THE VOLCANO

Written at Yerba Buena and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; October 15, 2007

On Thursday morning, October 4th, I catch a bus at the entrance road to the park surrounding the volcano known as Nevado Toluca,

in central Mexico west across a mountain range from Mexico City. The rest of the day is spent busing across the cities of Toluca and Mexico City. The distance doesn't look great on a map but this is the second-largest metropolitan area in the world, road organization doesn't make much sense to a North American mind, there are endless detours and surprises, and it takes a while.

At 3:30 AM the next morning I awaken aboard a bus entering Villahermosa in the state of Tabasco. In past trips from the US to the Yucatan this was the point at which my journey southward ended, I made a U-turn eastward following the Gulf of Mexico's southernmost shore, and began heading northward into the Yucatan.

This time, however, as dawn approaches I let the bus to Mérida leave without me. Instead I hike a few blocks to the second-class bus terminal and buy a ticket to a little town a couple of slow-bus hours south of Villahermosa, to Pichucalco, in the state of Chiapas. Chiapas is Mexico's southernmost state, up against Guatemala. Pichucalco is a colorful little town lying at the base of Chiapas's mountains, and entering those beautiful and troubled mountains amounts to a major policy decision for anyone, so most buses coming south from Villahermosa don't run any farther south than this.

The first seconds after stepping from the bus in Pichucalco I know I'm in a completely different cultural milieu from what I've experienced the last year in Querétaro and before that in the Yucatán. For one thing, the music blaring from nearby radios is marimba -- perky music played on the free-standing, wood-block musical instrument often referred to as the xylophone. A tiny lady in a blue dress carries an orange plastic bag out of which arches the long, slender neck of an old, white hen, looking backwards with a wide-eyed look on her face saying she knows she'll never see that view again, or maybe any other view at all.

The decibel level here is higher than farther north, but homier in its various origins, less industrial. People are more informal and outgoing. Instead of calling me "Don" as in Querétaro everyone calls me "Tío," which technically means "Uncle," but effectively it's what

you call any old fellow you don't know what else to call, but you feel like you need to call him something: "Tío, wanna buy some pig cracklings?" "Tío, what're you doing here?" "Tío, maybe you need a little drink?" These people around the bus station are continually cutting up, laughing hard, like kids on a fieldtrip, but this is everyday real life for them and, especially in this heavy heat and humidity, I wonder how they maintain such an energy level and good humor day after day.

After a big, beautiful two-dollar breakfast of eggs scrambled with onions, tomatoes and chili, and refried beans sprinkled with crumbly white cheese, and all the fresh corn tortillas and red hot-sauce dipped from a stone molcajete I can eat I enter a small local bus with open windows you can hang out of pointed upslope and we launch into a slow, gear-grinding, stop-for-anyone-halfway-looking-like-they-need-a ride trip all immersed in marimba music into the Chiapas highlands.

Two or three hours later, in chilly, pine-scented air, I disembark at an access road I know well from a time before these Newsletters began and descend to the gathering of buildings known as Yerba Buena, which means "Good Herb."

YERBA BUENA

Written at Yerba Buena and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; October 15, 2007

Sometime in the late 70s or early 80s, I think, I was wandering in the Chiapas highlands when I stumbled upon Yerba Buena, a hospital clinic offering basic medical care, often for free, to the area's desperately poor Tzotzil-speaking indigenous population. The clinic was operated by Seventh-Day Adventists from the US. Despite my aversion to all religions, I liked what the Adventists were doing.

Now the hospital is abandoned. The cloud-forest nature reserve that earlier served to provide pure water for the hospital community has been occupied by militant campesinos, or poor farmers. Some of the most majestic, biologically diverse forest I've ever seen has been converted to weedy, eroding cornfields. Someone with an uncertain right to do so -- the question is before the courts now -- occupies the former hospital and surrounding buildings, refusing to leave.

Aggressive words are painted on Yerba Buena's buildings declaring that they have been taken possession of by militant campesinos. In badly spelled Spanish the sign reads, "Owner get out. Taken by Battle Group II in Rebellion. The land is ours. AC get out. EZLN."

AC is an Adventist organization supporting Yerba Buena. The EZLN is known by Northerners as the Zapotista National Liberation Army, which conducted an uprising here a few years ago and which still occupies, or liberates -- depending on your perspective -- several communities, but not here.

On the main highway above Yerba Buena, land occupied by another militant campesino organization, CIOAC, is proclaimed with a sign and a flag, the sign reading "Taken by CIOAC." Most road signs here have "CIOAC" painted on them. So does the dwelling I'm living in.

But, these declarations and the flag are several years old. There's a feeling in the area that things are settling down, people are sick of confrontation and violence, and want to think about other things.

That's why I've returned. At least one document I've seen this week describes me as the Director of a development plan focusing on "Ecotourism, bird-watching and cave exploration." The "cave exploration" part rests on the fact that nearby lies the Soconusco cave complex with more than 50 kilometers of caves, including three of the ten deepest vertical caves in Mexico.

INTO TÉMORIS

Notes from a birding trip through Mexico, southwestern Chihuahua State October 16, 1996

Finally I round a corner and there's Témoris in a shallow valley below. It looks like any Mexican town with a population of about 1,500, and sounds that way, too. Even from a kilometer away there is a continual din of Diesel-engine noise, a sawmill's buzz, a merchant with a loudspeaker hawking bananas, papayas, and pineapples, the school bell ringing, dogs barking and roosters crowing. All this is remarkable because the binoculars show that the single gravel road leading into town from the other side is as narrow, pot-holed, and untraveled as this one. Témoris has one street paved for a short distance and on that brief paved section there's something of a traffic jam! Témoris is the best tempest in a teapot I've ever seen.

In town I'm directed to the house of Manuela Guerrera, known to fix meals for strangers. She is astonished that a man like me comes from so far away just to look at birds. It is a revelation to her and something she will be talking about, I judge from her amazement, for years to come. She says that everyone in Témoris is like everyone else, and that, typically, even people who visit Témoris are only like people already there. But, a man like me, just looking at birds...

I ask her if she knows anything about birds.

"Absolutely nothing," she replies with an exasperated shrug of the shoulders. "Except for the swallows. They come in the spring, April maybe, perch on the wires across the street and they look here and they look there and they fly around, they make nests, they raise their young, and then they fly away in the fall. They left here several weeks ago."

Manuela probably refers to Barn Swallows or Violet-green Swallows. Dozens of the latter right now line up along a wire just down the

street, twittering to one another and flitting about as excitedly as if it were the middle of summer.

I ask my hostess if my plan of reaching the Pacific lowlands by taking the road on the other side of town is a good one. It's impossible, she tells me, because water is over the road now and I might get stuck for days waiting to cross the low spot. The only dependable route to the coast is by train.

Visualizing myself stranded along a flooded bank someplace inside a cloud of black flies, I decide that hiking back the way I have just come would not be unpleasant.

GILBERTO ALMERÓN GONZALEZ

Notes from a birding trip through Mexico, southwestern Chihuahua State October 16, 1996

In the afternoon a barefoot fellow on a burro enters the ridgetop cornfield above the road behind me. He dismounts, stretches, gazes into the canyon awhile, spots me on my rock, removes his broad sombrero and waves at me with it. He spends half an hour wandering all over the cornfield, which has already been picked and now is straw-colored and dry, then mounts up and rides away. Sometime later, here he comes riding down the road, coming for a visit.

Gilberto Almerón Gonzalez is a handsome, bright-eyed, self-assured boy of about fourteen, and his burro's name is Mentiras, which in Spanish means "lies." Gilberto's little brother told his mother he wanted to eat squash, so Gilberto and Mentiras were sent to the cornfield to look for them. Planting squash among the corn is an ancient Indian practice, but Gilberto says his family doesn't belong to any Indian group. Animals seem to have eaten all the squashes

except one about the size of a basketball, one with such a hard rind that Gilberto says he'll use a rock to break it open.

Gilberto holds my field guide to birds in the manner of someone utterly unfamiliar with how books should be held. He tries hard to be delicate with it but ends up scrunching and soiling the pages. I show him the picture of the most conspicuous bird in these parts, the Gray-breasted Jay, and he calls it Tchwee, which is an excellent approximation of the call it makes. He says the Tchwee eats his corn. Then Gilberto flips some pages, points to a pigeon and tells me that it's an águila, an eagle, and that it eats his family's goats.

Gilberto's error isn't as absurd as it seems. He's unfamiliar with how the scale of illustrations can change from page to page. Both pigeons and eagles are heavy-set, thick-necked birds, so strictly in terms of shape they are vaguely similar. More interesting is Gilberto's suggestion that eagles in this valley capture his family's goats.

I'll bet Gilberto's goat-eating eagle is the Golden. Immature Golden Eagles even show white areas on the undersides of their wings, and at the base of their tails, which approximates the patterning of some pigeons.

However, I suspect that if any eagle ever ate one of his family's goats it was a long time ago, maybe even generations. I think that right now Gilberto is introducing me to a tiny part of his family's spoken tradition. He is repeating something he has heard his father or grandfather say and in five or six years, if he still doesn't watch television, he will speak of goat-eating eagles to his own child.

MARÍA'S ORANGE FINCHES

Notes from a birding trip through Mexico, above Xoconostle on the Sierra de Alvarez, northeastern San Luis Pososí, October 20, 1996

Arriving in Xoconostle on a Sunday morning an hour after dawn, frost still whitens a few grassblades and loose chicken feathers on the ground. As the bus pulls away and I strap on the backpack, diminutive María López, an old woman keeping warm with a red shawl wrapped over her head and across most of her face in Moslem style, stands not far away looking at me. She operates a tiny roadside hole-in-the-wall selling softdrinks and crackers. From her I buy a couple of days' worth of carbohydrates.

María cannot suppress her questions. At my mention of birds her dark eyes peeping through the slit in the red shawl flush with pleasure. She asks me to follow her into the tiny courtyard behind her shack.

Two small, wire birdcages hang on the unfinished boards constituting her house's walls. One cage holds three birds, the other four. On the cages' floors are split-open pricklypear fruits, xoconostles, their pulpy flesh scarlet and glistening. Also there's alpiste -- freshly cut clusters of pods of a turniplike plant, the pods gorged with B-B-size seeds, and sold in Mexican markets as the preferred food for caged birds. María tells me each bird's name and history, says that such birds are very common in the desert around Xoconostle, that they sing beautifully, and then she asks me by what name such birds are called in English.

I am confused. Instantly my credibility as a gringo bird-specialist flies out the window.

From the short, thick bill it's easy to see that this is a kind of finch, but the males are pale orange, and I can't recall having ever seen anything orange in Mexico. I explain my astonishment, and bring out my bird book to show María that it must be closely related to strawberry-red House Finches, which I know very well, but these orange birds...

María laughs like a child and says that of course everybody knows that before these birds are caught they are strawberry red. It's just that once they're caged up, they turn orange, and nobody knows why.

I take leave of María and begin hiking upward and eastward. The low, sparse, mostly spiny, cactus-rich vegetation along the road is indeed home to innumerable strawberry-red, male House Finches who sing their pretty, twittering melodies even on this cold morning in late October. It's sad to think about these birds fading once they're taken from the wild. However, it's hard to be angry with María for caging them.

She takes the best care of them she can, even feeding them xoconostles, which I know the birds love. I know this because Sahagún, the Spanish priest who during the 1500's wrote the history of the Aztecs, relates that the Aztecs also kept House Finches in cages, calling them by the name of nochtótotl, which meant "birds of the cactus fruits."

THE LAYING OF A TURKEY EGG

Written at Yerba Buena and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; October 22, 2007

Inés told me that one of the turkey hens she kept penned up at night was laying eggs somewhere out in the overgrown abandoned garden and she, Inés, wanted to find the nest and move it into the pen so the dogs wouldn't get the eggs. Already after just a few seconds of my inattention a dog had stolen a fresh chicken egg from my table, broken it on the ground and lapped it up, so we knew that the egg-eating-dog scenario was a possibility.

Once the nest was found, each day Inés would remove that day's egg as soon as it was laid and save it inside her house. When a dozen eggs were collected she'd move them all into a corner of the pen and put the turkey hen atop them. Over the hen and her nest Inés would place a box fixed so the hen could look out through slits but not get off her nest, and then after three days of sitting on the nest the hen would continue incubating her eggs.

But first we had to locate the nest somewhere out there in half an acre of waist-high weeds. Happily, Inés knew the trick for doing that.

I arrived about ten in the morning expecting us to put the trick to use right then but Inés stepped outside, looked at her pen for a few seconds, and said her turkey wasn't ready. We'd know when she was ready because she'd cluck in a nervous manner and pace back and forth.

When three hours later I descended the slope again from fifty yards away I could hear an anxious turkey clucking and when we approached the pen the hen was pacing back and forth. She didn't really need to do so, because we already could see that she needed to lay her egg immediately, but Inés showed me how she could put her finger up the hen's rear end and actually feel the hard egg right at the opening; "coronado," Inés called it, "crowned."

Inés placed the turkey on the ground and then we watched. That old hen with her tail bent curiously low zigzagged all over the yard before she even entered the garden, then zigzagged some more, and went to the far end and circled back with her head held low. Obviously she didn't want us to know where her nest was. Then I lost sight of her but Inés didn't. After maybe fifteen minutes Inés announced that the hen had settled down inside a particularly thick clump of weeds beneath the spreading guava tree.

We went and stood about ten feet away and could hear the hen quietly clucking. "In about fifteen minutes," Inés diagnosed, and she was right on the mark.

The turkey hen clucked a few minutes, then was quiet, and finally began clucking in a different way, louder and somehow contented-sounding. Now finally I could see her as she dragged straw and grassblades over her nest for a little added camouflage. Then she sneaked away still keeping her head low, but now with her tail held normally.

HORACIO'S CLOUD

Notes from a birding trip through Mexico, atop Nevado de Toluca Volcano ±16 air-kms south of Toluca; elev. ±4,250 m (±13,900 ft), Mexico State; October 26, 1996

In the afternoon storm clouds boil over the western ridge threatening to wash back and upward to engulf the slope so I hike back toward the hut. Arriving there with sleet bouncing off my shoulders and certain gusts of wind almost knocking me to the ground I open the hut's heavy wooden door to find a companion for the night, a young man named Horacio. He's ridden up here on his mountain bike along off-road trails from Toluca. Handsome and muscular, he sits at the hut's wobbly wooden table writing a children's story by candlelight. Instantly we're friends, and we talk into the night.

Next morning I take off for the crater again but see nothing I hadn't seen the day before. This time I spend more time sightseeing. From Nevado's northern slope the view into the broad valley below is majestic. Through binoculars nearly every major building and street in Toluca can be recognized. At midday I return to the hut to find Horacio gazing into the valley, too. He draws my attention to the fact that from horizon to horizon the sky is clear, except exactly over Toluca.

There, floating like an enormous mushroom with a bulbous cap, a dazzlingly white, billowing cumulus cloud casts its shadow onto the

city below. Horacio says he's been watching the cloud grow from a single wisp, and that during other visits he's seen something curious many times: Hot air from Toluca's pavement and buildings rise into the sky, cools, and as the moisture in this air condenses, substantial clouds like this one form.

"For the rest of the day, keep an eye on this cloud," Horacio suggests. "Sometimes the very same cloud stays visible until dusk."

A couple of hours later the cloud has drifted toward the northwest and it's developed a rounded thunderhead towering so high that it spreads into a broad anvil shape. Above Toluca, a second cloud has formed just like the first.

By dusk the sky all around has grown moody with dark-bottomed clouds, but we can still pick out our midday cloud, now grown into a massive purple bank, an immense thunderhead looming over smaller storms all around it. It's too far away to guess at its distance. Between this first cloud and Toluca now there rise four big clouds just like the first, all in a row and all having formed over Toluca.

At nightfall an impressive display of lightning takes place beneath our distant cloud, though it's too far away to hear the thunder. Surely by now this storm is in the next state, in Querétaro or Guanajuato.

DON JORGE'S EAR MEDICINE

Written in Yokdzonot and issued from a ciber in nearby Pisté, Yucatán; October 27, 2008

Deep in the forest I met Don Jorge, an old fellow who solemnly looks right into your eyes as you speak. Carrying a tattered burlap bag over his shoulder he was heading toward his cornfield, but he seemed eager to tell me things, especially when I mentioned

medicinal plants. Suddenly his eyes started darting around, looking for a certain plant he wanted to tell me about, but it wasn't there.

"It cures fungal infection beneath your toenails," he said. I remarked that it was too bad he couldn't find the plant because I'd like to try it on my ear fungus. In no time he was dragging me down the trail until we found the plant.

"It's Ek-balam," he said, snipping off a leaf and showing me the clear, thick liquid oozing out. "Put this on skin with a fungus and it'll cure it. It burns, but it'll cure it!"

The plant was unflowering but from its spicy, crushed-leaf odor and the scurfy mat of silvery-reddish, multi-pointed (stellate) hairs mantling the leaves below I could guess that it was a member of the genus Croton, of the Euphorbia Family, and when I looked up Ek-balam in Martinez's Las Plantas Medicinales de Mexico my suspicions were supported. Several plants go by the name of Ek-balam but it looks like ours may be Croton cortesianus. The book says that this plant's juice is used as a caustic agent when dealing with skin problems.

I put juice in my ear, but not deeply enough to touch the eardrum, and it did burn considerably. The itching stopped for about a day but I'd also been using a drugstore ointment for athlete's foot, so I still can't say whether it works

GRINDING PINOLE

Written at Yerba Buena and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; October 29, 2007

Several times while in Querétaro I mentioned drinking atole (ah-TOH-leh), which was ground seeds or grains of various kinds mixed

with water and cooked until a thick, tasty emulsion was formed, often flavored with sugar or honey, cinnamon and/or other condiments. Atole is an indigenous American drink and people here drink it, too. My favorite from Querétaro, made from ground sunflower seeds, doesn't seem to be present here, though.

Pinole (pee-NOH-leh) is another indigenous American drink, probably more typical here than in Querétaro. Friday when I dropped by Inés's she was holding a big crock of yellow corn kernels she'd just parched atop her earthenware comal, or griddle, and I asked what she was up to. "About to make pinole," she said, with turkeys gathered below her table waiting for dropped grains.

The simplest pinole is made with nothing more than finely ground parched corn (we reground the first grinding to make it finer) added to water and drunk. The poorest of campesinos carry with them to their fields a little bag of pinole, some water and nothing more. However, people of greater means add sugar or honey, cinnamon and other things.

Inés wanted to grind some fancy pinole, so our second crock of parched corn had sprinkled atop it some cinnamon bark and cacao seeds. People here buy cinnamon as tan, woody-looking, elongate strips of bark from the Cinnamon-tree, Cinnamomum zeylanicum. When you grind the bark, the cinnamon odor is much fresher and more pungent than can be produced by the bottled product northerners have to settle for.

The cacao seeds were black, crack-skinned beans from downslope where Cacao trees, Theobroma cacao, are grown in the lowlands of Tabasco State. To make chocolate the beans are removed from the fruit and fermented. Our beans hadn't been fermented but Inés had parched them so they'd grind into a dry powder along with the other ingredients.

As I ground the three ingredients a wonderful fragrance of wholesome parched corn mingled with sweet cinnamon and pure, unadulterated chocolate blossomed around me. People who have

experienced only the North's foods flavored with overpowering measures of industrial-strength condiments simply can't imagine how appealing a fresh pinole can smell concocted with modest, tradition-sanctioned amounts of simple spices.

Inés said that many people would have added ground cloves, black peppercorns and sugar into their mixture as well, but she's an Adventist who believes that such ingredients harm the body, plus the result wouldn't be as tasty anyway.

THE SILVERSMITH

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in Taxco, Guerrero, probably sometime in 1995

In a tiny, dark room inside the spacious Platería Gloria of Taxco, Guerrero, silversmith Javier Pérez Pérez sits hunched over a silver bracelet. Javier works furiously fast and talks so hurriedly that his words jumble together. At first he thinks I'm just a nosey tourist so he pays no attention. However, when I tell him what I'm writing, and ask what he'd like to tell my readers about being a Mexican silversmith, he lays his tools down and looks at me wide-eyed. His expression seems to say that he is profoundly pleased that someone is finally interested in what he has to say.

"It's hard, hard work," he says, "and people just don't know or don't care how much work goes into every little piece. I need four or five days to make a set consisting of necklace, earrings, and bracelet. First I must fashion a thin plate of silver, have the plan all outlined on paper, and then create the thing. I have to use an acid to make the silver white, and that burns my lungs. But what really gets damaged is the eyes, having to work so close all the time, always paying attention to tiny details. Sometimes I work all day and then all night, then other times not so much. If someone makes an order for the

next day, yes, I may have to work all day and all night. At the moment I've been working for seven days without a day off. No, people just don't know or don't care how much work goes into these things."

TALKING WITH THE INVADERS

Written at Yerba Buena and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; October 29, 2007

I was told that a government biologist would be arriving on a certain day and that he and I should survey what remains of Yerba Buena Reserve. The idea has been to establish a nature trail through it, and for me to monitor migrant birds there, in conjunction with an international study focusing on overwintering wood-warblers of the genus Dendroica.

"But isn't all that land still under invader control?" I asked.

"Yes, but a new governor has been elected, he's promised to give the invaders land elsewhere so they'll move out and everything needs to move forward."

This didn't jive with the militant attitude I see the invaders taking every day. I spoke to others about it, including Inés, who flatly said, "If you go onto the reserve land the invaders will regard it as aggression."

So I went to talk to the invader leader, and he agreed with Inés. He told me that when the government biologist arrived we should go visit him.

Next day, the biologist arrived five hours late. All morning the leader had kept the other invaders waiting, but they'd all left about half an hour before the biologist got there. Bad start. Now the leader called

his group back together, about half returning, all men, twenty-five of them.

We formed a big circle, most invaders standing with their arms crossed across their chests and with grave looks on their faces. Speaking Tzotzil, the leader explained who we were and asked the men if we should be given permission to enter reserve land they'd confiscated. A discussion of about forty-five minutes ensued in which very little was said about our studies, but a great deal about the past's broken promises and misunderstandings.

Standing there in intense, high-elevation sunlight, the sun in my eyes, deliberate-sounding Tzotzil alternating with musical Spanish, I felt as if I were in an old, scratchy, black-and-white daguerreotype showing representatives of the US Cavalry in powwow with Sioux tribesmen of the Old West.

The men conducted themselves in a dignified manner and presented their case clearly and convincingly. Basically they told us that the government had broken many promises, and their physical possession of the land was their only bargaining chip, so yielding on any point would only weaken their position.

In short, until they get land elsewhere the biologist and I will not be permitted to design a nature trail or conduct a study of overwintering Dendroica warblers on the confiscated reserve land.

HURRICANE RINA

Issued from Mayan Beach Garden Inn on the Caribbean coast 20 kms north of Mahahual, in the state of Quintana Roo; October 30, 2011

Early this week Hurricane Rina formed in the Caribbean and headed our way. Early Wednesday morning when its winds reached 110mph (177kph), it was pointed right at us, though the experts predicted that the storm would jag northward before making landfall. Still, on Wednesday, people here were nervous. In area towns long lines formed to buy essentials. In chilly rain that morning I shoveled sand into sandbags and cut big coconuts from palms, to keep them from becoming cannonballs.

Right before dusk on Wednesday with Rina still approaching and already so close that the eastern horizon was a dark, dramatic and grim thing to look at, the wind calmed, a warm heaviness came into the air, and Marcia said, "The calm before the storm... "

Right at dusk, beneath heavily overcast skies, the landscape suddenly lit up and grew amber colored. There was a heavy, muffled, vacuum-like feeling in the air and everything, even the green palms, seemed to be glowing with internal amber light. There was more light than could be accounted for by such a cloudy sky, and there were no shadows. It was as if light came out of the ground, and the light was amber. I've read that such phenomena are caused by sunlight from the setting sun to the west reflecting off towering storm clouds to the east. Now we know that if you have a hurricane to the east, not a normal storm, the effect is even more eerie.

Before turning in, Marcia said that there was a tremendous amount of rain poised to fall upon us. I figured that that Wednesday night would be a rough one.

But, neither heavy rain nor high wind materialized. By Thursday morning Rina was moving away, toward Cozumel. This summer I've experienced more turbulence from unnamed "areas of disturbed weather" drifting over us than from Rina. The animated radar showing Rina's approach revealed that exactly when she was about to be upon us in all her rage, suddenly she jagged to the north, as if bouncing off a glass wall -- just as the experts had forecast.

So, that's my closest call with a hurricane, and maybe it's a good thing that my most vivid memory of it always will be of those few moments before dusk when it seemed that everything in the world was glowing with its own internal amber light.

BALCHÉ, THE SACRED BREW

Written at Genesis Retreat in Ek Balam, Yucatán; October 30, 2006

One of the most striking plants flowering now in Genesis's garden and on the land as well is a much-spreading small tree with glossy, compound leaves reminiscent of Wisteria leaves, and bearing upright racemes of purple, Bean-Family flowers. It's the Balché, genus Lonchocarpus. From the bark of this handsome tree, and some other species of the same genus, the Maya have for centuries brewed their slightly fermented, rather bitter "beer," also known as balché.

When I saw the tree I asked Pedro, one of Genesis's workers, whether farmers here still use the drink balché when seeking the Creator's favor upon establishing a new cornfield. Balché is mentioned in ancient Maya texts.

"They do," Pedro replied, "plus they offer it when asking for rain, too."

I'd figured this to be the case, since balché sometimes was offered at cornfield dedications near Telchac Pueblo, where I was last winter, and Ek Balam is far more traditional than there. Still, this information set me to thinking.

For, traditionally, the cornfields where balché is offered lie at the very center of Maya society. When Miguel Asturias received his 1967 Nobel Prize for Literature for writing about Guatemala's Maya during

a time of social strife, the name of his book was "Hombres de Maíz" -- "Men of Corn." The traditional importance of corn to the Maya can't be overstated.

Yet, cornfields here, as at Telchac Pueblo, are being abandoned by the Maya. For one thing, NAFTA has caused cheap US corn products to flood the Mexican market, making it economically unfeasible for small farmers to plant it.

Still, how can it be reconciled that on the one hand the Maya here continue to consecrate their cornfields with balché, yet on the other simply abandon their fields, choosing instead to live new kinds of lives not centered around corn?

Lee, Genesis's owner, has attended several ceremonies in which balché was offered. First, it surprises me that she was permitted to attend because traditionally women were strictly forbidden to be present at such ceremonies, lest they pollute matters. Also, she saw that when the ceremony was over the men abandoned a large amount of balché at the field. She asked why the men didn't take it home with them.

"The men would be ashamed to be seen carrying it with them," someone explained.

What awful and strange tensions must occupy these Maya minds as old ways are pushed aside -- as radios blare Spanish hip-hop rap "music" from huts with thatch roofs and stick walls, which is happening across the road as I type these very words.

COLD FRONT #4 & THE DAY OF THE DEAD

Written at Yerba Buena and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; November 5, 2007

Mexicans assign their cold fronts numbers. Most cold fronts peter out before reaching this far south, the same latitude as Guatemala, but over a week ago Cold Front #4 not only made it this far south but also stalled out right above us. As I issued the last Newsletter a week ago it was raining and most of the time ever since it's kept raining.

Downslope on the Gulf of Mexico side the state of Tabasco is 80% underwater and the major city of Villahermosa has been mostly abandoned. Lowland Chiapas also is flooded. One of Inés's brothers lost everything and his family now is among many thousands of refugees.

Last Thursday I ran out of food and had to walk to town, rain or not. It happened that Thursday was the first day of the four-day celebration of the Day of the Dead.

In other Newsletters I've described how people construct and decorate altars in their homes, then place on the altars pictures of dead people and things the dead liked, maybe cups of chocolate, bottles of tequila or, if they liked to dance, maybe a dancing figurine. Inés tells me that here there's an extra twist. The altar consists of seven steps, each step supposed to lead the wandering spirit back to the netherworld where they belong.

Inés was a bit cagey about going into details because, being a good Adventist, she says she doesn't believe in all that stuff. Because of the rain I didn't get to circulate much to see things for myself, but I did run into a group of boys in a rainy woods stuffing pine needles into bags, the greenery destined for their family altars.

In other parts of Mexico I've been in during the celebration marigold blossoms have always been a conspicuous part of altar decoration. Marigolds reach their flowering peak at this season, creating lovely,

orange streaks in the dark green landscape where they're traditionally planted along the edges of cornfields.

When I got to the market area next to the Cathedral it was raining hard and most of the vendors had scattered. From all the marigolds littering the ground it was clear that earlier there'd been heavy commerce in them.

PASSING THROUGH FELIPE CARRILLO PUERTO

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; November 6, 2011

Last Sunday Don Bruce arrived at Mayan Beach Garden to fetch me back to Hacienda Chichen up at Chichén Itzá, for the winter tourist season. By the time we got underway already daylight was fading and it was looking like rain, so nearly our entire trip northward took place in the night as we passed in and out of mists and drizzles, and little Maya towns where water from the afternoon's downpour puddled deeply and still ran through the streets.

It's always pleasant passing through little Mexican towns in the early evening, Maya or not. They remind me of small-town Kentucky back in the 50s when everyone wasn't inside at that hour with their faces glued to some kind of screen. In little Mexican towns at dusk, people of all ages come out to see what's happening, to visit family, or sit in tiny restaurants with their elbows on red and white, metal Coca-Cola card tables laughing and nursing sodas.

At that hour, even dogs look particularly alert and good natured. Most stores, tiny ones, have no walls on their street sides so you can see inside them, their colorful and always-the-same-as-every-other-store's items cheerful and homey to look at. Limones, Uhmay, Señor,

Tusik, Tihosuco, Xtobil, Tixcacalcupul, in early evening and with so many people smiling and socially engaged, even the towns' names were friendly and celebratory.

You don't get lost in these towns, just drive straight through them, the main streets -- sometimes the only real streets -- perfectly identifiable as such by everyone. Except in Felipe Carrillo Puerto. There it's impossible to get from one side of town to the other without asking, unless you already know the way, because at one critical juncture there's no signage at all. When we traveled the same route six months earlier no signs had helped us coming from the other side, either. Once you realize you're lost, you just have to stop and ask, or have very good luck, for Felipe Carrillo Puerto is by far the biggest town in the region, until you get to Valladolid, which is bigger.

But, in the early evening, almost you don't mind getting lost in Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Once you know you're lost and you're going slowly down dark streets looking for the right person to ask for directions, you see nice things. Folks inside churches singing, their heads bobbing back and forth. Old men drinking together on somebody's doorstep. Little kids playing while mama watches hard just feet away.

Felipe Carrillo Puerto hasn't always presented such a congenial and homey image. The town was founded in 1850 by rebelling Maya during the Caste War, when it was called Chan Santa Cruz. It wasn't conquered by Mexican troops until 1901. The Caste War is one of the most interesting, bizarre, and overlooked, historical events in the Americas.

Traveling northward through the darkness, drizzle and those agreeable little towns, I thought about Felipe Carrillo Puerto's fight to protect Maya culture from outsiders. What's wrong with wanting to protect your own way of being, when you're not hurting anyone else? But, in this case, the foreigners won, and the homefolks lost many rights and privileges.

DAY'S END

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in the Merced Market, Mexico City, DF, probably sometime in 1995

It's completely dark as I walk along the Merced's southern perimeter. A drunk with a beer in his hands approaches and begins talking and shaking my hand.

"I'm a fish seller and I'm drunk because I worked so hard all day," he slurs. Before he can continue, another drunk comes up with a scowl on his face.

"What are you doing here?" he demands of me. "I've been seeing you walking around here all day. What are you doing here?"

Before I can extricate myself, yet a third man approaches, also a little drunk, but for the most part coherent. I fear that the three men, at a given signal, plan to mug me, so I break from their encirclement; as I'm making for the middle of the unloading zone, I'm relieved to see that only the last man is in pursuit. In the zone's center, where I have maximum visibility because of light issuing from the dozens of naked lightbulbs in comedores around the perimeter, I stop and let the man catch me. It turns out that all he wants is to talk.

He talks endlessly, not letting me excuse myself. Without making a scene by pushing him away physically, all I can do is to stand in the darkness as a very cold rain begins to fall, and listen. As he rambles on I peer through the Merced's open doors for what will be the last time. Merchants there are tying down their tarpaulins; in the comedores along the perimeter everyone is working hard. At last the blaring Conchamaca Cream advertisements have been replaced by laughter from the comedor area, and cheerful cumbia music.

"Bob Dylan," the man says, thumping me in the chest and fogging me with tequila breath. "You know Bob Dylan, right? I tell you, he came to Mexico, and you know why? He and I ate peyote together.

Peyote! Good Mexican plant! Only grown in a little place down in Oaxaca I know about. It doesn't make you hallucinate, just helps you see things as they really are. Bob Dylan! Our Mexican plants aren't like yours. Our plants let you see! Using our plants is like conducting a religious ceremony, a mass... !"

The drunk's unexpected reference to a mass stuns me with insight. For, it occurs to me that at this very moment here at the Merced, a kind of mass is indeed taking place. It is a mass in which hard-working, tired vendors and customers are taking part.

For, apart from all the dreams, hopes, and illusions we humans are subject to, there remains the fundamental truth that each of us shares a condition with all other humans, and indeed with all other of the Earth's living things; and that is, that, to survive, we must take into our bodies a rich assortment of nutrients. We must eat and drink wholesome foods.

Therefore, among the mere handful of human activities about which there can be no doubt as to their appropriateness and necessity, there is the mercado's mass-like coming together in one place to receive food. And it is further worth celebrating that this inescapable chore can be accompanied by laughter and music, in a workplace riotously alive with extravagant colors, odors, sounds, and every hue of humanity. ...

DESCENDING SPIRITS MAKING RAIN

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; November 6, 2011

On Tuesday, November 1st, at breakfast at Hacienda Chichen, just to have something to say, I remarked to my Maya friend Edgar that

yet another shower had begun, so apparently things were destined to stay lush and muddy awhile longer.

He replied, "Espíritus bajando" -- spirits coming down. It always rains like this at this time." Then he moved away to serve a visitor. When José the shaman came to eat with me I asked about Edgar's cryptic remark.

"It's the Día de los Difuntos, the Day of the Dead," he explained. "On this day spirits descend to the Earth to gather up souls, to lead them upwards. Spirits are pure energy so when they gather in the sky before coming here they concentrate their energies, that changes the atmospherics, so it rains... "

Notice that spirits are different from souls. Spirits are pure energy, but souls can be accompanied by visible features from their previous lives. And there are different degrees of spirits, the higher degrees possessing more energy. Under certain circumstances souls can be seen. Not all souls wandering on Earth after the deaths of their bodies return with the spirits. Some souls might wander for hundreds of years, or longer. Later Edgar told me that it'll rain again at the end of the month when the spirits come together again to lead the souls upward.

"It's all a bit complex," José admitted, seeing me trying to piece it all together.

In the afternoon José presided over the construction of an altar where offerings were left for wandering souls. It was still raining, as the spirits descended.

MAYA ENERGY

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; November 7, 2010

Often visitors to Chichén Itzá ruins, about a five minute stroll from my hut, return to the Hacienda speaking of the "energy" they felt when standing next to big Kukulkán Pyramid, the ruin's impressive centerpiece. I personally don't feel any special energy when I walk by the pyramid each week on my fruit-buying trip to Pisté, but I'm curious about this matter of "spiritual energy." I asked my shaman friend José about the Maya concept of spiritual energy, and how it relates to pyramids.

"There's just one spiritual energy," he said, "but it has two faces, day energy, and night energy. During the day, energy descends from the sky onto the pyramid's apex, then spreads out along the pyramid's flanks to enter the Earth all around. In the night, the opposite occurs, energy flowing from the Earth up the pyramid's sides and shooting out of the top, skyward. Your Maya hut is shaped like a pyramid, with energy coming and going off the roof's crest. Over a twenty-four hour period the day and night energies equalize. If you live in a traditional Maya hut, the result of the daily and nightly ebb and flow of energy is peace and contentment. When you dream, that's energy gathering from the Earth all around you, passing through you up into the hut, then shooting off the roof's crest, carrying your spirit far away, where you have experiences you recall as dreams... "

At this point we'd only begun getting into the matter. We hadn't even addressed how the shaman heals by harmonizing the body's energies, or how standing water loses its energy, but its energy can be restored with a certain ritual, holding the hands a certain way above the water, seven turns one way then seven the other...

But, though we'd only begun, that day at this point I stopped José, saying that, for the time being, that was enough to think about.

For, already I was looking forward to going to sleep that night in the hut's calm darkness visualizing the Earth's stored day-energy gathering in from all directions around me, concentrating in the

ground below my Cedro-plank bed, gushing up through me, up through the silent hut, the hut's sloping roof sides focusing the energy at its peak, then that energy like a flame in pure oxygen exploding into the night sky, drawing up unknown parts of me inside its dazzling, swirling currents and waves, diffusing parts of me out into the unified world of pure, loving energy...

PRINCES DZUL & LOR

Notes from a birding trip through Mexico, Mexico City, DF; November 7, 1996

On the subway back home a man with thick, horn-rimmed glasses, Indian features, a bad complexion, and slicked-downed hair sits next to me, asks if I speak Spanish, and in a friendly manner inquires what I'm doing in Mexico. Hearing about my project, he smiles.

"All I know about birds is a story my mother told me when I was a boy in the Yucatan," he says. I bend close to hear through the subway's rumble, and this is the story the man tells:

"Long ago there was a king in our part of the world, and he had two boys, Prince Dzul, and Prince Lor. Dzul was the firstborn, so he was the first in line to become king. He was a happy, friendly boy whom everyone in the kingdom loved. Lor was very different. He was so jealous of Dzul that he decided to kill him. But when the night arrived when Lor was planning to do this, suddenly some gnomes appeared and put a magic spell on him. His feet turned pigeon-toed and he grew a huge beak."

"Nonetheless, Lor managed to club Dzul to death. Just then the bushes parted, and out stepped the Spirit of the Forest, who said, 'What my gnomes started, I will finish. Since you want to fly as high as to be king, I will give you wings. So that you will learn to love

nature, I will give you green feathers. To punish you for the blood you have spilled, I will enable you to talk, but only in a way that no one understands.'"

"And so, Lor was turned into a parrot. Lor returned to the palace, but people treated him as a parrot. In disgrace, he flew into the forest."

"Today the soul of Prince Lor is purifying as his calls mingle with the songs of other birds. In fact, today his descendants have earned the respect of our people, and they call the green bird that speaks in a way that no one understands by the name of loro, in honor of Prince Lor."

In Spanish, the word for parrot is loro.

The story ends exactly as the man is rising to leave. The timing is so perfect that I half suspect him of exiting where he doesn't want to, just for the dramatic timing effect. The man smiles and disappears out the door.

DAY OF THE FAITHFUL DEAD

Issued from Hacienda San Juan Lizarraga one kilometer east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán; November 8, 2005

On Halloween Sunday I visited a friend in Mérida where a traditional altar for the celebration was set up. A wooden table was decked with burning candles and several pictures of dead family and friends. Next to the pictures were small offerings of food and drink the deceased had liked in life. The altar was pretty and neatly prepared, but a good bit different from the one I saw years ago when with a family of Nahuatl folks in the Eastern Sierra Madre foothills of the Mexican state of San Luis Potosí.

That altar had consisted of a free-standing, arched-roof structure about six feet tall with a shelf halfway up. It was constructed of bamboo and adorned with palm fronds, marigold flowers and other colorful leaves and flowers. On the shelf were placed candles, pictures, foods and drinks.

In the village marketplace, marigold blossoms had been sold just for this celebration. For, in that village, many marigold blossoms had been broken apart and their brightly orange parts strewn on the floor from the altar through the house, to create an orange trail. Outside the house, the marigold-petal trail joined other such orange trails to form a larger trail passing through town and leading to the cemetery. The idea was that wandering spirits would see the beautiful orange trail and follow it to the altars set up for them, seeing that they were being remembered and honored.

Roberto, San Juan's gardener, tells me that in the past special flowers and edible plants also had been grown in this area just for this yearly celebration, but that now you hardly ever see them. In town, some young people have even taken to dressing up and trick-or-treating, gringo style.

Eating, drinking and visiting friends and neighbors is a big part of the Faithful Dead celebration, and during this one I hit the jackpot. Not only was I invited to the Sunday meal but also Roberto brought me a big pile of freshly made tamales wrapped beautifully in banana leaves, and Darwin's mom sent a large bowl of atole, a traditional drink made of fresh sweetcorn smushed into an emulsion, sweetened and cooked.

A RAINY MORNING IN MÉRIDA

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; November 8, 2009

You think of Mérida as a sun-baked, dusty old colonial town with low, white adobe buildings and narrow streets built for horse-drawn carriages, and sidewalks barely wide enough for one person, but on Thursday morning a big rain came up changing the city's character completely. As I bused out of town I saw that effective drainage hadn't much been on the city planners' minds, or maybe there'd been no planners, for before long most streets became long, narrow ponds, our bus sloshing waves of gray water onto sidewalks and even through open doors of stores and homes.

Downspouts emptying from above gushed water squarely onto sidewalks or else discharged it horizontally at ankle level across walkways. In Mérida most doors opening onto street are recessed into deep walls so during the downpour every pedestrian chose a door to stand in; hardly anyone had an umbrella. Street dogs simply had no place to go, and there's nothing wetter looking than a wet dog.

Cities can be divided into those whose citizens regard rains as big bothers, and those who take advantage of a good rain to withdraw into themselves and gaze out into the totally changed, out-of-control world around them, their faces blank but somehow satisfied-looking. Mérida is one of the latter. I was happy to see so many people looking more or less at peace being stuck where they were. Only a few middle-aged ladies lugging hefty plastic bags of fruit in one hand and a kilo of hot tortillas wrapped in coarse, pink paper under an arm seemed a little discomfited, slipping around in their thin-soled sandals as they tiptoed, hopped and waded, for they weren't about to stand in anybody else's door.

Little Maya towns to the east of Mérida were beautiful to pass through after that rain, the kids out in mud puddles, the trees green and glistening, people standing around laughing over one another's being-caught-in-the-rain stories. This bus was one of those that stopped everyplace for anyone, so we took our time, wandered the countryside, the bus driver twice stopping to go buy himself some

grease-dripping tacos, and nobody seemed to think it was out of place for him to do so.

SALT

Notes from a birding trip through Mexico, desert at Zapotitlán Salinas, southeastern Puebla State; November 11, 1996

In dazzling afternoon sunlight, during a hike downstream, I come to a bend in the canyon where a clay cliff has been undercut by the stream so that it has collapsed. The resulting landslide has created a steep ramp leading from the stream bed, through the spiny mesquite belt along the banks, onto the barren upland. I clamber up the incline and find a high spot for looking around.

Not far away, at the mouth of a small side-canyon, I'm astonished to see a cluster of about twenty interconnected, square, shallow ponds, each pond about five meters on the side (fifteen feet). Next to the ponds stand roofless, mostly collapsed ruins of several buildings.

The binoculars show that behind the ruins someone has cut into the steep slope a small vertical wall. A trail leads up to the wall where a regular wooden door is mounted on wooden beams. A room has been excavated inside the hill, and the door is its entrance. As I continue scanning the ponds, a jolting image floats into view: an old man wearing only white shorts and rubber boots, his shiny skin baked almost black by the sun. He's standing in the middle of a pond, looking exactly at me.

As soon as it's clear I've been seen, I step more clearly into view, wave, and begin walking deliberately toward the man. Up closer I read in the old man's face the fact that during the course of many years he has reached a state of equilibrium with his monotonous, difficult work. Patience and ability to endure hardship are plainly

visible in his wrinkled face, as well as in his gazing-into-long-distance wrinkles. His tight-lipped mouth shows no hint of either a smile or a frown. His body is small, compact, and sinewy. I tell him I'm a gringo studying birds, and ask what the ponds are all about.

"Salt," he replies, with the expected economy of words. "We have saltwater springs up the canyon. We fill these ponds with their water, the water evaporates, and we get salt to sell."

Then he asks me how old I am, something many Mexican country-folk wonder about. Because it's such a frequent question, I've learned to make a game of it: I ask the old fellow to guess. Today, because I'm feeling supple and fit, I expect him to guess around thirty-five, though I'm almost fifty. He guesses sixty-five. Then I remember that in lands where people typically have such fine black hair my balding head and graying beard throw people off. Then he asks me to guess his age.

"Sixty-five," is my honest opinion.

"Seventy-six," he smiles, and the smile shows that he knows he looks much younger.

"Hard work all my life," he explains, "never stopping. Never having much, just working... "

I can see he wants to get back to work, so we shake hands and I depart.

DISTANT THUNDERSTORM AT NIGHT

Issued from Hacienda San Juan Lizarraga one kilometer east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán; November 15, 2005

I leave Hotel Reef Yucatan at dusk, riding the free bus that shuttles employees between the hotel and the two towns where the workers live, Dzemul and Telchac Pueblo. I have ridden buses, subways and trains full of homebound workers in several cities and it's always been a pretty subdued affair. However, on this bus the radio blares disco music, a light over the driver's head rapidly flashes four different colors, and people laugh and joke with the exuberance of kids. The ten-mile ride down the straight road through low scrub and weedy henequen plantations is a pleasure. I've never seen such good-natured people anywhere, except maybe Belize.

In the ill-lit streets people stand around talking to one another and kids play on the sidewalks. Rooms are lit with a single lightbulb and are often bare of furniture beyond a table and a hammock. At the few houses with TVs people often sit just outside their doors keeping one eye on the screen but mainly watching who is going where on the street.

After being deposited in Telchac Pueblo, while walking to the hacienda, I was reminded how easy it is to see on unlit roads in the countryside, even when there's no moon, and even on cloudy nights. This week a big thunderstorm to the south put on a show. It was so far away I couldn't hear its thunder but it was close enough to see very clearly nascent thunderheads rising mushroom-like beneath the gigantic mother-thunderhead. Almost constant lightning snaked among the round-topped cloud risings tinting them orange and pink.

The most vivid moment came when a surprisingly slow shooting star fell just to the left of the storm. Just visualize it: The road with its head-high weeds full of summer-sounding crickets and other stridulating insects, the smell and feeling of a warm, early night, fireflies over the weeds, that storm way to the south, and then a shooting star right next to the thunderhead...

BUYING ORANGES & EGGS

Issued from Hacienda San Juan Lizarraga one kilometer east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán; November 23, 2005

On San Juan's eastern and western boundaries local farmers tend citrus orchards producing sweet and sour oranges, lemons, tangerines and grapefruit. Each week I visit the western orchard to buy oranges and eggs.

When I arrive wearing my empty backpack Don Gildardo slips a side-bag strap over his shoulder and goes picking oranges right from his trees. The thin skins of his oranges are smooth and green, and the fruits themselves are much juicier and sweeter than the bright orange, thick-skinned ones in typical US markets.

Instead of calling his oranges "naranjas," the Spanish word for oranges, Don Gildardo refers to them as "chinas." At first I regarded that as a strange name but then I recalled how English speaks of mandarin oranges, thought to have originated in China. Also, our English tangerines get their names from "Tangiers," though they're not native there. These names remind us how exotic oranges once were to our English-speaking ancestors. At Don Gildardo's I get about 50 oranges for a dollar, and he seems apologetic to be charging so much.

Don Gildardo also keeps a lot of hens of different kinds, some in large pens and others running loose, and some are traditional Mexican chickens with featherless necks. Those with featherless necks were much more common in the past so I'm tickled to see them here. The eggs I get are colored every pale hue imaginable, including greenish and bluish ones. Their yolks are bright orange and stand up high as they sizzle in my skillet over each morning's campfire.

Don Gildardo always has his radio loudly playing cheery, bouncy salsa music and the hens, goats and pigs -- if I am interpreting their body language correctly -- seem to like it, especially the hens. There are also black-tailed, red-bodied roosters in separate little pens. Sometimes men from town come to talk privately with Don Gildardo.

The way they stand apart as they talk slyly eyeing the roosters I figure they must be plotting rooster-fighting strategies for upcoming events.

Like all other farmers in the area Don Gildardo lives in town and commutes each day to his plot. The vast majority of farmers ride bicycles but Don Gildardo is a bit more of a go-getter so he drives an old, beat-up truck. Each morning as I jog an hour before sunrise I listen for the approaching hiss of bike tires, for often farmers are heading to work even at that hour and if I don't watch we can scare the dickens out of one another when we meet.

"ME LÍ OYOTÉ"

Written at Yerba Buena and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; November 12, 2007

I resolved to learn a little Tzotzil so I stepped outside and spoke to the men renovating the dwelling I'm occupying. They speak Spanish among themselves but they'd told me that most of their parents still speak some Tzotzil, and they themselves know a little.

"How do you say 'Good morning'?" I asked. They looked confused and soon it was apparent that not a single man knew how to say it.

I'd been reading a novel from the departed missionaries' abandoned library. The story is based in southern Africa about a hundred years ago and in one place the hero says that in the language of the Zulus there's no standard way of saying "Thank you." If one is grateful for something, appropriate words must be found for that exact context. I don't know if that's true, but maybe something like that is going on in Tzotzil with regard to "Good morning."

The next day an old man appeared at work and the foreman brought him to me because he spoke Tzotzil. The old man was protesting in Spanish saying that I'd never remember. "No, this one knows how to write words onto paper," the foreman assured.

The old man taught me the sounds for "Good morning," which, written as if it were Spanish, are "Me lí oyoté." I'm just guessing as to how many words the phrase consists of, and the old man himself couldn't say.

"But the words don't mean exactly 'Good morning,'" my teacher said. "They mean 'Here I am.'"

So, mystery solved. Like the novel's Zulus, Tzotzil speakers have a whole different headset with regard to what to say when you meet someone.

The first time I used the phrase I felt the difference between "Here I am" and "Good morning." I've read that "Good morning" is a contraction of the sentiment "I hope that you are having a good morning." "Good morning," then, is so impersonally abbreviated that it leaves out the speaker, doesn't mention the person meant to hear what's said, and even squelches the verb, which otherwise would make clear that a message of "hope" is being offered.

On the other hand, when you meet someone and say, "Here I am," then human psychology expects something to follow. One commits to pursuing a train of thought or an action, and one takes responsibility for being present. "Here I am" is not something just to say and walk away from. "Here I am" as a greeting suggests a whole world view, one firmly rooted in the speaker's membership in a community, alien to those of us who use "Good morning."

For me, this is the great charm of learning other languages: They provide frameworks from which we can glimpse completely new perspectives on life in general. This enlarges us, giving us greater flexibility of thought and action in everyday life.

It happened that my first chance to use "Me lí oyoté" was with no one less than the invader chief. He was so astonished to hear Tzotzil coming out of me that he lost his usual cool, melted into a grinning, boyish discomfit and, as his eyes darted back and forth the way a smart person's do when a trick or trap is suspected, replied in a torrent of Tzotzil, of which I understood not a word.

I'll never forget the look on that man's face.

A TREE NOT FAR AWAY

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; November 14, 2010

In the Hacienda's take-one-leave-one library for guests someone left a translated republication of Friar Diego de Landa's 1566 book Relación de las cosas de Yucatán, in English entitled Yucatan Before and After the Conquest. de Landa burned all Maya books he could find, cheating us of many insights into the ancient Mayas' minds, but then he authored this book, which now is the most important eyewitness account of the Mayas' ancient ways, and how the Spanish Conquest was conducted.

Remarking on some of the violence the Spaniards committed on the Maya, de Landa writes: "... I saw a great tree near the village upon the branches of which a captain had hung many women, with their infant children hung from their feet." He goes on describing other violence equally abhorrent. The event de Landa describes took place in the ancient Maya chiefdom of Cupul, which incorporated the Chichén Itzá area.

This week it's been surprisingly cool and sunny here. Monday morning at dawn it was actually 38° F (3.3°C), though by the afternoon it was warm and the sky was filled with dazzling sunlight.

How pleasant it was to sit warming in the sun as a dry breeze blew. But, that's when I thought about those women and their children hanging in the tree, not far from here.

In the 1530s, during the first clashes between Spanish soldiers and the Maya, the Spaniards habitually won because they had access to superior warring technology and resources. The Maya didn't know how to make metal swords and guns, and here in limestone-bedrock Yucatán they didn't have mineral-bearing rock needed for smelting metal. Nor did they have horses. This disparity in resources and technical information resulted in centuries of atrocities.

Warming in the sunshine reflecting on these and other great currents of history, not far from where the tree once stood de Landa talked about, this insight arises:

Social violence, treacheries, and atrocities are nearly always rooted in disparities of resources and/or information. The geography of the world with its uneven distribution of resources ensures that always some communities will possess more resources than others. Human nature being what it is, there'll always be conflict between haves and have-nots.

However, information can be freely shared. By sharing information we can reduce the likelihood of more of de Landa's trees.

Blessed be the sharers of information among us, and may knowledge always be free for the taking.

WHEN DRUNKS GIVE THE EVIL-EYE...

Written in Yokdzonot and issued from a ciber in nearby Pisté, Yucatán; November 17, 2008

In a pamphlet I'm writing to be sold to visitors to the cenote I'm including a small section on the local use of medicinal herbs. While interviewing a friend about the uses of this and that plant, we came to the common vine called Popox in Maya.

"It's used against the evil-eye (ojo malo) drunks give babies when they look at them," my friend said. I asked for an explanation.

"When men are drunk sometimes when they look at babies they give the evil-eye, and the baby gets diarrhea. You bathe the baby in water prepared with Popox root to undo the evil-eye."

Just when you think the people you're around have their heads entirely in the cell-phone, TV, go-to-the-ciber world, you realize that inside those heads there are still vast acreages of magical, dangerous territory.

CASTOR OIL TO THE RESCUE

Written in Yokdzonot and issued from a ciber in nearby Pisté, Yucatán; November 24, 2008

I'm writing up a history of Yokdzonot so Wednesday morning I spoke with 98-year-old Don Germán (pronounced her-MAHN) Escalante, who remembers the town's founding in 1936, and retains vivid memories of every name, date, and major event in Yokdzonot's history. I found most interesting his recollection of a locust invasion reaching its peak in 1938-1940.

"They ate not only the corn and beans but everything," he said, his eyes wide as if he still can't believe how they ate. "They can eat so much because the food goes right through them. If you get beneath them, it's like rain, they retain nothing. Most of our families simply

left, went to Mérida, but eleven of us remained. We survived by planting Castor Bean (Ricinus communis)."

"I planted four hectares (10 acres). We toasted the fruits on a comal (hotplate), ground them in a hand mill and got a paste like masa (moist, fine-ground cornmeal). We boiled this in big pots. After it had boiled awhile we'd add cold water, oil would float to the water's surface and we'd spoon it off. Four kilos of seeds would produce one liter of oil (8.8 pounds seeds for one quart of oil). A big war was going on and they bought our oil for their machines. We used it, too. We'd fill bottles with it, insert a wick, and it'd burn just fine."

I also asked Don Germán about changes in the local ecology.

"When we first came, all was tall forest, with trees more than a meter thick. The big trees fell for making railroad ties and later we cut the forest for our cornfields. I can't say that there's any difference in the hurricanes of then and now, there always being a mixture of big ones and little ones, but the soil has changed. When there were no longer leaves to replenish the soil, the soil got hard and thin. The soil isn't as rich as it used to be, and there's less of it."

IT HAS A FORKED TAIL, RIGHT?

Written in Yokdzonot and issued from a ciber in nearby Pisté, Yucatán; November 24, 2008

I showed last week's picture of a Green Vine Snake eating an oriole to a friend here and she exclaimed, "Oh, that's the one with the forked tail, right?"

I had to ask for an explanation.

"At night when lactating new mothers are sleeping it creeps into their beds, puts the tip of each fork of its tail up her two nostrils and

suffocates her. When she's dead it sucks milk from her breasts."

Of course it was pointless to refute the forked tail. Some people standing around said rather unconvincingly that they believed the story to be made up, but others assured me that it was all true. I asked if such fork-tail murders happen often.

"Not so much here in Yokdzonot, but you hear about it out in the countryside."

REVOLUTION DAY IN PISTÉ

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; November 27, 2011

Last Sunday when I biked into Pisté to roam backstreets looking for interesting plants and to buy fruit I found a big parade taking place: It was November 20th, Día de la Revolución, Revolution Day, commemorating the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. There were kids dressed up as revolutionaries, the boys with drawn-on moustaches and even the girls brandishing toy rifles.

It seemed to me that the parade less celebrated revolution than it did the kids. A few were dressed in fancy costumes and performed skits from time to time, but more typical was the group in which each walker simply carried two red-painted jícaras (traditional bowls made from gourdlike fruits of the Calabash tree) which they clacked together on cue. Not much was expected of anybody, just walk and do the little thing you'd been told to do, and family and neighbors watching along the street couldn't look prouder or more pleased.

It's amazing how expressive kids' faces are. As these kids passed I almost felt that each one's whole future was written in his or her face. I even saw myself out there, a real fat little guy as I was back

around 1957, with an expression saying, "I'll be so glad when I don't have to do all this kid stuff anymore... "

Seeing myself out there with that look, I almost wanted to go tell the kid that I understood, but that, really, he needed to lighten up. He had something good going for him right then, his mom still alive, healthy and happy right beside him, and not really any big heartbreaks in life yet, no real big failures, yet.

And that got me thinking about how we tend to underestimate kids. I think that as a kid already I understood the big things I still think of as big. For example, even back then I think I had it figured out that in our world there's a great deal of silliness and waste of human potential, largely because people aren't properly amazed at and humbled by everyday realities, by one another, and by the fact that they are alive on Planet Earth, right now.

At that point, leaning against a telephone pole watching it all, I almost forgot about the parade, getting lost in philosophizing, in head-talk. It was the fat kid when he looked over and saw his mom, and smiled real big, who pulled me out of it.

It was nice seeing those kids last Sunday. I hope their revolution works out.

EGRETS, HERONS & IBISES

Issued from Diego Nuñez's office above Restaurante "Isla Contoy," Río Lagartos, Yucatán; November 27, 2006

Out in the mangroves it's normal to see mixed flocks feeding together in areas of open water 2-4 inches deep. A normal flock of about 20 birds may be half Snowy Egrets, 1/3 White Ibises, with a sprinkling of Tri-colored Herons, Little Blue Herons, Great Egrets and

maybe a Willet or two. Feeding in a group like this seems to scare up more fish for everyone, plus there are more eyes to scan for enemies.

After you watch such a flock awhile you see that each species has its own strategy and personality. Often the flock I've been watching more or less follows the White Ibises who systematically probe the mud with their long, curved beaks, more interested in worms and other mud dwellers than fish. Snowy Egrets appear to follow the ibises stabbing at fish the ibises scare up, frequently getting into noisy fights with one another, and sometimes trying to rob an ibis of its catch. The other heron and egret species stay on the fringes and are less engaged with the group.

Then a Common Black Hawk comes YEEP YEEP YEEPing, lands on a snag amidst the mixed flock and everyone except the ibises flies away, the ibises looking over their shoulders in absolute disgust.

CRAVING SABRITAS

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; November 28, 2010

Often I've mentioned the Mayas' high degree of social sophistication and their steadfast group solidarity. This week when a friend requested that on my trip into Pisté to buy bananas I also buy him a certain snack, I learned something new.

For, my friend wanted a package of Sabritas, which is junk food as bad as the worst the US has to offer -- oversalted, too-greasy, preservative-rich starchy items sold in small, plastic packages. I tried to convince my friend that such snacks are bad for his health but, no, he had a special craving, a craving it was important to satisfy, and

his craving was for a package of Sabritas. For, his wife was pregnant...

You guessed it: In the Maya culture, to a certain extent the male shares pregnancy with his mate. The male can crave foods, suffer morning sickness, and some males even experience some pain of labor.

THE SNAKE MAN

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in the Merced Market, Mexico City, DF, probably sometime in 1995

By 11:00 I need a rest. I go to the small unloading zone on the Merced's southern end, hoping to find a quiet corner. But in the spot I'd been thinking of there's a chattering man surrounded by an audience of about ten people. He's chalked a ten-foot square around himself, and the people stand outside the square. He's kneeling, surrounded by the following: a row of face-up Tarot cards; a small, black statue of an owl, with seven red candles laid radiating from it; a red, foot-long box ornamented with zodiac symbols and the English words "7 Holy Bath Waters"; another box on which, in Spanish, is written "The Seven Holy Waters of Osrisus"; two glasses of clear liquid, and; a tall aerosol can on which is written, in Spanish, "Money Luck Love Health."

A yard-long green iguana, emaciated and lacerated with wounds, poses beside the collection. The man is occupied with a living snake, a young boa constrictor. The snake advances toward the line of cards and the man explains that the snake is "choosing cards," sending him messages. After the snake chooses a card, the man pulls the snake back, but it keeps slithering forward, "choosing" other cards. The man, aged about twenty-five, with an awe-struck voice

and trembling hands, discovers profound significance in the chosen cards.

"Step up closer, ladies and gentlemen," the man calls in Spanish. "The snake won't hurt you. What will harm you is the snake with two legs. My snake will not harm you, but you know that in the hearts of some people, yes, there can be bad thoughts, bad intentions. No, ladies and gentlemen, I am not a brujo (witch doctor), but I am one who can undo black magic practiced by those who would harm you. We all have seen how certain piglike people of low morals, envious of us working men and women, every Thursday and Friday go down to the Sonora Market and buy blood and venom of rattlesnakes, and we all know what evil purposes those bad people seek, and I am here to show you how to protect yourself, I from Juchitán, Oaxaca, the very land of brujería (witchcraft) and curanderos (healers)."

The man repeats all the above as new people join the circle. He talks in circles as he motions us to step closer, to pay attention. He asks a matronly, middle-age woman to show her palm; she does, and he reads it with raised eyebrows and a rapt expression on his face:

"Oh, I respect you," he says. "You are a mother like my mother, always working hard, and if you see someone hungry, you will give food meant for your own mouth. You are kind, hard working, and generous. Is this not true?"

The woman admits that it is true, and then the man examines the palms of two others, saying similarly flattering things and, again, it's all confirmed. The man kneels, puts a card in the snake's mouth, the snake bites, leaving prick-points clearly visible in the card's surface, and the man places the card atop one of the glasses filled with clear liquid. He now explains that the snake's evil essence is transferring into the liquid, and as he speaks an oily film indeed coagulates atop the liquid. He pulls forth a red bandanna and as he relates how certain envious, evil people cast spells on innocent working people, he artfully folds, refolds, twists, and pats the bandanna into human shape; it becomes a well proportioned, very well made rag doll.

The man now opens up the doll's "stomach" and while speaking of the wisdom of not allowing just anyone to take your picture, he tears a card into pieces and places the pieces inside the doll's "stomach." He closes the doll up and places it atop a large picture of a saint, and then sprinkles the snake-poisoned water in a circle around the doll. He lets us understand that if the card had been a picture of one of us, we would now be completely bewitched.

He draws from his black bag a vial of dark red liquid that well could be blood, and we understand through an oblique remark that this is rattlesnake blood, the essence of evil. He pours the scarlet liquid into what remains of the snake-poisoned water, turning the water bright red. Now the man pulls crystals from his black bag and says that they are blessed. But now he looks us all in the eye and says that before he can continue we must all tell him whether we believe in God and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Everyone does, so he crosses himself and continues.

He drops the blessed crystals into an untainted glass of clear liquid, swirls it around, and then pours part of this "blessed water" into the glass of red, envenomed liquid, swirls it around, and within seconds the red fluid becomes perfectly clear. He drinks it and declares that good really has triumphed over evil.

As he tells more of his personal battle against black magic, he brings forth several clear-plastic bags filled with small, plastic stars of every color, the kinds grade-school kids get glued to their charts when they do something right. These stars, he claims, have all spent three days and nights in the Church of Guadalupe, and are thus blessed in the very same way that the crystals have been blessed, and possess the same purifying powers.

It's not long before several onlookers fork over pesos, buying little bags of colored, plastic stars. Before handing over each bag, the man sprays it with the big aerosol can saying "Money Luck Love Health."

All during the above presentation, not far away, a loudspeaker on a tall, slender pole has been blaring the virtues of Conchamaca Cream. It has been such an oppressive presence, such an annoyance as we around the snake-man tried to listen, that now I go and pay attention to what this loathsome noise is saying.

The man's voice on the loudspeaker is high-pitched, monotone, repetitively speaking hypnotic sentences that don't ever seem to end. The tone in the man's voice is that of a bored father telling the little child the obvious for the millionth time, "You must eat to be healthy, eat, eat to be healthy... " Here are the translated words spewed by the obnoxious loudspeaker:

"Ladies and gentlemen now I want to tell you about Conchamaca Cream. Conchamaca Cream is for bathing, for white spots, black spots, scars, the cream doesn't burn on contact with the skin, the medicinal cream, Conchamaca Cream is for white spots, black spots, scars, the cream doesn't burn on contact with the skin, it cleans, it disinfects, just put it in your bath water or bathe your skin in it, and then in a few days your skin looks great, we have the medicinal cream, Conchamaca Cream for white spots, black spots, scars, come on and get to know Conchamaca Cream, Conchamaca Cream, for white spots, black spots, scars, come on and get to know Conchamaca Cream, Conchamaca Cream for white spots, black spots, scars, doesn't burn, doesn't inflame on contact with the skin, come on get to know Conchamaca Cream, Conchamaca Cream, for white spots, black spots, scars. We also have Tepezquite Pomade, good for burns and similar wounds."

"We have Tepezquite Soap and Tepezquite Pomade, for burns, cuts, and similar wounds, for sores, scratches, for the itch, come on and get to know Tepezquite Soap, Tepezquite Soap, good for burns and other skin problems, massage it into the hair, it fortifies, it maintains the hair, come and get to know Tepezquite Soap, the medicinal soap, Tepezquite Soap, Tepezquite Soap, massage it into the hair and it fortifies, it maintains the hair, come on get to know the medicinal soap, medicinal soap, Tepezquite Soap, for burns, cuts and similar

wounds, for sores, scratches, for the itch, come on and get to know Tepezquite Soap."

"We also have... "

NO MULCH FOR THE MAYA

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; November 28, 2010

This week I was suggesting how useful placing mulch around plants might be now that the dry season has come. However, before I could explain how mulch helps soil retain moisture and how it enriches the soil with organic matter and nutrients as it decays, the Maya man listening took his machete, flipped up some leaves on the ground, revealed a big, hairy spider, and said:

"Look, that's the kind of thing that plant-trash on the ground attracts. That bicho eats plants. Why attract things that'll eat up your garden?"

I was stunned that a man who all his life has supported his family by cultivating a large milpa, or traditional cornfield, would assert that spiders eat garden plants. Neither would he buy my claim that invertebrates who eat garden plants are not the same species found under leaves on the ground. What I said about soil organic matter and nutrient release simply didn't register.

Later I asked another Maya farmer if he could think of a single instance when the Maya use organic matter to enrich or improve the soil.

"No," he said.

I asked his thoughts about spreading mulch beneath the Hacienda's ornamentals. Though this man knew volumes about local medicinal

plants, he now expressed exactly the opposite of what I was taught in Soils Class back at the University of Kentucky. "When dry weather comes, mulch sponges up moisture from the soil, and of course that hurts the plants," he said.

Over the years I've seen many references to sustainable farming techniques practiced by indigenous Americans before the arrival of Europeans. Mainly they were talking about "slash and burn." Cut down a patch of forest, burn it, that releases a flush of nutrients in the ash, resulting in bounteous harvests for two or three years. But then weeds and animal pests invade, the soil grows depleted of nutrients, soil structure deteriorates from erosion and loss of organic matter, and after a few years the plot must be abandoned, the farmers go elsewhere, and start the cycle all over. Once the slash-and-burned plot reverts to forest, it may be slashed and burned again.

Well, this technique is sustainable only in areas of low human population density. When population increases, there's not enough forest to go around, and periods between slashings and burnings shorten until the land no longer has enough time to recuperate. Soil is eroded away or gradually converted to relatively sterile, hard-packed dirt.

More and more I'm thinking that Classic Maya civilization may have collapsed not only because of stresses brought on by overpopulation but also because of destructive, unsustainable farming practices. The Maya never discovered the wheel, except for its use on small toys, and from what I see here they never realized that conserving soil organic matter is supremely important for long-term soil fertility, and that mulch helps soil retain its water during dry spells.

Historically, I suspect that not appreciating soil organic matter and the use of mulch has been a greater misfortune for the Maya than having missed out on the services of the wheel.

DRUMBEAT IN THE ALUX GROVE

Issued from Hacienda Chichen Resort adjoining Chichén Itzá Ruin, Yucatán; November 29, 2009

Last weekend as the sun set a rhythmic drumbeat arose from below my room adjoining the old church. I'm atop a small mound that probably once was a Maya temple. The drumming seemed to come from the grove below set aside for local shamans to make their peace with the local Maya elves, or aluxob ("-ob" is a plural suffix; one elf is an alux, pronounced ah-LOOSH). A well-played, jazzy piccolo joined the drumbeat and before long the pungent odor of copal incense wafted through the woods. When I arrived in the Aluxob grove I found maybe 50 people striking drums and dancing.

A young woman I'd met before saw me and came to escort me into the circle. Seeing her, I knew what the group was up to, for several days before, when some of us had taken a mother with her sick child to a local curandero, or traditional healer, I'd met her there and she'd told me about the project she was helping to organize. A poster her group was putting up everyplace spoke of the return of the gods Quetzalcoatl and Kukulcan (Most consider the two names as applying to the same deity). Her group was traveling through Mexico's Indian territory staging events like this, if nothing else just to remind the native population that they once had their own special beliefs and traditions, which are worth remembering and honoring. The project finishes up around Christmas with a big pilgrimage to sites sacred to the ancients.

I spotted my Hacienda friend José standing stiffly just outside the growingly animated circle. Before José came to work at the Hacienda he was training to be a shaman himself, thus he knows more about Maya spirituality than anyone I know. As a greeting I jokingly asked him if he was going to join the dance.

"We don't dance," he replied. "Dancing doesn't enter into our Itzá Maya spirituality. What's going on here is recreation, not spirituality."

Looking around I saw that no one in the group seemed to come from a local Maya village. Many were non-Mexicans and a lot came from the Mexico City area. I quipped to José that I hadn't seen anything like this since the 60's and he replied, "Exactly that."

With clouds of intensely fragrant copal incense billowing among us, the group leader spoke of Mother Earth's generosity, a story was told about a white hawk, and thanks were given to a Universal Spirit. At one point they all kneeled with heads to the ground and with their arms stretched toward the circle's center.

Several tried hard to get me to join the circle, to participate, to join the dance.

But, despite the group using terms and concepts that I myself favor and believe in, somehow it was clear that if I was to stand with anyone, it would be with José, and his people don't dance.

WASHING CLOTHES

Issued from Hacienda Komchen de Los Pájaros just outside Dzemul, Yucatán; December 5, 2004

You might guess that we wash things here by hand. It's not as ineffective, time-consuming and unpleasant as you might think.

For one reason, we have special concrete sinks with ribbed bottoms, constructed just for washing clothes. The ribbed bottoms work on exactly the same principle as washboards did in the US a couple of generations ago. I think most of us in the North have simply forgotten how rubbing wet, sudsy clothing over a series of finger-thick ribs removes dirt and stains in a way it would take an awful lot of hand-

rubbing and rinsing to accomplish. The process is almost magical. If you have an old washboard lying around you should try it.

Years ago I spent several months in a community of Nahuatle-speaking Indians in central Mexico. Women there washed clothing atop rocks emerging at the river's edge, using the palms of their hands and a certain flick of the wrist I never quite mastered. They considered anyone lucky enough to have a washboard, or maybe even a sink with a ribbed bottom, as high-class folk.

Another reason washing clothing here is easier than you might expect is that Mexican detergent is much more powerful than our Northern brands. That's because water-pollution laws in the US and other developed countries don't allow the high levels of phosphates permitted here. You pour light-blue, powdered Mexican detergent into your moist hand and instantly you feel heat being generated. It's powerful stuff. But of course Mexican rivers are a mess as a consequence. Often smaller rivers are black and smell like sewers, and on larger rivers sometimes you see knee-high piles of suds floating downstream, or maybe the entire river's surface will be white with suds.

So, it's the same old story: Convenience for humans means death and destruction for other living things. My opinion is that the Middle Path would be to wash clothing by rubbing them over ribbed surfaces, but this high-phosphorus detergent has to go, and, most importantly, clothes just don't need to be washed nearly as often as people think they do.

A few stains and a bit of grit around the collar should be honored as nothing less than medals commemorating life-loving, Earth-wise decisions being made at the washing place.

THE SILVER DEALER

From Jim's online Mexican Mercados website, based on notes taken in Taxco, Guerrero, probably sometime in 1995

In the mountains of northeastern Guerrero, the town of Taxco is as colorful as you could want. Its multistoried houses rise separated from one another by alleyways so narrow that a single car fills them. From across the valley, the town seems to be an imaginary village in a children's book, with all the houses stacked haphazardly atop one another, the whole town a fanciful mingling of walls painted gaudy colors, terra-cotta tile roofs, balconies with wrought iron railings, jungly islands of potted plants, crooked TV antennas, randomly situated shuttered windows, clothes lines strung at all angles, adorned with brightly colored blankets, and clothing fluttering in mountain breezes...

Shops selling silver line both sides of Taxco's main highway. For centuries Taxco has been famous for its silver mines, and for the silver objects its local artisans produce. Upslope from the main highway, facing the little plaza known as the Plazuela, I meet Sr. Andrés Rodríguez Méndez, who runs the impressively provided silver shop known as Platería Gloria. Sr. Rodríguez, a very well dressed, polite, educated man, invites me to sit with him at a sidewalk table outside his shop. The table is equipped with an umbrella against the dazzling, high-elevation sunlight; we huddle within the umbrella's soothing shade, and Sr. Rodríguez talks about Taxco silver:

"Nowadays," he begins, "to be sure you have good silver, you need to look for the new government seal. Taxco silver always bears a seal with the silversmith's initials, his number, and the silver's quality. For example, in our business we deal with silver ranging from grade 925, which is regular commercial silver, to the exclusive silver grades of 950, 960, and 970. The highest silver grade we sell here is 980. A classification of 980 means that the product is 98 percent pure silver. Pure silver is 999, but you can't work with that because it's too soft. Silver must be compounded with copper in order for it to keep its shape. Our highest grade, 980, contains only two percent copper, so

when you see a rating of 980, you can be sure that that silver won't develop spots; it will stay clean and white."

"Forty to fifty families supply our business with worked silver. The family who works most with us is the López family, headed by Sr. Manuel López. He has the number 01, so he's Number One in Taxco. Another very famous silversmith who works for us is Tango Aceves. Well, 'Tango' is his nickname because he's a fan of music. So he's TA31, and he works only 970 silver."

"Taxco is the only place using this kind of government mark. If you go to Guadalajara you'll find other marks. In Guadalajara the stamp might say 'Mexico Sterling 925,' and they don't use the silversmith's initials and number. Therefore, if you buy silver jewelry in Cancún, for instance, and you see a silversmith's initials, his number, and the quality-of-silver mark, you know that that silver comes from Taxco. The government developed this system because earlier, for example at Teotihuacan, and at the beaches of Acapulco and Cancún, they were selling 925 silver stamped with just 'Mexico,' so buyers didn't really know what they were getting."

"We've been using this new system since around 1989, I think. Before that, all Mexican silversmiths used an eagle. Back in those days when the tourist realized that what he'd bought wasn't real silver, that gave us all a bad name. Earlier, the penalty for falsifying silver was very light. If the police found someone selling silver plate for pure silver, they'd just demand a small fine. Nowadays, falsifying silver is a crime punishable with imprisonment for several years, so today the problem is seldom encountered. Also, there are ways for a tourist to know whether the silver he's just bought is good. Here in Taxco we have jewelers who can use a special acid to see whether a piece is made of good silver. If it isn't, you can return the merchandise and demand your money back.

"At the moment we have six mines being worked around Taxco, so we're still getting a lot of silver. These mines belong to the federal government. In Mexico, private individuals don't own mines. Miners work for the government. The government deposits the mined silver

in banks, the silversmiths buy the silver from the banks, and then we buy the worked silver from the silversmiths."

NÁHUATL, OTOMÍ, CHICHIMECA & PURÉPECHA

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; December 11, 2006

I miss the lovely Maya people I've grown to know and respect in the Yucatan. Here most people probably have as much Native American blood as the Yucatan's Maya, but I think that here native traditions have succumbed more completely to the Spanish influence (and now the North American influence) than in interior Yucatan. Very unlike at Ek Balam where I was two months ago, here young people seldom know any of their ancestors' language. Only a few old people speak the old tongues.

Querétaro is one of Mexico's smallest states, yet I read that originally Native Americans speaking languages from four language groups -- Náhuatl, Otomí, Chichimeca and Purépecha -- lived here. In fact, Mexico is home to 62 living languages and only India, with 65, hosts more.

Náhuatl was the language of the ancient Aztecs. The Náhuatl-speaking Nahua people are thought to have originated in the southwestern United States, split from other Uto-Aztecan peoples and migrated into central Mexico at some point around 2000 BC. They settled in and around the Basin of Mexico and spread to become central Mexico's dominant people. The Aztec civilization was just one of several important Mesoamerican civilizations with Nahua roots.

In pre-Columbian times the Otomí people, sometimes known by the unlikely name of Hñähñu, were conquered by the Aztecs and thereafter often used by them as mercenary warriors. In this area Otomí speakers live almost exclusively at the highest elevations.

Sometimes the Otomí are lumped with the Chichimeca because originally "Chichimeca" was a Náhuatl name applied to a large number of nomadic, northern-Mexico ethnic groups with various linguistic roots. The name carried a pejorative connotation because the Aztecs regarded the northern nomads as primitive and barbaric compared to their own advanced civilization.

When the Spanish began subduing the north the various tribes resisted and the resulting conflict is known today as the "Chichimeca Wars." The northern tribes were obliterated or absorbed into today's mestizo or "mixed" culture. Many "Chichimecas" were sent to the Yucatan as slaves to work on henequen plantations. Now almost nothing is known of many of the former "Chichimeca" tribes -- the Guachichiles, Caxcanes, Zacatecos and Guamares, for instance. The Otomís are among the former "Chichimeca" peoples who still retain some of their former identities. Others include the Cora, Huichol, Chichimeca Jonaz, Pame, Yaqui, Mayo, O'odham and Tepehuán.

The Purépecha people used to be known as the Tarascan, and in historical accounts are referred to as coming from the Tarascan state. However, today the people refer to themselves as P'urhépecha, in Spanish simplified to Purépecha. At the time of the Spanish Conquest the Tarascan state was Mexico's second largest, incorporating many of the groups mentioned above as belonging to the Chichimecas. (Through history subsets of people merged with and overlapped others, and many disappeared.) Mexico's largest state at the Conquest was that of the Aztecs. The Tarascans and Aztecs were mortal enemies.

CHICKENS WITH FEATHERLESS NECKS

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; December 11, 2006

During my earliest days of traveling in Mexico mostly I visited the southernmost states, especially Chiapas, because down there is where you find the most ecological and ethnic diversity. I've quit traveling there mostly because it's grown too dangerous -- for reasons too complex to go into here, other than to say that overpopulation lies at the root of it.

One feature of the small, Native American villages in the south that always intrigued me was that the chickens running around people's homes had featherless necks. At first I assumed that they were a special kind of "Indian chicken" and over the years as I began noticing them being replaced by more familiar races I figured that they were just going the way of other Native American traditions.

But then it occurred to me that poultry ancestors arose in Asia and didn't come to the Americas until the very late 1400s or early 1500s. At that time Europeans introduced into Mexico a whole range of plants and animals never seen here before, including horses, cattle, pigs, sheep and goats. The Spaniards likewise introduced nuts and grains such as almonds, rice, wheat, and barley; and fruit and vegetables such as apples, oranges, grapes, lettuce, carrots, cauliflowers, potatoes (these brought from Peru), and sugarcane. These chickens with featherless necks must have been introduced here then, too.

My best Googling on the Internet suggests that the featherless-necked fowl may be a race sometimes called "Naked Necks," first developed in Hungary, then refined in Germany, and now popular in some tropical countries, especially the Far East. They are known as hardy, vigorous birds who are good layers, producing brown eggs,

their main weakness being intolerance to cold. However, that is compensated for by their ability to thrive in the tropics. They were introduced into the US during the 1920s under the name of "Churkeys," some believing they were crosses between chickens and turkeys.

I've been thinking about these chickens lately because I've seen some running around the streets of Jalpan. Just seeing a featherless-necked old hen running across the road makes me happy.

TOMANTZIN

Written at Yerba Buena and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; December 17, 2007

Last Wednesday, the 12th, was a big day here. It was Mexico's day for celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe. I can't imagine how many exploding rockets people in town set off during a 24-hour period, the booms awakening me at 3AM from two miles away. Iván, in charge of Yerba Buena's blackberry operation, returned from town that day shaking his head and saying, "Man, you should have seen all the drunks!" There were also long lines of pilgrims on the highway walking great distances, led by decorated pickup trucks carrying the Virgin's image.

I didn't realize how important the celebration was until I saw that the three tree-cutting men working for Yerba Buena's owners weren't working that day, even though they work on rainy days and are supposed to be Adventists who don't recognize the Virgin's overweening importance. In the afternoon two of them went off drinking, leaving the third behind because he's trying to overcome a history of alcoholism. He looked so sad and abandoned that I went down to talk with him.

I asked him why people shot off rockets and he simply said "for devotion." The pilgrims were walking, he further explained, in the hope that if the Virgin sees how they're suffering in her name maybe she'll do them some favors, or, maybe they're thanking her for past favors. He also said that the 12th, the Virgin's day, was even more important than Christmas. The festive dish he said he was missing by being away from his family on the Virgin's day was Mole de Pollo, or Chicken Mole, "mole" pronounced MOH-leh.

Iván has a book explaining how Mexico's indigenous people made the transition from believing in their own religions to accepting the Catholicism forced on them by the conquering Spanish. For example, the natives already worshiped the Goddess Tomantzin, who was the mother of all gods, the mother of Nature, etc., so it was easy for them to accept the Virgin. The first generations after the conquest looked at Virgin statues but in their minds prayed to Tomantzin. Later generations forgot all about Tomantzin. Still, a man in town here once told me how his parents, devout Catholics, still prayed to the Sun God.

BOOM-BOOM, CROAK-CROAK

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; December 18, 2006

This is the time of year when a vast exodus of working Mexicans floods south from the US diffusing out into Mexico's thousands of little towns and villages more or less like Jalpan. Jalpan's general atmosphere has changed enormously from two weeks ago.

Mainly you see it on the steep, narrow streets now jammed with cars and pickup trucks with US license plates. Up north these folks may have been only the shadows you see hustling in the backrooms of restaurants, the humble, stooped-over fieldworkers you pass in your

car, or maybe the anonymous construction workers across from your office, but, down here, now, they are kings. They have returned home in triumph. They are powerbrokers and people of vision, bigwigs, people who have seen and done it all.

A fair percentage of these returning workers are young men and one way they impress the local folks with their success is to drive their fancy cars equipped with sound systems with speakers that can jar the fillings from your teeth from half a mile away. Day and night, day after day, night after night, up and down the one main street of this little town the boom, boom, boom of the base line of songs erupts from one car or pickup truck after another. Higher-frequency lyrical notes get filtered out half a mile away but these very low bass notes rumble through trees, through walls, right through my body and my soul, day and night. It's like being inside the guts of a flatulent dinosaur. Add to this the continuing rocket explosions set off by wandering Baby-Jesus-statue carriers and the cathedral's unpredictable outbursts of tolling bells and you have something to consider.

Thursday night I camped beside the reservoir near the Reserve HQ. Right after sundown the first carload of young people arrived on a peninsula across the lake and they came in a car with a grand sound system. Over half a mile of silvery water speckled with startled coots and nervous Blue-winged Teal when the boom-boom-booms came. I am pretty sure the nylon walls of my tent shuddered with each boom but how could I know with my eyeballs jiggling so?

The booms made frogs start calling. And what must have been those frogs' thoughts as they heard the boomings of what surely was a competitor frog ten stories tall? Yet, this is the wonderful thing: Those little frogs around my tent gamely replied to the behemoth across the lake with their own normal croaks, just as if they had not lost all hope of having their own croaks heard.

WINTER SOLSTICE AND THE YUCATAN

Written at Hacienda San Juan Lizarraga one kilometer east of Telchac Pueblo, Yucatán; December 22, 2005

Back when I was issuing this Newsletter from the woods outside Natchez, Mississippi I always made a big deal about the Winter Solstice taking place this time of year. The solstice was important because -- at least from the perspective of this naturalist near Natchez -- it seemed that on that date the current year's natural cycle ended and a new one began.

The precise changeover took place at the moment when days stopped getting shorter and began getting longer. What pleasure I had finding "signs of spring" already on the Winter Solstice date, and what a delight when, just two or three weeks after the solstice, it really felt as if days were getting longer, and that a gloriously warm, green, luxuriant spring was avalanching toward us.

Down here there's not much difference in the length of "summer" days and "winter" days. In fact, the concepts of "summer" and "winter" don't make much sense because here the big differences are between dry and wet seasons.

So, right now, for me, there's no sense of the annual cycle coming to an end and beginning anew with the solstice. What I really feel is the dry season gradually getting underway. Herbaceous plants are starting to show the strain of lack of rain, though they're not turning brown yet. Some of the trees who lose their leaves during the dry season, to conserve water by cutting down on water evaporation from leaves, are losing their leaves now -- the Guanacastes, strangler figs, the Flamboyáns.

If I happen to be here when the dry season ends with the first big rains, maybe around late May, then I'll celebrate the beginning of the

new annual cycle for here, for at that time there'll be so many new germinations, blossomings, hatchings and emergings from dust that it'll be the equivalent of "spring avalanching forth," maybe even with more exuberance than I've chronicled in Mississippi.

DOÑA HILARIA

Written at Yerba Buena and issued in Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, Chiapas; December 24, 2007

The first day I walked into Yerba Buena last October Doña Hilaria was standing with a kid talking to Inés and I could tell from Doña Hilaria's wide-eyed look that she wasn't used to seeing tall, balding, bespectacled, white-bearded gringos wearing backpacks. For her part, she was wearing a pretty, very colorful traditional blouse, and as soon as I heard her thick Tzotzil accent and her Tzotzil manner of speaking, which is more choppy than Spanish and more high-pitched and tonal than English, I knew she was the real thing, down-home Tzotzil.

She often comes to do housework for Inés or ask if she can gather firewood, and she always passes right outside my window waving and smiling. She habitually travels with a Tzotzil companion, usually a kid, apparently it being unacceptable for a Tzotzil lady to wander around alone. Despite her attention to this detail I'm told that she's not fully integrated into the local Tzotzil community. For one thing, she's not married, which is almost unheard of. I suspect the main reason, however, is that she's unusually smart.

She's the only Tzotzil speaker I've run into so far who understands that a language has a grammatical construction. When I asked her if I was right translating "my house," "your house" and "his house" as "jna," "ana" and "sna," though I'm sure no one has ever broached the matter of grammar with her, in a flash she grasped the concept and

was ready to contribute "jnatic," "anaic," and "snaic," which mean "our house", "you-all's house," and "their house." "Jna" is pronounced "ha-NAH" and "snaic" is "sna-EEK."

The other day Iván asked her if in town it was possible to buy chocolate-flavored pozol, which is a soft, moist mass of ground corn and cacao beans which you dissolve into water, add a sweetener, and drink. Yes, she said, and the next day she brought a hunk big enough for both Iván and me. When I dissolved the pozol into my next morning's hot water I could taste the smoke that'd filled the house in which the corn-mass had been ground and mixed with ground cacao. It was exactly the taste of the odor of every chimneyless indigenous hut. Sipping the resulting pozol I could almost hear the roosters crowing and the dogs barking.

CIOAC

Notes from a birding trip through Mexico, Yerba Buena Clinic just south of Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacan, northern Chiapas, December 25, 1996

The seasons are out of whack and life in these mountains also is out of whack. One morning I walk into Pueblo Nuevo for a hot meal of beans and scrambled eggs a la mejicana. I take a seat at the only table in a hut with a ceiling so low I must bend. The structure is open on the street side and the street is a pure quagmire of mud. While I eat, a couple arrive, the man riding a burro and his wife dressed in Indian style, barefoot, walking and carrying goods to sell on her head. They enter the restaurant and sit across from me. The man orders a meal for himself. The wife sits next to him facing him, thus holding her body at a right angle to me, never once looking at me, and she eats nothing, simply watches him eat, belch, and pick his teeth as he stares at me. She looks very embarrassed, and also very tense and scared. Her face is as intelligent as his is aggressive and

impudent. He knows I speak Spanish and that I'm interested in talking, but he just stares at me, saying nothing.

The highway crosses Yerba Buena's property. On the upslope side which the clinic is trying to preserve forested for the water supply, there's an old sign in Spanish asking people to not pick the flowers or cut firewood. This has been painted over with the letters CIOAC, the name of the local group of poor people organizing to seize properties by force. On the cistern upslope someone has scrawled "Tomado por CIOAC" -- "Taken by CIOAC."

On Christmas Eve there's a great deal of drinking among the men in town and late in the day a large, angry group comes to the entrance road, but people are talked out of entering the compound. People in these parts believe that there's a law that if someone finds unused land or an empty house they have a right to take possession of it, so I spend Christmas Eve sleeping in one of the clinic's isolated houses, hoping to not be "invaded." Happily, on Christmas Day, things are quiet and nothing has happened.

Population density in this land is simply too high for the resources available, so even in a community that for decades has received free or very inexpensive medical service, large numbers of people are turning against those who earlier helped them. Nothing is sacred when population density outstrips the ability of a habitat to sustain life.

DON ANTONIO'S PULQUE

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; December 29, 2006

Last Friday Margarita and her son Paul invited me to hike with them up the mountain to the east of town, to visit their weekend house in

an isolated, tiny village. Most of the hike took place on a trail between stone walls and worn deep by centuries of foot travel. That trail must have been in use since pre-Columbian times. Now few people use it because a gravel road has bypassed it.

However, the one person we did meet was Margarita's uncle, Don Antonio, coming down the trail with a pole over his shoulder carrying bags in which rode large plastic Coke bottles filled with Don Antonio's homebrewed pulque, which he planned to sell in town. Don Antonio knew what he was doing because that night there'd be lots of Christmas celebrating in town, and pulque is this region's traditional alcoholic drink. Don Antonio had fermented it (not distilled) from sweet sap of the giant agave called Maguey. Pulque and Maguey are important features of traditional society here

Of course Don Antonio insisted that I take a sip. When he opened his Coke bottle, the sweet, foamy, only-slightly alcoholic liquid spewed onto the ground like champaign. It wasn't bad tasting and I was glad to experience a bit of local tradition, but it's hard to see how some men get hooked on it.

AWAKENING ON LLANO DE CABALLO

Issued from Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Headquarters in Jalpan, Querétaro; December 29, 2006

A feature of the La Trinidad area's physiography is that here and there among the soaring peaks you encounter small flatlands such as the one on which La Trinidad is established. These flatlands are called llanos (YAH-nos), the adjective "llano" meaning flat.

On Wednesday morning, my last day in the mountains, at around 7000 feet, I awoke on LLano de Caballo, or "Horse Flat," as it might

be called in Wyoming. My tent was white with frost, the nylon above my head was a solid sheet of ice where my breath had frozen. It was 25°F (-4°C). Through a slit in the tent's door I peeped outside and saw that the llano's grass was white as if covered with snow. I lay in the sleeping bag until a sunlight sliver stabbed onto the flat from between two peaks.

My tent is for summer camping. Its top is open netting to keep out mosquitoes while letting me see the stars. My sleeping bag is for summer camping, too. Despite wearing trousers over running pants, seven shirts and three pairs of socks, I was cold, but not as cold as you might expect. Instead of placing the tent's flysheet over the tent, I'd wrapped it around me. It was amazing how such a thin sheet of nylon made such a big difference. During the night when it'd slip off I'd immediately awaken because of the cold. Little tricks like using that flysheet can mean a lot under extreme conditions.

I went and stood in the sunlight. The llano's grass sparkled like a world of diamonds. The freshness of the air filled me with wonder and a kind of nostalgia -- wishing to share it with someone, knowing it was all about to melt away, knowing that as I approach 60 my vision, hearing, smelling, all are dimming, all are dulling, and what I feel at the present will never again be as intensely felt as now. All melting away.

My breath didn't make a fog. When I peed, steam didn't rise from the wetness. I'm guessing it was because droplets of steam need nuclei around which to form, such as particles of dust or pollution, and in this pure mountain air there were no impurities. Man, that's pure when it's that cold, but your pee doesn't steam.

When the sunlight shined on me and my body warmed, you should have seen the dust particles off my clothing waft into the air on vagrant curls of convecting warmth and soar upward, in the intense sunlight with black mountains behind those particles streaking like incandescent sparks at midnight. What a dustbin I was, but now I was being purified by coldness and sunlight.

What did it all mean?

This was my celebration hike for the beginning of the New Annual Cycle, which started with the Winter Solstice on December 21. I accepted the gift of the moment as an auspicious new beginning for a new year full of things to behold and treasure.

In this New Year may we all be purified and renewed the same.

LLano de Caballo proves that even old dustbins can be rehabilitated and filled with delight.

END