

## Gary Geddes / FOOTNOTE FROM CAHUITA

The jungle walk from Cahuita, which more or less follows the shoreline, holds few, if any, perils for the visitor, but that does not stop Jim from turning it into a journey to the source of the Amazon. The first blue crab that crosses our path, moving high on its four claws like one of those lumber carriers found in warehouses back home, is enough to send Jim careening off the path to the relative security of the beach. It's a splendid creature that seems to have adapted so it can't be easily spotted in the reflected sky-blue tropical waters of eastern Costa Rica; however, in the green shadows of the jungle, where it lives in holes above the tide-line, the crab's glossy ceramic shell comes as a complete surprise. So, too, do the butterflies, with their bars of black and gold.

We've spent several delightful days in San José, a city which, after Managua, seems opulent and full of history, despite the familiar fast-food chains and billboards enticing foreign businesses to invest and visiting pensioners to become residents. We've splurged for a meal at an Italian restaurant and lunched daily in the elegant, tiled snackbar at the National Theatre, taking time out to visit the gold museum in an underground maze nearby. It was there, among the host of exquisite Mayan and Aztec gold miniatures of frogs, turtles, jaguars, birds, lizards, and insects that Jim located his totem animal for the trip, the *zopilote*, or common buzzard. I've seen their relatives circling over the charnel houses in Bombay, waiting to pick clean the bones of the recently dead. Never mind the morbid associations; to Jim, the Spanish name calls up the English word 'co-pilot.' With "Zopie" on our side, he argues, we're sure to make it home safely on the plane.

There's no shortage of jungle in Nicaragua; in fact, much of it is infested still with remnants of the contra, plying their grisly trade on the civilian population. However, my own commitment to give a lecture and poetry reading at the University of Costa Rica precluded a visit to the coastal jungles of Bluefields or Puerto Cabezas. So we've settled for a quick run to the coast in a rented car. In San José, I was able to meet many academics and writers, including Julieta Pinto, Carmen Naranjo, Emilia Macaya, and Joaquín Gutiérrez, with whom I had corresponded. These were the kind of satisfying contacts I'd hoped to make in Nicaragua, but which were impossible because of the

extent of the celebrations and the crush of internationals on the scene.

Joaquín Gutiérrez and his wife Elena live in a small suburb of San José, not far from the University of Costa Rica, where he taught for fifteen years after the military coup in Chile forced him to return to the land of his childhood. I made my way there to meet him and also to deliver copies of the first English edition of his children's novel, *Cocori*, just published in Canada by Cormorant Books. Jim, who served as a tireless guide and host in Nicaragua, has come along as my guest. We left Managua last Wednesday on the red-eye flight at 6:00, which meant a lot of late-night packing and little sleep. Katrina, Paul, and Stephanie were on the same flight, but headed off immediately to travel to the coast on the scenic eight-hour train ride through the mountains and jungle. As it turned out, mudslides had closed down the railway indefinitely and they were forced to take the bus.

It also transpires that Joaquín was in Managua the same time as we were, to receive the Rubén Darío Medal for his contributions to Nicaragua and to literature. He shows us, with some reluctance, the medal and a picture of himself in *Barricada* with the famous Ecuadorian painter Osvaldo Guayasasua we saw at the Borge sod-turning. Not surprisingly, considering the low profile of Nicaragua and of the arts here in Costa Rica, not a word of the award has appeared in the local papers.

He's an imposing man, tall with a shock of grey-white hair, an aquiline nose, moustache, and bushy athletic eyebrows that respond to every emotion that registers in his face. And there are many of those. In the course of fifteen minutes, we have witnessed his delight at the production of *Cocori* ("*Que linda, que linda*"), jokes about the literary life, affectionate asides to Elena, and deep concern over the politics of the region and his preferred home, Chile. There's a boyishness about him and his enthusiasms are catching: we're given an animated tour of the house, with its wall-hangings, paintings, photographs of Tolstoy, Gorki, Charlie Chaplin, Zapata, Sandino, two shots of himself with Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-tung, and a collection of animal remains — snake-skin, shark's jaw and teeth, swordfish blade, and turtlehead — each recalling his childhood in the jungle and on the beaches of Puerto Limón.

His father was a land-owner and later Ambassador to the U.S., which led to Joaquín's short career as a student of economics. Higher education, he explains, lasted a month, followed by his making the

rounds of all the chess clubs in New York. He worked much of his life as a journalist and translator, travelling to China to translate the works of Mao Tse-tung into Spanish. I ask if he speaks Chinese.

“Ha! No, I never learned Chinese. I had too good an interpreter and I was lazy. I translated Mao from English to Spanish.”

Talk moves easily from art to publishing — he headed the Chilean national publishing company Qimentu, under Allende — to scenes of childhood. He remembers how, when the sea rose, it would push all the crabs up the sewers onto the streets of Puerto Limón, so you could hardly find a place to put your foot down. He speaks warmly of the numerous black inhabitants, who were determined to succeed and refused to do peasant work, setting up plots of land between the railways and the fincas. Apparently even now, few, if any of them, work for the United Fruit Company. The local dialect, which is a blend of English, Spanish, and Creole, produced some memorable moments in his childhood, as when one of his black companions rushed into the kitchen to announce, “*Hay un snaké in the caca-hole,*” meaning, roughly, there’s a snake in the shit-house.

Elena is Chilean and worked as an editor for many years in her father’s publishing company, Nascimento, which published the work of Pablo Neruda even while he was out of favour. The clandestine publication of *Canto General* was managed by maintaining a network of complete secrecy; no one talked of his or her work on the book, not even the illustrator and proof-readers. Two thousand copies appeared just before Neruda went into exile. Naturally, there were some wonderful anecdotes to relate about Neruda, who was their close friend much of his life. I’m particularly fascinated by the stories of his acquisitiveness, having seen his three dwellings in Chile and heard of a fourth in France, purchased with winnings from the Nobel Prize. Joaquín recounts an incident in front of an antique shop in Venice, or Florence, when Neruda saw something he had to have.

“Joaquín, go in and buy that horse for me. I want it so much, I’ll have to pay twice its value.”

Another story recalls Neruda’s efforts to extract from Elena the sculpture of a whaler, which was on loan from her father. Neruda managed to persuade her publisher father to part with it. Once, after her return from China, Elena was looking at an interesting ashtray in a shop in Santiago. Neruda, who was looking on, convinced her that it was not a good buy. Later, she saw the ashtray prominently displayed



in his living-room.

"He was a child, a child spoiled by his indulgent friends," she says fondly. A sad, shy young man, Neruda later became very social and loved to have happy people around him at all times. Apparently, he hated any mention of death and once turned sour on a young guest who had remarked that the profusion of objects in the house reminded him of a museum.

Time has come to leave our generous hosts. Joaquín has offered to read the Spanish translations of my poems at the lecture and poetry reading at the University and to dine with us in the evening at a restaurant run by Chilean refugees. Nothing could please me more, except for his comment on seeing me enter the lecture-room the next day: "Hey, Big Boy!" I take a last look around this haven of taste and goodwill, which served as a safe-house for Sandinistas during the revolution. Gioconda Belli stayed here, and *Comandante* Henry Ruiz-Modesto. As a final coffee and brandy are finished and I stand up to leave, Joaquín returns to a subject we have mooted earlier.

"The great writers and painters are those who teach us to recognize their people, the essence. Goya was not a good painter technically. He made a lot of mistakes — eyes out of line, and so on — but he knew the essence of the Spanish people. Did you ever see his *perro* looking at the mountain ranges stretching ahead of him, and the look of despair on his face?"

Right on cue, there's a bark from the dining-room, where the Gutiérrez's cat has leapt through the open window with a small black garden snake. The dog circles the writhing snake, which the cat is batting about playfully. Joaquín rewards the cat with a few pats on the head.

"Look how proud she is of her conquest."

We've come to the end of our jungle safari without seeing much in the way of wild life. I can't say I'm terribly disappointed. The spiders, butterflies, and blue crabs are about my speed — or slower. I'll leave the predators to more adventurous travellers. As Jim stalks the treeline with a cigarette and listens to his Stan Rogers tape, I take a last swim in the shallows, one eye on my clothes, passport, and camera, the other on the surface of the ocean between myself and the reef. I've just remembered the gleaming white teeth and jaw hanging on Joaquín's wall. Several *zopilotes* circle overhead, biding their time before descending on the remains of my shark-ripped, water-logged carcass.

One of them dips to the branches of a blighted tree nearby, then takes a low swoop over the picnic table.

"Jim, chase that buzzard away from my clothes. He's probably been trained by the contras to steal passports."

"*Manos Blancos*, more likely. Just what we need to shake up the granting agencies back home."

At that moment a low roar can be heard above the dull rumble of the surf. It's the sound we've been waiting for, and which has sent many tourists scurrying from the jungle for their lives. High above his head, Jim has located about seven howler monkeys, who are making the noise that resembles the roar of the jaguar, doubtless something that has evolved for protection, as birds and animals take on the colours of the vegetation they frequent. Jim is so excited he's holding the recorder up, taping over the voice of his beloved Stan Rogers.

"Arnie will freak out when he hears this."

The diminutive howlers peer down from the upper branches, then stop suddenly. A wave of comparative quiet overwhelms us. Jim bangs a stick against the base of a tree and imitates their noise, but nothing happens. Only vigorous hand-clapping seems to rouse them once more to action. As long as we continue to applaud, these old-stagers keep up their inordinate performance.

"I've heard members of the League of Canadian Poets make less interesting sounds." Jim smiles at his own dig, having chosen membership in the broader-based Writers' Union.

"The poets will do it even without an audience."

"Only the postmodernists."

The howlers have put the finishing touches not only on my trip, but also on these meditations. Stephanie, Paul, and Katrina, who we have met again by chance in Cahuita, arrive with our rented car and the voyage homeward begins in earnest. It's a long road that has led me to Central America, beginning with high school Spanish in Vancouver, the chance discovery of an image which would lead me to write my long poem on the Spanish conquest, "Letter of the Master of Horse;" the poems of Neruda and those of my fellow-poets in Canada who first made the physical or spiritual pilgrimage to South and Central America — in particular, Pat Lane, Tom Wayman, Pat Lowther, and Earle Birney — bringing the various landscapes and their harsh social realities so palpably home to me; the invitation from Lake Sagaris to translate my work and to arrange for me to visit Chile; the subsequent

publication of work by such Chilean-Canadian writers as Nain Nomez, Leandro Urbina, and Gonzalo Millán; and my discovery of the amazing Central American photojournalism of Larry Towell, whose brilliant photographs in *Gifts of War* and *Nicaragua Under Siege: From Their Lips* achieve so well what Kracauer calls “the redemption of reality.”

Earle Birney’s poetic life-work finds its finest expression in his poems of solidarity and self-analysis, written as a result of his travels in the Americas. The poem most widely read and appreciated is “Cartagena de Indias,” which explores not only the conditions of poverty in Colombia, but also the poet’s guilt over his own privileged position as a tourist with time and money at his disposal. The poem takes the form of a romantic ode, in which the poet articulates the causes of his dis-ease and is then rescued from the doldrums by an unexpected source of inspiration. For Keats and Shelley, a west wind or urn did the trick; for Birney, what is needed is the statue of an old pair of shoes, a tribute to poet Luis Lopez, who is reported to have said he loved his countrymen, despite all their failings, as a man loves his old pair of shoes. After the taxi-driver explains to him the meaning of the statue, the voice of the poet is heard speaking to the people of Cartagena, a message which is mainly for himself and other Canadians:

— and him I envy,  
I who am seldom read by my townsmen  
  
Descendants of pirates    grandees  
galleyslaves and cannibals  
I love the whole starved cheating  
poetry-reading lot of you    most of all  
for throwing me the shoes of deadman Luis  
to walk me back into your brotherhood

As we leave behind the jungles of Cahuita and then Puerto Limón, I’m more than a little conscious of the brotherhood encountered here and in Nicaragua, especially among the writers I have met. This has not been the competitive, self-promoting ‘wolf-pack’ of Hemingway’s imagining, but Wyndham Lewis’s ‘community of writers,’ an ‘inner public’ which guides and sustains us as both writers and readers. Margaret Laurence, drawing from her clan heritage in Scotland, called



it 'the tribe' and was fiercely loyal to those she believed were serious enough to give writing their life. I remember vividly a moment at her home at Elm Cottage in England when, after an evening of wine and talk, she looked at me with piercing eyes and said: "If you're not prepared to be there to take up the mantle when it's cast, don't waste my time." I suspect she said this to a number of young writers in whom she perceived faint glimmerings of promise; but, for me, full of hope and self-doubt, it was a glorious, chastening experience.

The search for Nicaragua is, in large part, a search for form. Political form is not too different from poetic form; both need, constantly, to be renewed. I share Milosz's view that "poetry is essential as bread" and Robert Haas's conviction that "a poetry that makes fresh and resilient forms extends the possibilities of being alive." Milosz has also reminded us that "Form in poetry has many uses; one of them, like refrigeration, is to preserve bad meat." Somoza was committed to an outmoded, feudal ideology, based exclusively on power and self-aggrandizement; this is nowhere more evident than in his purchasing from the Italians an old headless statue of Mussolini on horseback, on which he had a sculpture of his own head mounted. Political structures must undergo constant revision. Revolution or reform is more a state of mind than a finite political goal. Ernesto Cardenal struggles now in public life, as he did in his poetry, to "organize hopes/Possibilities that cannot be dreamed by computers." And Jabra I. Jabra's description of the author of the *Seven Voyages of Sinbad* as a "craftsman of adversity" might well be applied to the practical poet and the inspired politician, since there is no harbour in which he or she can find a perfect and permanent rest.

I'm reminded, in this context, of Conrad's comment about political realities in his essay "Autocracy and War": "The true peace of the world will be much less like a beleaguered fortress and more, let us hope, in the nature of an Inviolable Temple. It will be built on less perishable foundations than those of material interests. But it must be confessed that the architectural aspect of the universal city remains as yet inconceivable — that the very ground for its erection has not been cleared of the jungle." Perceptions have changed in the seventy years since Conrad wrote those lines; it's no longer acceptable, given our environmental consciousness, to use the jungle as a metaphor for the undeveloped or the uncivilized. Still, considering the holocaust in

Europe, the killing fields in Cambodia, tribal genocide in Africa, Stalinist atrocities, and the endless harassment and slaughter of both reformers and innocents in Asia, Mexico and the Americas, with the aid of the U.S. government, not to mention American and Canadian vested interests, Conrad's assessment of our state of moral progress remains as acute as ever.

The first night in San José, I dreamed I was in a small coastal village in Nicaragua. I couldn't shake off a sense of impending danger and kept mentioning my unease to Ortega and several of the *Comandantes* I'd seen in Managua. Nobody paid much attention, though I suspect they must have wondered what a gringo like me was doing here in the first place. Then the planes came, a night raid, with fires and pandemonium in the streets. I took refuge in a boat-house with several others, while light from the gunfire and burning buildings reflected off the water. Ortega put his arm around my shoulder and smiled.

"I should have stayed in academia, *verdad?*"

"You need *cojones* for that," I said, and we both laughed as the bombs fell.

Murray Reece and the Vancouver contingent from Tools for Peace, who shared the flight down from Toronto, have shown up again, their solidarity meetings finished and their cargo of aid distributed in Managua. The tired flesh has not yet begun to pale under their tans. A huge U.S. military transport squats on the pavement near the terminal in San José, its low-slung wings, dark shading and ominous aspect recalling something from another, prehistoric time. I nudge Jim and direct his gaze out the window. What I don't say, since we are about to take off, is that it reminds me of *zopilote*, his ever-vigilant co-pilot.