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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Flâneur

by

Christopher David Wiebe 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

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His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect "flaneur," for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude . . . in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite . . . to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world.

Charles Baudelaire

"The Painter of Modern Life" (1863)

Although our first view of (Lake Atitlán) had been the most beautiful we had ever seen, this surpassed it. All the requisites of the grand and beautiful were there: gigantic mountains, a valley of poetic softness, lake and volcanoes; and from the eminence on which we stood a waterfall marked a silver line down its side. A party of Indian men and women were moving in single file from the foot of the mountain toward the village, and they looked like children.

John L. Stephens

Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan (1841)

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **Flâneur** submitted by **Christopher David Wiebe** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Arts.**

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January 28 1997

Abstract

This is a novel about a contemporary young Canadian who goes looking for his father, a well-known Canadian writer, who has disappeared in Guatemala.

The long and continuous record of earthquakes in Guatemala provide the structure for the novel.

A variety of cultural issues are explored in the novel: the "fin de siècle" concern with deterioration, randomness, and fragmentation; the anxiety of a parent's influence; the practices of travel and travel writing; the politics and problematics of the photographic image.

I contend that the literary trope of the "flâneur" provides a way of understanding the practices of travel in the late twentieth century.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kristjana Gunnars for her encouragement and sound judgment; my parents -- Rudy and Tena Wiebe -- for their unfailing support and confidence in my abilities; Adrienne and Arturo Avila-Wiebe for providing the impetus to travel in Central America; Janice Schroeder, for being the perfect traveller; and lastly, John Glassco (1909 - 1981) --the aesthetic "primum mobile."

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1. 21 Oct. 1954 / N.Lat., 13.9 / W. Long. -90.6 / Magnitude 6.5

Massive stone temples collapsed above the jungle canopy. The pale flanks of branches and trunks flashed beneath the verdure. Along taupe roads fields were hacked, occasionally the corduroying of cultivation. A beautifully colourless plume and tail of smoke rose from the galvanic, sodden heat of slash and burn. Hoary rain forest, then mature trees on otherwise denuded hills. Cardamom fields were swathed in black gauze. The aircraft decelerated over a city that appeared to be cracking apart. As if the earthquakes had left gaping fissures, a puzzle whose pieces lay congruently next to each other. A volcano had heaped a still steaming cone in the south beyond the runways, choking back another impotent eruption that had burned black fingers in the green scrub. The city's fissures were filled with garbage; long, snaking gullies of human activity. Resident families, their homes built of detritus, sifted though debris in a perpetual scavenge and salvage.

The capital of this country moved like a tent city, its wanderings precipitated by natural catastrophes. The final move to this high, cracked plateau came when the colonial city that once governed all of Central America was devastated by the most powerful earthquake in recorded history. The colonists had built cities with fortifications below the ground, seeking to thwart its convulsions and find rigid strata. They built massive foundations that had no give. Antigua, as it came to be called after it had failed as a seat of power, was located on some of the richest agricultural land in the country. The landscape was also very beautiful: volcanoes on two sides and a range of lesser hills enclosing the sightlines. The new site of Guatemala City was chosen for its fractured terrain, plates of land that did not meet and sprout volcanic scabs.

2. 28 Aug. 1955 / N. Lat. 14.0 / W. Long. -91.0 / Magnitude 6.75

As we taxied up I had a good look at the airport. A sixties combination of gilded aluminum and glass, a design that once signaled sensible and modern. The hatch of the plane opened and the stenches of a warm country flooded in. I sat trapped, staring at the in-flight magazine's map of Guatemala, following the gazelle leaps of planes that could take me elsewhere. The antiseptic air of the fuselage mixed with unpleasant odors of stale food and bodies. To get to the passport control we had to pass through corridors sheathed in orange, yellow, and brown shag mixtures that gave off a corrupt miasma. The lights were covered in a sticky yellow film.

We stood four deep leaning on luggage carts waiting for the dark wooden conveyor belt to move. Workers argued with each other, wrenching on panels and levers, crawling through the rubber flaps in the luggage bay walls. The floor above was crowded with people. Hanging on the railing like bent clothes on the wash line, they waved frantically and despondently to travelers mumbling together below. Two children pushed through the military guards and ran toward a couple who lifted them open-armed off the ground squealing with delight, their small legs excitedly pounding against their hips. The paths of shifting wooden plates began to move counter-clockwise and a red vinyl suitcase pushed through the rubber flaps. The tables where the customs officers opened bags were part of the same bear pit theatre, the visible controls of the state. This was where your underwear and books were riffled through, your presents mercilessly pried open.

I walked past the officers' bored stares and proceeded through automatic doors that could barely open in the crush of well-wishers and taxi drivers. A man from the embassy, his little Canadian flag raised half-

heartedly, introduced himself and we cruised on the soft suspension of a sedan to the embassy. Mr. Leiris' conversation moved systematically, as if revolving around a down spout, from the weather and Canadian politics to my studies at university, and then to the disappearance.

3. 3 Sep. 1955 / N. Lat. 13.8 / W. Long. -90.8 / Magnitude 6.5 - 6.75

Car exhaust lay close to the ground in a sickly embalmed pallor. All around the car were the dopplered castanet drones of engines without mufflers. Men and women pushed and pulled homemade carts, with automobile axles or bicycle tires. The grass was being cut by boys squatting with machetes. Crumpled loiterers held half-cradled, sprawling children. The embassy car drove through the massive central plaza, ringed by the cathedral, the archbishop's residence, the government palace, the law courts, the post office, the municipal palace, assorted shops, and an unobtrusive military barracks. Many people stood by carts and merchandise on the flat, shadeless expanse of stone surrounded by these formidable edifices. A fountain epileptically tossed up a jet of brackish water. The centre of the city radiated the power of official institutions that still demarcated the presence of authority when the real strength had moved elsewhere, to the towers that lined Avenida Reforma, the walled mansions of Zone 9. At the embassy building, we passed through metal detectors, past guards with guns dangling from their necks, and paused at alarmed doors watched by cameras.

"Just this morning we had a tremor," my escort informed me. "I felt it when I stepped out of the elevator, and by the time I got to my office it had not abated. People were standing around wondering if they should ignore it, crouch under their desks, or evacuate." Mr. Leiris settled himself in the chair behind the desk. "It is understandable that you came down, Mr. Neufeld, of

course we are conducting an investigation through the Guatemalan authorities, who have dealt with these situations before. Naturally, there is very little that you can accomplish here yourself. The bureaucracy is exceedingly daunting to the uninitiated and productive manipulation of it requires a certain degree of, how shall we say, finesse: you must know when to apply pressure, but also, more importantly, when to hold back and let things run their course."

The office I sat in looked like it had been sensibly redecorated in the mid-eighties: lots of plum stained oak and bluish-grey carpeting. The vertical blinds behind Leiris were conscientiously swiveled, so the view down Avenida Reforma was blocked to my view. The synthetic burlap throbbed with inner light: a squat purple vase stood on his desk, from which a pastel combination of silk and dried flowers fanned out. Brian Mulroney smiled warmly in a metal frame, his muscular profile shown to best advantage. The office could be anywhere -- Yellowknife, Yaoundé. It was undoubtedly tailored to put Leiris and his visitors at complete ease. It was effectively a liminal space, leaving the country that surrounded and sustained this elevated floor of offices utterly at bay. Leiris hunched forward at the desk and earnestly shuffled through official looking documents, bending open clipped and stapled leaves in dramatic reappraisal.

4. 8 Jul. 1957 / N. Lat. 14.5 / W. Long. -91.0 / Magnitude 6.0

I had seen films such as "The Official Story" and thought it best to declare at the outset that I was prepared not to be surprised. I was steeped in cynicism.

"I have done a little reading about the Guatemalan government, its army and police," I told him. "The sources suggest that difficulties may be

encountered if certain parties are implicated in any way, by his death or injury. I understand that these kinds of investigations can be . . . restrained by political imperatives."

I could see Leiris was making an effort to maintain a bright expression, though there was an undercurrent of fatigued unease in the gentle upward tendency of his lips, as if trying to place these "sources" on the political spectrum.

"'He looks like a suburban socialist," I could imagine Leiris thinking, "he has read fragments of Marx with nominal comprehension, let a subscription to the New Internationalist lapse with a pang of conscience, lends tacit support to social justice initiatives when friends prod him, too young for the enthusiastic support of Nicaragua or sending books to Cuba.' He chuckled inwardly at the facile treatments from which these "misgivings" were gleaned, "Country digests" and reports from axe-grinding partisans who would jeopardize bilateral trade initiatives in a puerile bid to bolster human rights.

Gazing at Leiris and the careful interior design of his working environment, I remembered how I had once thought of going into the Foreign Service myself but was glad I had gotten no further than the information package, headed in bold print: "So you think you have what it takes to be an ambassador for Canada abroad?"

"Does the Canadian consulate here have the means to conduct an independent investigation?" I asked.

"Let me assure you, the Guatemalan authorities are doing everything in their power to cooperate with us. They are as eager to determine the nature of his disappearance as the Canadian government is, and to locate him, if possible, or to recover his remains. A person of your father's renown makes things a little more difficult. Guatemala is affected by a proliferation of

negative reports abroad, brought on by the recent shooting deaths of an American couple during a robbery near Momostenango. This was compounded by magazine exposés claiming that South American groups are using Guatemala as a site for conveying drugs into North America. You may have come across in your reading that tourism is of increasing importance to this country's economy. It is a large source of hard currency, second only to coffee exports. The government is eager to find other less mortifying explanations for his disappearance, to not cast aspersions on the safety of foreign nationals here."

Foreign investment was their worry, and investors were an excitable and uniformly cowardly bunch. Leiris had real élan as a liaison officer, a soothing delivery that emulated the tone one affects when stroking an obese cat. He habitually settled his eyes on a point on the carpet behind me. "As to your suggestion of an independent inquiry conducted by the Canadian government, that, I'm afraid, will be difficult to mount. Budget restraints have given us little room to manoeuvre, and until we have reliable evidence that there has been foul play, it will be impossible to justify the expense to Ottawa. Ultimately, it is not in my power to initiate such proceedings; we are a very small operation here, and matters of that magnitude are at the discretion of the regional ambassadorial headquarters in San José, Costa Rica."

My faith in the Guatemalans was not strong. My thoughts were laced by suspicion; underdeveloped nations were unstable, their interests interlocked with international banking systems and the demands of "good neighbours." Ever since the CIA sponsored overthrow of the leftist President Arbenz in June 1954, American involvement in Guatemala was very explicit. Everything was mutable, everything subject to excision or reprision. Any link in the chain could scuttle the inquiry: a boat owner who wanted no responsibility for his

employees or a lawsuit for negligence, could be deflected by a carefully placed bribe, for example. Objectivity would be a challenge.

5. 20 Feb. 1959 / N. Lat. 15.9 / W. Long. -90.6 / Magnitude 6.5

"Now, I want to expand on a hypothesis you have been informed of that has taken on a compelling aspect; I entreat you to understand that these are merely possible explanations, dire ones at that, and that they are by no means inevitable or should be privileged in any way. They are purely scenarios. The last time your father was seen by reliable witnesses, he was taking a boat from Panajachel to San Pedro La Laguna, a milk run of sorts on Lake Atitlán. We have learned from some German tourists whom he talked to, that he got off with them as planned at San Pedro and that he wanted to go hiking, and would wait for a launch to Santiago Atitlán. About forty-five minutes later they saw him get on an open boat with two boatmen, from a restaurant up the hill from the docks. They said the afternoon wind had come up and the water further out looked choppy. The police questioned the boatmen who regularly ply between the two towns. A pair finally admitted that a man of his description had been on their boat and had fallen overboard in the rough water. They had been too frightened of the consequences to report the incident when it initially occurred. A few days later an empty money belt was found by a trash scavenger, empty save for a receipt for changed traveler's cheques bearing your father's passport number. And a business card from a Margaret Evanson of MacMillan Canada. She is your father's editor and publisher, is she not? These items were turned over to the military authorities."

"So, you seem to be quite assured that he is not alive?"

"Do not assume that. I explicitly stated that the hard evidence is slender and the conjecture that binds together these speculations is malleable in the

extreme. Let me underscore that the statements of these men should not necessarily be taken at face value. The population of Santiago Atitlán is almost exclusively of Mayan Indian extraction. In the past decade the town has operated as a political focal point, a register of anti-government discontent, a Richter Scale if you will. The guerrillas were particularly well ensconced on the volcanoes and hills of that region. The military reprisals by the government on what was seen as a highly sympathetic and sustaining civilian community were intense, prolonged and bloody. There has been a constant source of tension between the military barracks at the edge of town and the local population: routine rape, 'disappeared' persons, violent disruptions of religious processions, those sorts of things. Now, I am not saying that this had any explicit bearing on your father's situation. But this is the context in which we find ourselves searching for genuine answers, in a place where disguised intentions are a matter of course, where fear and intimidation have long held sway."

I had underestimated Leiris' rhetorical power, his heroic brush strokes, though I still distrusted his essentializing take on things. His reduction of present circumstances to an interplay of forces cast in past relationships. He seemed to have no faith in a coming to terms by either side, or in the intervening years, the UN brokered peace accords.

"The route from San Pedro to Santiago Atitlán is around a bleak and precipitous tongue of the volcanic cone, predominantly rock. Cultivation is virtually impossible there, something remarkable for these people who are adept at making almost any land receptive to production. All this by way of saying that it is unlikely that there may have been other witnesses from shore of any incident. It is remote, desolate, and nowhere near the corridor of the ferries shunting between Panajachel and Santiago Atitlán. Why your father

took this circuitous route is difficult to understand. Had he wanted to go to Santiago initially, he could have gone from Panajachel directly."

Obviously something happened on the boat, a decision formed in the midst of the journey. "All right, why has his body eluded location? If they know approximately where he fell in, how hard can it be to find?"

"Very true, but that is presuming he is not in the lake. If there is a body in the lake, there are problems unique to the basin that must be taken into account. Its depth is 320 metres in places. That is considerable. The lake is contained, but it is immense. If you ever swim on the beaches of Panajachel you will notice that the water is only warm the first metre, below which it becomes very cold indeed. These cold temperatures will retard the fermentation of the bodily fluids and its subsequent buoyancy and resurfacing. I have been told that it can take up to two weeks under these conditions. There is also the possibility that it may not rise at all. The basin has many outlets that more than likely join with the many streams down the nether side of the volcanoes, to the Pacific. Local researchers have neither been able to determine where these outlets are, nor their dimensions. Their explorations have defied the application of sophisticated equipment and vast quantities of dye. Suffice it to say, the precise mapping of the lake bottom is not a national priority. They have difficulty paving sections of the Pan-American highway. If these outlets were of sufficient calibre a body might be able to pass through them or become lodged somewhere along their length."

6. 9 Mar. 1959 / N. Lat. 15.1 / W. Long. -91.0 / Magnitude 6.3

I knew about bodies in water, death, knew how they moved after animation had abandoned them. When I was ten there was an exceptionally voluminous spring run off and the creek became a thick moving band that

spilled over the banks. Two young men had gone canoeing in the high water and overturned on an uprooted log. One young man did not come to the surface. The people of the area walked the creek, prodding sticks into deep holes, looking for bright scraps of clothing. His body was found on the edge of our land, snagged on a tree many miles downstream from where he fell in. By the time I saw the creek the fence near it had been taken down and I followed the dual-grooved depressions made by the ambulance tires leading to the bank. The only indication of where the body had come to rest was a knotted piece of orange flagging ribbon tied on a bending willow branch. The body had lost itself in the runoff, become swollen with it: eyes open yet unseeing, mouth ajar. The leeches that adhered without the recognition of the sting of their suck; the ears hearing, at first, the roar of fast water, and then each individual melody as every stone stretched the many-stringed water; the garments billowing in the revolving eddy, undulating like swaddling kelp or mouthing in a pantomime of motion like the gelatinous hooped skirts of the jellyfish. I never saw it. Its removal was quick and orderly. I sat on the bank across from the marked spot and saw how the long dangling end of the ribbon trailed its cut edge like a finger, teasing the water.

7. 13 Apr. 1960 / N. Lat. 15.5/ W. Long. -92.0 / Magnitude 6.0

"There is also the possibility that your father may have had a hand in fabricating a context into which he could. . . vanish."

"You mean suicide."

"No, I mean, to disappear, to escape. "

While parting, Leiris suggested I go see the Relief Map model of Guatemala. "It will give you a sense of the geographical diversity of this small country, put the impediments to movement in perspective."

The park at the edge of the city was unkempt. Food wrappers chattered in the long grasses that ringed each dry tree, lop-sided from scavenged fuel. Bus loads of school children in uniform -- navy shorts, white shirts -- sprinted past the little ticket kiosk and stamped loudly on the stairs of the encircling wooden platform. The model, which had been built in 1904, took up the space of half a city block and I looked down on it from a platform thirty feet in the air. By including Belize as a part of Guatemala, the model perpetuated the official desire to regain control of this "lost department." Leiris, of course, was right. The country was physically awesome. The riotous eruptions of mountains that comprised its waist could not be called mountain "chains" for they did not institute orderly valleys. The model appeared to reproduce them on an exaggerated scale. The mountains subsided abruptly in an even slope running parallel to the Pacific that must have dropped thousands of feet, immediately flattening out into grassland striated by evenly spaced rivers. In the bulge of the country's north west was a high altitude plateau similar to the Andean altiplano. It was juxtaposed with the far north, the thinly populated torso of the country, the rain forest Péten region where thousands of Mayan people once lived in stone cities. To the east, the land flattened to the low hills that bordered Honduras and El Salvador, and the outlet to the sea. Many of the towns and cities had little flags declaring their names which seemed to be delight the school children who were yelling and pointing out their home towns. Many of them, perhaps, had been displaced, had to come to the city for a higher level of education.

8. 20 Aug. 1960 / N.Lat.14.5 / W. Long. -91.5 / Magnitude 6.0

The sun came through amassed clouds, stabbing contrails of white mists in daggers. Taut tendrils of vapour shinnied down, precisely gilding the lake at distant points, playing upon the water's mobile etchings and static white crests. A tall boat lacerated the surface, its wake shriveling, lost in the gnarled labyrinth of the tree. Its silver stack winked through spearheaded leaves and oblong fruit silhouettes, as if the prospect were seen through a sheer drapery of the William Morris "Pomegranate" pattern. I had arrived. I was roused from a richly liquor-embroidered sleep by the telephone call of my father's disappearance, perhaps death, that said the passport had been found the previous evening. I listened to the voice in the receiver and from my fingers came the intimate odors of Elaine, who lay in a cocoon of rumpled sheets and blankets in the next room

The house on Lake Atitlán was rented after my mother died. It belonged to Elizabeth Currie and her partner Detmar, a Dutchman who was a distinguished corn expert working for the United Nations. Elizabeth was a student in the first graduate Canadian Literature course my father ever taught. She continued writing fiction herself -- two novels and a collection of short stories in the two intervening decades -- but had been seduced by financial expediency into External Affairs, and retooled herself as a cultural attaché and then as a development officer. Detmar had acquired the land many decades before in exchange for a car. An American friend who was working for the United Fruit Company was desperate for a reliable vehicle and finally asked Detmar if he could be persuaded to part ways with his Volkswagen Beetle. Over the course of three days they made their way to various government offices around the capital, filling out forms, producing deeds and residency permits, receiving permits and scowls of irritation, the

pounding impress of many coloured stamps after the payment of excise taxes, and signatures that, in the hopes of discouraging forgers, writhed about like rococo scrollwork.

The land had been transferred sight unseen, although the American had helped form a mental picture of it in Detmar's mind. When he first went to see the land he had to hike up from the lake after being let off at Santa Catarina, there being as yet no road cut along the mountain slope. For a long while after leaving the dusty streets of the village, its dark crabs of waste water sprawling and cracking in the tawny powder, he had to walk along the edges of fields, climb over feeble fences of scrap wire bent into wild knots strung between thin, knobby posts. He had to ask directions at many huts but none of them could understand his Spanish, the language of diplomats and business. It was only when he said the old finca's name and "Americano" that they would point with assurance. Soon the fields stopped and he was labouring up a slope covered by golden pine needles lying across each other like an incomprehensibly vast game of pick-up sticks. The pine trees were airily spaced, their long bare branches offering congested vegetal tufts to the shifting sun. Orchids found poise on random branches, spiked green pineapple tops decorated by coy damask flowers dangling rhododendrinous roots for balance.

Through a break in the trees he saw a ruddy tile roof mottled by weeping puddles of dark mold and freckles of ashen lichen. The slope had endless folds and not knowing the terrain he descended into the baranca to find the most direct route. He made his way unsteadily into the gorge of damp verdure at whose bottom water flowed over moss-sheathed stones. The farmhouse was not empty. The land around it had been sown with corn and legumes. A lime tree grew nearby and cutting one in half he nursed the sour

juice and pulpy meat from the porous rind. A family was living in one of the buildings, cooking over an open fire at one end that had blackened the open truss ceiling and wreathed the white washed window openings in ghostly charcoal wisps. The American had not come for many years and the family had begun using the vacated land.

9. 17 Jun. 1961 / N.Lat. 14.2 / W. Long. -92.0 / Magnitude 6.0

My father always wanted a belvedere, a tower where he could see in all directions. The sod hut in which he was born was very dark, a bit of the mid-morning light coming under the door like an insubstantial straw mat and flaming around the poorly squared door jamb, stretching rectangles and scalene guy wires of light to the opposite wall. Adding a gauffred fringe to an axe-squared log, a spider's web hammocked from the wall to a wooden ledge holding Roger's Golden Syrup, their red factories spewing coifed columns of smoke. Or a thread of light angling through an untraceable crack and fixing upon the flywheel of a calendar's threshing machine, a month waiting to be ripped free of two staples. The glow from the south-facing windows, the arcs of his fingerprints transparent and insubstantial, turned the room into an illustration from an old newspaper. He grew acutely aware of the sensuality of light.

My father thought of towers as the piles of rocks filled the sloughs of the undulating land. He was born into a world of wood and stones and a thin scalp of soil, land laced with sand where jackpines grew capriciously on hidden shoals, amid spruce and poplar. There were stones everywhere in the poor soil but the homesteaders only knew how to build with wood, and for this alone they praised the land. They could not prosper but it would never allow them to freeze. Glacial erratics crouched or stood in mocking immobility in

the scattered clearings. As a young child my father carried small rocks to the stone boat. His brothers levered large boulders with crowbars and lashed traces around them while the horses vainly flailed their heads and tails at horseflies. Over a few years, piles of rocks engulfed the bases of the trees and the fence lines became ridges of stone. The land sequestered more rock, reserved it, meting out frustration yearly in the muffled ring of plow metal and the bone-jarring report of the slicing, flipping discs. They were potentially the materials for fortifications, longevity. They were born from the furrowed soil but remained ruinous walls and towers, wells, keeps and stables. These labours remain, and in the pits of their cellars is the blanched rainbow realm of Mason jars and rust pocked, crippled glazed pots.

The dream of the tower originated in the hunger for the infinite, elevated prospect. To perceive the terrifying erasure of the horizon, the broken land groveling before it, carved by the sliding persiflage of an omnipotent sun. The clearing was the first skein of wire in the barbed fence of association. The forest deflected the testudo of a hundred lissome aspen, black eyed and powdery silver skinned. The tower on Atitlán took him above the corn, the trees, and left the mica sparkle of the water and its crateral corset, the ecstatic supercession of the volcanoes, to offer in themselves a complete transcendence. The homestead plot and the yearly dilation of arable, seeable space, taught him the pleasure of spaciousness and the commensurate solace of enclosure.

The stones were the materials of his first conception but how had their image set roots in his imagination? Did it revive in earnest in Medicine Hat, with the Queen Anne houses, their bodies covered in bright trout scales, their rooflines holding wrought iron tiaras? The gracile windows that gazed with iridescent evening eyes toward the South Saskatchewan, angular shadows

cowering closer to the eaves, vivisected by finials? Were his conceptions mixed with the envy of a privileged class?

10. 1 Sep. 1961 / N. Lat. 13.6 / W. Long. -92.5 / Magnitude 6.5

It was Detmar who built the tower that looked over the kidney shaped lake, each window framing a different volcano or vertebral crease of the crater. He let the family who had lived there during the American's absence stay in a retrofitted building up the hill. He needed someone to look after the place while he was frequently away. Reclaiming the two stone farmsteads that faced a bleak inner courtyard, he constructed a massive hip to join them. He built it as if he were shoring up the dikes against the North Sea rollers, a robust capstan to secure the two buildings and keep them from emulating the mobile volcanic soil. It looked like a Norman keep with a red cardinal's cap of tiles. Detmar placed all he knew together -- the concrete mix, whose proportions he had experimented with while shoring up terraces for his corn, the rocks he had collected on his land or had brought by donkey and cart from other fields, the plumb-lines that had left blue chalk pools after sudden showers before his concrete had set. This was the first tower my father could inhabit after the ethereal ones of his mind.

The house formed a right angle, one long white-washed face looking out at the lake, that would continue to elude the lake and its cradle of earth and rock. The house was in the shape of the most rudimentary crutch of human industry. It was trued and squared even if the land was not. And then, as if perched on the summit of a ziggurat, there were eleven ranks of terracing, each with its intestines and spigots for water that could pepper the land with fine mist. The wind blew predictably from the lake in the afternoons, from the southeast directly at the tower, so Detmar placed the purest strains of corn

closest to the house. The lake was a caldera, the remnant of a volcanic cone that fell in on itself. Three smaller volcanoes later emerged like cold sore clusters on its lips, forming cunning bays with their ash. Guatemala was a series of sutures, grating limits, the meeting point of the North American, Cocos, and South American plates, as they converged on the Caribbean plate, and Lake Atitlán was its centre.

Detmar left his family on their acreage along the Rideau Canal south of Ottawa for the villa on Lake Atitlán to plant his unusual strains of corn in late October and to harvest them in April. While he was in Canada Don Carlos and his wife Lucy, both extremely knowledgeable farmers, nurtured his plants and attended to their own plot of land on the slope above. They lived in a two room house near the spring and tried to keep their chickens from wandering down near the villa. When Detmar began to rent out the villa to Europeans and North Americans, he moved his study into a converted shed not far from the pump house. I went to see him the morning after he arrived and he was sitting at a workbench cross-referencing logs of hybrid strains, their subsequent characteristics and yields. The stone shed held many wooden filing cabinets whose open drawers revealed rows of crumpled manila envelopes containing precisely labeled seeds which chattered along the bottom crease.

11. 5 Aug. 1965 / N. Lat. 14.8 / W. Long. -91.0 / Magnitude 6.0

Shortly after my arrival, Detmar had come to plant his corn. I watched as he pushed his finger into the lumpy soil and then placed two wrinkled yellow nuggets into the bottom, white near the cob as if dipped incompletely like Achilles. With a light brush of his loafer he collapsed the chamber, interring it by a gibbous shaped pat. I looked at one of the dried cobs lying

next to me, hung from its ears by the now stiff fibrous husks. The kernels did not form uniform rows, nor were they tight together like the corn from southern Alberta that was sold from the backs of pick-ups at abandoned gas station lots. Some kernels were round black opals and others small tiger eyes.

"Are all those drawers in your room full of different kinds of corn?" I asked, and he seemed gratified by the distraction.

"Actually, many of them would not even be called corn at all, but maize or teosinte, a kind of extremely tall grass that can fertilize maize. Corn is very promiscuous. Wheat isn't, it keeps its flowers so closely confined that there is no way for escaping pollen to reach related species. Wheat is self-fertile, its flowers are bi-sexual. Maize's female organs willingly accept whatever fertilization comes their way, not necessarily even their own species. "

Two springs rose near the villa, making it an anomaly for many kilometres in both directions. To maximize this resource, Detmar designed a sophisticated catchment system that collected much of the ceaseless gush and directed it to two massive cisterns, surmounted by a pump house. Many people came from far away with jugs and filled them with drinking water. With the surplus he watered his plants, augmenting the fickle rains of the dry season. But he could not catch it all, nor did he want to. It still flowed down into the baranca, where it was waylaid and used by those further down. My father could not drink it, his stomach was too sensitive, and had purified water brought once a week in five gallon glass bottles that shoeless boys carried down the stony road to the villa, sunlight laughing in the bubble rocking on their shoulders.

12. 18 Aug. 1966 / N. Lat. 14.6 / W. Long. -91.0 / Magnitude 6.0

The room in which my father wrote was in the turret. It could only be approached from the outside on stone stairs that had no railing. They flared at the bottom coming off the patio and as they curled along the tower toward the door they became alarmingly narrow. A small clay pot of fuchsias was placed on the outer edge, a bright living flame, warning of a precipice. I scrutinized the keyhole, trying to divine the approximate shape of the key, and match its form to one in the bunch of duplicates Lucy had given me. The original set must have been in my father's clothes, now maybe at the bottom of the lake. They were archaic keys, where the metal flanges attached to the end of the key in heavy teeth. The different alloys jangled against each other and tapped the spherical plastic fob, with Jesus sporting a crown of thorns floating inside.

The door opened and stopped abruptly against a stack of books. It was smaller than I expected. Set against one of the curved walls was a concave desk hewn from one of the enormous ceiba trees that grew in the fields of the Pacific coast, providing broad parasols of shade for grazing cattle. The tree must have taken root in the nineteenth century. When he wrote at the desk, the pages resting on it were surrounded by rings, and the jewels of old parasites engulfed by the straining skin. Where the desk ended, bent boards on bricks followed the walls lined with books, crates piled full of folders, spilling sheets and maps. Light entered through six rectangular windows caught in the netted panes, each stylized loophole gathering different intensities and qualities of light and merging them at the centre of the room, like light finding its way into a gemstone, playing off facets with many small and brilliant percussions.

13. 21 Apr. 1969 / N. Lat. 14.1 / W. Long. -91.0 / Magnitude 6.0

There was something horribly familiar, almost cliché, about his disappearance. Its inevitability. Almost all of the men of my grandfather's family had disappeared into the camps of the Gulag, to work in the vast forests or carry mineral-encrusted rocks out of open pits. After decades, one or two emerged, back crumpled, hands arthritically collapsed, face scoured by wind and cold, restored to families that had become uneasily accustomed to their absence, the probability of their death. For other families it was different. They refused to admit their husbands and sons were not alive, had developed elaborate narratives of miraculous intervention. It was only when they were unbelievably old that the KGB files were opened and they found their relatives had died a few weeks after their arrest. How many years had they imagined them working in a camp, conjecturing every detail, when they actually had been shot in their town police station, the report audible in the surrounding streets? But now, here in Guatemala, what could come for a man in the middle of the night, with a horrible knock at the door to take him away, except himself, his own mind? Here, my father was a privileged foreigner. His hard currency was a system of security that slowly revolved elsewhere. He was a remittance man. He was sustained by the endless trickle of royalty statements and agents' correspondence, telegrams or faxes that offered projects. I saw some in a heap on his desk; a travel piece on the Garifuna villages of coastal Honduras; a lure to review a book by an old crony, still swaddled in its bubble wrap and contused manila.

My father began to write at a university, where he met other people who were also writing. There seemed to be few doing it. These young writers saw that very little had been written about where they were from and they started writing about the parkland and prairies, how it had no names, no

history from a European perspective. It was empty. This excited them. They could start to fill it themselves with exquisite sensitivity and they became obsessed with the idea of "land" and the "voice" they thought animated it. They wrote about small towns because they thought they were genuine, unadulterated.

14. 22 Jan. 1972 / N. Lat. 14.0 / W. Long. -91.0 / Magnitude 6.0

My papers were in the briefcase that was my mother's wedding present to my father. The stiff butterscotch leather became too worn for him to tote around without embarrassment and I used it all through university, finding in its worn-out form an articulation of the entropic nature of all life. At a shoe repair store on Whyte Avenue I received the prognosis that it was beyond repair: the leather had completely dried out and the linen stitching inexorably pulled through the parched skin at its many folds. It required prosthetic handles. After I learned this I moderated my demands on it, treated it as if it were a convalescent, not stretching its guts with heavy art books, not placing it on dew slick grass, and slipping it in a garbage bag when the sky brooded with precipitation. I reinforced the leather wrapped handles with wire from old ice-cream buckets that constantly bit into the callousless flesh of my palms. The briefcase came to a blunt point like a gothic vault, and the "nave" space unfolded and collapsed like an accordion. A tapered flap pulled the metal jawed mouth shut, and it was here that my father's initials -- C.N.-- were still visible above the vaguely art-deco brass latch. The flap persistently retained the grey, shadowy impress of that identification and ownership even after the embossed gold paint had flaked away. The obfuscation of the monogram.

My parents were both Mennonite. To be a member of this Protestant sect once meant to be involuntarily nomadic. That is, not desiring to be on the move by choice but by force of political and social convictions, from nation states that sought to curtail the Mennonite's tight conception of their separateness. "Refugee" may be a more accurate term. . But their refugee status did not proceed from purely religious motivations. Economic considerations became inseparable, their location harder to ferret out beneath the cross-stitched shawl of sentiment and pulpit oratory. The Mennonites were, not surprisingly, co-dependent -- the religious and cultural order could not be maintained in the midst of plurality without prosperity and abundance. And those successes were impossible without the vigilant maintenance of collective aid and support, and the resoldering of an exclusive community through religious peculiarity and alienating belief in tenets, such as a militant pacifism.

The Mennonites needed a stable government that left them alone, allowed them to foster and nourish the delusion of self-sufficiency, and that could stomach their perspicacity to solipsism. This worked well in the southern Ukraine during the nineteenth century where they could, by dint of their collectivism -- a derivative individualism held together by peer pressure and the threat of ostracism -- achieve prosperity where the less effectively organized Ukrainians could not. They fed on the machines and scientific advances of Europe. They utilized the impersonal systems of the secular world while maintaining a suspicion of it, proclaiming they were unsullied by them. In terms of the nomadic explanation, the Mennonites failed that categorization. They did not inhabit the marginal land that had been discarded by settlement because it could not sustain them, but remained mobile, sometimes by force, and rationalized it as a means of moral cleansing.

To become intimate with a place, a sole piece of geography, to pass it down through generations, could only produce excretant strains of pride and covetousness. Land, produce, were purely a means of sustenance to allow one to focus on godliness. It was not inherently beautiful or good. The fixity of place was ultimately expendable, perpetually capable of discard, and from this my father and mother diverged, signaling a break with the past. They hoped to instill in their children a personal relationship with land. The Anabaptist martyrs at the stake or in sacks thrown into rivers, and the Russian Mennonites sent to labour camps for preaching Christianity or for commanding too much capital, suffered, symbolically, the torture of immobilization and confinement. To see dislocation as cleansing, this was the genius of the Mennonite peoples. To carry out, anachronistically into the twentieth century, a practice of spiritual hygiene demonstrated, for one, by the Israelites in their wanderings and incipient purges. The force of the new, of starting again from the most rudimentary level, demanded the complete devotion of time and mental energy. The new erased vicissitudes, engendered conservatism, and chilled temptations that spawned in the ponds of leisure time and amphibiously crawled onto the lush, reedy shores of sin.

15. 12 Oct. 1972 / N. Lat. 15.8 / W. Long -91.2 / Magnitude 6.0

Though I had published nothing I believe my father envied me for the luxury of abdicated ambitions, invertebrate potential. He was put out by my semi-somnolent intellect and sophomoric humour, my listless pursuit of immediate sensations. Envy of me was fed by the sense of being forgotten, despite the fact that he still commanded solicitation for jacket blurbs.

"When you are asked for jacket blurbs you are dead, people expect nothing new from you, their conception is fully formed -- you're reduced to a

name. Blurbs are testimonials carried across the river Styx, they are gravestones."

Or he elaborated on how the young and new grasped all the attention and adoration. "I may as well be dead. Every three or four years I publish a novel, I receive a number of faintly praising reviews in magazines and newspapers only read by other writers. It sells two thousand in hard cover, the first five hundred briskly and the next arthritically, and disappears in remainder bins. The tepid, pedestrian review that refers to your 'established position' and 'undeniable contribution' (as if it were a sort of organ donation!) to Canadian letters is worse than being ignored; at least, then, you can nurse a rage against the cupidity of reviewers and their collective plots of dismissal."

Like an infection, a tumour that accumulates material around it, Canada made him feel small, insignificant. He craved exposure in other nations, wanted to "disappear" his "modest success." He had never been published in the United States or Europe. Agents and rejection letters unfailingly claimed his writing contained a specificity of a place that was unmarketable abroad. He had grown up endeavoring to give "voice" to place, and had eventually become cognizant of its smallness, its dwarfed significance. Like the disease that genetically accelerates the aging process, envy was to arrive as a significant element in his life. He was noticed occasionally on the street, a smile on a passing face disguising a mind searching for a forgotten title on an unforgettable fly-jacket, or by a sagacious sales clerk lingering over the embossed credit card. That was not gratification enough. His name had modest weight, the specific density of a malleable metal, not the gauged thermometric turgidity of mercury, against which the rhetorical climate could be measured, or the immovable solidity of lead that could rip mushroomed holes in unreasonable reviewers. An aluminum name was recyclable and common,

efficient and unassuming. Restlessness was exacerbated by the firm shackling of the past, the inescapable clutter of his publishing history. During one of his lamenting monologues I suggested that he could write stories to which I could sign my name and "lend" my body for the subsequent publicity tour. A certain amount of coaching would be necessary, of course. To do that he would have to modify his style so that it was unrecognizable as his own. He would have to court spicy contemporary themes. Laughing a little, he muttered, "Yes, yes, good idea . . . " and I congratulated myself that I knew how to hurt him.

16. 7 Jun. 1973 / N. Lat. 14.3 / W. Long. -92.0 / Magnitude 6.2

Why had he disappeared? I pondered interlocking reasons, one of which might have been a boredom with the inheritor, the protégé, the son. He seemed to think that my path would be much smoother than his, as he "knew so many people." I had done little to encourage his efforts, in fact. I was a good if unremarkable Arts student, I collected outraged stares and astonishment in the cafeteria, and I liked to believe that the legend of my volatile wit preceded my shuffling tray of food. My father wanted nothing specifically from me, levied no particular expectations. Yet there was a brooding pressure, an unacknowledged understanding, that I should not disappoint; rather, surpass. I confused these sentiments with my own self-conception. The notions I had of my position in the future, the set-pieces that slipped and cohered like a slowly revolving kaleidoscope, were all illumined by his steady effulgence. I could no longer distinguish my own "expectations" from his; like a third personality produced by our interaction, a being formed by his oblique desire to control and my passion for helplessness and ambivalence towards effacement. Acquiescence was deeply attractive, a divan

whose pillows pleaded to be crushed. To hurl oneself upon them, and dent their soft forms and examine the play of sun or street light on a murang dimpled ceiling.

17. 31 Dec. 1974 / N. Lat. 14.1 / W. Long. -91.8 / Magnitude 6.0

In the morning the lake was very calm, painting with effortless verisimilitude a side of a boat, the logs and crooked planks of a dock, the body of a fisherman from the haunches up as he stood beside his dugout canoe, its bottom astir with a dark tongue of leakage. By noon the water was furious at its arbitrary parameters, mustering lather and froth and quivering in the diffused light. On Sunday I resolved to go up to the tower and to begin looking at the drafts of my father's "work in progress." Thinking of it thus, it reminded me of Joyce's Work in Progress published under that title in transition, writing that was ostensibly "unfinished" yet published and read. My father would never have done such a thing -- made himself vulnerable in print. There could never have been "work in progress," only the shuddering emergence of a complete book.

Once he asked me if I would suggest some titles for his novel -- knowing I liked titles more than anything else and could engineer an alluring phrase with juvenile flair. When I asked him what the book was about he sketched it clumsily as if he hadn't foreseen that eventuality, gave me a summary that would have travestied the jacket blurb. He never told me what he was working on save for a historical period or situation through a thickly vaselined lens. A few days later I approached him with my list. Of course, he used none of them. I should have known all along that he was circumspectly teasing me, toying with my young wisp of confidence. But I had eagerly deceived myself and

pretended it was a commission. At that point I knew it was a game for him, the play at collusion, when he reveled in his self-sufficiency.

I stood at the threshold and looked at the desk and shelves in the velour light of an overcast day. I felt like a thief casing out a room for the most profitable point of initiation. There was no real rush, though like a child again I became nervous, as if the moment I began to irrevocably disorder the signature arrangement of the desk's articles, my father should come padding across the tile patio and up the stairs in his whisper quiet Wallabies.

What had my father tried to do? He, his generation, and the one that came before it, the distinctions were almost indiscernible now, had tried to commune with the land, to figure it as massive and isolating, inscrutable yet ultimately knowable. They sought to articulate its myriad elements and from that chaos of their own making, their own magnificent alchemy, let the land speak, to give it a voice. Above all, art had to matter; as if there was an incredible urgency in all things and especially the written word. A spirit had to be coaxed, wrenched from the soil, the blasted outbuildings of settlement, torn from the historical record and root cellars sunk deep into its hide. Triumphant literature, a torch through which the fugitive and laughter-convulsed identity of a nation, a region, could be born. The arts in western Canada were driven forward by implacable optimism, a sanguinity never before elicited from the creative community. It was engendered in the idea of community, not manifest in uniformity of practice or expression. They built a pyre to "indigenous form." Above all, the prairie could not be "invisible." It had to be a strong presence, a character of profundity itself. The mobilizing of weekend "retreats" in the country whose very rusticated conditions encouraged a rudimentary cohesion among the artists. The poplars swaying

out of sync with each other pulling the thick plastic lashed to them, tight then slack, throwing up puddles of rain as they watched short films, their artifice and mediation worn like an exoskeleton. Though they would never have admitted to it, they thought of themselves as the first true prairie writers, their vision of the land not distorted by European methods of apprehension and expression. They crafted and re-animated a lineage of prefigurative writers who, while revered, had misinterpreted the vagaries and uniqueness of the west. The writings of the early explorers were read as Eurocentric distortions of the landscape and the native cultures living in it.

He had been working on a novel about Edmonton, a city neglected by the literary imagination, the great historical novel of its establishment and growth. Should I just read his drafts? Pack them up and eventually order them? Will I be another Marjorie Bonner trying to finish Lowry's jumbled "novels," or Mary Hemingway suppressing material, agonizing over the release of a fragmented novel and giving in, or be a Dmitri Nabokov, writing long "Afterwords" explaining the novel's incompleteness, extrapolate with faux-assurance my father's ambitions for it, construct a few comments he made to me about the project and invest them with pompous significance? Should I burn it? Was the way to bury his memory, his career's ragged denouement, to rewrite it myself?

18. 4 Feb. 1976 / N. Lat. 14.5 / W. Long. -91.5 / Magnitude 7.5

On one of the shelves I found a small album made of black felt paper to which photographs were clasped at the four corners by black angles. It was tightly bound between naughahyde covers by black laces. I recognized the photographs imprecisely; these were the photographs that I quickly flipped over when I was young, till I got to the colour photographs, the recognizable

world of interiors cluttered with things, the ones that depicted me. Even as a child I loved looking at myself in pictures -- such a different person, a completeness of presence that I could only view in pieces. I gleaned a similar sensation from the tripartite mirrors of department stores where I watched myself from new angles, almost without meeting my own nictitating gaze.

The pictures of my father's family were all outside, most often with the house in the background. The house stopped the Brownie's gradual blurring of focus over long distances, kept their private, familial world in clear definition. For the first five years of my father's life he was placed fully erect on a chair. The photographs juggled four elements: the blond compressed ground, a log and thickly mud-chinked wall, a milled window with four panes, a curtain and fringe, and the chairs. These pieces of furniture were the only objects that incontrovertibly pointed to a world of manufacturing, of cities, of styles that were adapted for mass distribution. They were tall dining room chairs with highly wrought backs, stylized ivy scrolling around an empty oval plaque, held aloft by many lathed dowels. Each chair was missing one of its middle dowels. Despite the damage they had sustained, the chairs developed an electrostatic charge with the cracking mud and the simple clothes of my father and his brothers and sisters. On the chair my father was singular, separated from the rest of the family who stood on the packed dirt, hands at their sides against the stack log house. In the photographs my father, his body framed by the chair, was elevated and trapped: he had to be lifted on it. If he stepped off it he would hurt himself. Education would take him away from the solidity of earth; an intimacy of contact he would try to bridge through the trestled passion of his writing.

I looked around the tower. There was not a single portrait on the walls, just postcards with terse messages propped on the shelves and sills. They were

all of buildings or paintings. There were no faces of anyone he knew. Did they only exist in their letters to him, in writing? Were there any objects that had significance for him, that recalled a moment with another person? He came to hate taking photographs. I took photographs out of guilt, created still lifes out of the withering faces of my friends. He cleaned out his office with ruthless regularity. I had always kept items of no apparent value -- cinema stubs, dated library slips, bus transfers, beer labels, incredibly ephemeral notes -- never trusting the mind to separate the gold from inert debris, saving scraps as if they were beads of mercury to which exquisite moments would cling. My father called me "conservative," and I took this in its primary, apolitical sense. "What is the purpose of artificially retaining the material of the past? The mind preserves what is necessary," he said, as he looked into my cluttered closet. Incomprehensibly, he did not seem to realize that people like me made his historical novels possible: we were his audience.

In the turgid darkness at supper, broken only by the feeble yard light that cast gothic shadows, I went to see Lucy who was in the small cooking room attached to their two-room house. Carlos was sitting on a red vinyl chair watching a variety show -- "Sabado Gigante" out of Miami. The room pulsed irregularly with a grey light at every change of camera angle. A corner of the kitchen was occupied by an earthen wood stove. The fire box partly open and the wavering light off the logs licked the walls, sap crackling occasionally. Feeling I ought to find out more about how she lived, I crafted a clumsy question for her, asking if she got her corn milled in Santa Catarina. No, she took it to Panajachel where there was a cooperative mill. The linkages in her Spanish were difficult to discern. Her pronunciation was peculiar and she spoke softly. I asked her to go more slowly. She tore off bits of corn dough

from a lump and patted them flat with her hands, passing them back and forth, and placing them on a flat piece of metal on the stove. The pot of frijoles occasionally burped as a bubble of steam cratered the surface. It was warm and the pine logs exhaled the close, tranquilizing smell that reminded me of the artificial rusticity of camping; surreal living conditions.

By the door, a candle quavered at the base of a cartouche holding a photograph behind glass. It was a broad Indian face; the prominent cheeks and self-deprecating chin, the almond eyes wide set to either side of a large, smooth nose. "Mi sobrino. Fue Desaparecido." She turned over the tortillas on the metal with her bare fingers, wiping her hands on an apron stitched with horses. There were broken carbonized boils on the corn patties. The nephew was a catechist at the Catholic mission in Santiago Atitlán. He had become involved in a protest against the expropriation of campesino land by finca owners in the area. One night, he had been dragged into a jeep screaming and not been seen again. That had happened five years ago. I wondered why this photograph, whose glass was clouded with dust and caked in oily streaks, had been placed in the kitchen. I went and got some cucumbers from the villa and we ate together in the kitchen, putting pinches of sticky salt on the pale green disks.

19. 4 Feb. 1976 / N. Lat. 15.5 / W. Long. -91.5 / Magnitude 6.25

On the desk in the tower in front of a row of books, was a long smooth shard of petrified wood. Was the ossified wood kept merely as a reminder of the great Alberta river systems -- the Saskatchewan, the Athabasca, the Peace -- and the compression and sculpting of the land under ice, the deposition and stiffening of the wood in a tomb of clay and silt for thousands of years? Or did it hold other associations? Did he discover it as he was walking along a river

bank or the gravel bar of the creek, watching the rhythm of his feet in the weeds that sent congregations of seeds flying? He carried it with him because he remembered what it was like to be a child, how despite his maturity, his vise-like mental focus, wonderment was still possible. He loved this type of stone as a testament to metamorphosis and durability. The metabolism of the living structure had slowed to a point where animation was imperceptible, as if the wood were in a divine coma. Such an explanation was too cloying. Perhaps it was given to him by someone. Say, a woman. Their paths had diverged a little and she came over to him, her sandals slapping her heels and leaving glistening depressions in the stiff moist sand, holding the stone in her palm, bending down near him to rinse it in the river.

On the window sill, squatting on The Double Hook, was a powder blue insulator, rounded and collared like an artillery shell. Along the bottom in raised lettering it said "Canadian National Railway." Did he remove this from the abandoned spur line that ran seven miles from his birthplace, or did it hail from an anonymous spurline on the "bald" prairie? When he placed his nose in the hollow centre encrusted with scaling creosote, where it threaded the fir peg, did he synaesthetically hear the train whistle at the level crossing, its sound combed straight and flawless by boreal forest, a beckoning voice, notes from a melody that was an incantation for a vast country? I detached myself from these ruminations to consider his arrogant treatment of books, as sort of learned vandalism. He seemed oblivious to a book's value beyond its writing. I had often told him not to leave old books sitting in direct sunlight and not to mark their pages with a pen. "The only thing that will make these books worth anything," he responded, "will be the marks I make in them."

My father came into focus in these photographs. By observing slivers from his past I could pretend that I was navigating the hedged labyrinth of

knowledge, ferreting out chimeras, or running through rapids in a canoe whose freight was not propitiously balanced, and a way must be found to portage around impassable falls. But it was his books that were the arch through which I had to pass. I took down some of his early collections of poetry and novels and looked at the jacket biographies -- birth, education, other books, occupation, in the usual order, and then the final sentence, an anchor or an after thought -- "He lives in Edmonton with his wife and two children". I was one of the children who lived in Edmonton with him; I was a component of the most ambivalent sentence of all. I was the child who was essentially a mutually sanctioned interruption, a venture embarked upon when all the tentative steps of a career had been surmounted or suppressed, when turbulence had been deemed to have subsided. I came after marriage and place, as the last thing. Readers may like to imagine they know something about the author.

I flipped over the narrative wad to the dedication of the novel written in the middle seventies when I was rambunctious and deliciously cute. The page facing the copyright information was bare except for a sententious, "For L." Did "L." refer to my mother or could it be someone else? Why this sudden doubt of the simple resurrection of a system of relationships that I may have known nothing about? But if "L." did refer to my mother, why the obfuscation? The abbreviation's period acted like a rabbit hole down which authorial intent could disappear. The circumspection of the dedication reacted strangely with the limpidity of the biographic sketch, which only said "his wife" and not her name. He was playing at being masterful in a bid to camouflage the domesticity he lounged in as if he was embarrassed by it.

20. 6 Feb. 1976 / N. Lat. 14.8 / W. Long. -91.2 / Magnitude 6.3

I returned to the black felt album: my father was five years old, sitting in a dark metal wagon, and next to him four children were preoccupied with making castles in the dirt in front of a log fence. The mud plastering was falling off the side of the house in the background and there was a table festooned with cans and wash tubs. At the extremity of the camera's vision, was the serrated edge of the bush. It was the multiplicity of watching eyes in the photograph that made it disturbing. My grandmother, overcoming marauding reflections and dirty panes, was visible in a curtain pleated window staring at her son. There was a triangular circuit of vision: the mother looked at the child, the child looked with intense, interrogating eyes at the father, the father looked through the viewfinder at the entire scene -- recorded and took hold of it. Again, as in the other photographs, he was separated from those around him, and conscious of the artifice of his posture for the camera.

There was also a photograph of my grandfather and me in front of the chicken coop of their southern Alberta house. The colour of his fedora matched the unpainted siding, its satin band straining toward the almost white blondness of my hair, foiling the entire repertoire of light. The frames of my grandfather's glasses were translucent and seconded the pasty white, pinkish hue of his skin. A cherry coloured cane rested against his inner thigh. The rich chestnut brown of his pants clashed with my lustrous nylon jacket. At the centre of the photograph were my grandfather's hands. He was holding a small object and I was reaching into his roughly scalloped conch of skin, their tendons threaded by large blue veins. My mouth was rounded in languageless amazement. What was he holding: a pea pod unseamed to reveal a pew of cowlicked peas; the rumpled muslin of a wilted crocus; a grasshopper held skillfully by its hind leg; a moth with eyeletted wings? My face and fingers

were so smooth and curious. He chose this thing and said to himself, he should be shown this, this is something he will need.

When I heard the story of the Three Wise Men I understood the wisdom of what could be brought, presented. Gold would have been unattractive, but myrrh and frankincense, those odiferous gifts must have filled Jesus with longing, must have haunted his memory. When the woman by the well anointed his feet with fragrant oils he must have returned to that misinterpreted moment in his childhood. How many things did my father show me for which there were no photographs? What were those things that the camera and winding spool of emulsion could not record, hidden by cupped flesh, manifest in mouths and eyes? When my grandfather died my father held me near the casket so I could see. I touched his folded hands and felt their waxy coldness. I touched the sunken cheeks free of the stubble I had marveled at after my brief kisses. I went away with the arid smell of coloured powders, the vitiated musk of dry cleaned gabardine. He was hidden and remote even before the casket had been sealed.

21. 9 Feb. 1976 / N. Lat. 14.2 / W. Long. -90.0 / Magnitude 6.0

Sitting on a stump by the road I tried to read Andre Breton's Nadja, but the surroundings were distracting. Not that they were exceptional. The road itself was a carved rufous ledge following every wrinkle of the slope. The roadbed was scoured by miniature badlands formed by stout, cascading rains, studded with sharp rocks like Cordovan leather chairs. There were fields above, patchwork and shorn of all but the smallest trees. Occasionally there were huts on outcroppings of relatively level ground, easily located by the conifers pared down to masts ascending around them. Firewood was so scarce that all but the top six feet were systematically stripped clean, leaving ladder-

like stumps. A campesino came up the road, a machete swinging on a thong slightly out of beat with his thigh. His broad rimmed nylon fibre hat was dark and moist around the band. "Buenos dias . . ." I said hesitantly, taking a fleeting look at him.

The lake was at my back, obscured by Detmar's roadside covering, reproducing an imported obsession with modesty and privacy. Most of the branches near the fence had been hacked off to coruscating crusts of blond sap. A truck approached, its box sagging. I said "Panajachel," gave the driver a quetzale, received no change, and found a place on a part of the rear fender after others shuffled down. Half a kilometre down the road my tail bone was bruised and I held myself off by bracing my hands with great effort. I lodged a toothpick in the crook of incisor and canine before flattening it, releasing a spoor of ash redolent of Georgian Bay, the calamity of the Canadian Shield. For a moment I hung between two places.

From the north, Panajachel began abruptly as the narrow gorge, which the road miraculously parried and yawned open. I got off the truck at the market and flattered myself that the men in the truck were talking about me in Quiché. Foreigners always thought they were so unusual, worthy of discussion. They were probably commenting on the mongrels anxiously copulating in the shade of the Catholic church. I wandered down Calle Los Arboles to the corner of Principal and Santander, where yellow school buses were idling at the curb as backpacks were hoisted alacritously to the roof-rack and tied by worried yellow rope. Australian accents wandered by along with a clot of disgruntled American nasality, on a street seamlessly lined by craft stalls.

22. 19 Feb. 1976 / N. Lat. 15.5 / W. Long. -91.5 / Magnitude 6.25

The young boys worked in pairs, intersecting your path and advancing, half-turned, side-stepping in front of you, shoe shine box on canvas thong -- "Mister, shine, mister . . . Where you from. . . Alemán, Americano?" I gave them a wave of the hand like the fanciful gesture of an illusionist while manipulating his wares, moving the cups so that the object disappears. They had seen my shoes, perhaps had felt disenchanted as so many tourists jettisoned leather for the fusion of vinyl, plastic and mesh, the brand name-emblazoned heel. The apprentices hounded the vulnerable tourists, played on their unease.

"Shouldn't I spread my money around," I thought, " instead of giving it to reasonably well-off restaurateurs and hotel owners? If I tell them to get lost will they nurture grudges and resentment?"

"Cuanto?" -- and once I had said this I knew I had committed myself by expressing a modicum of interest. I was prejudiced against them because their hands and laundry-worn T-shirts were permanently stained by polish. They just wanted my money.

The one boy put down his box, which rang hollow and wooden on the concrete, and squatted over it. He lowered a flap along one side and removed a plastic tub of polish and a blackened brush, its middle bristles concave, bent almost flat from wear, the hourglass wood handle blackened along every figured grain. There was no place to sit, so I was obliged to place my foot on the angled foot-shaped rest. He stuffed a piece of plastic in the shoe to protect my sock, presumably. Was he that unskilled? He began brushing away the polvo, the dust that evenly covered the leather like icing sugar on an éclair. On the second shoe he looked over at his companion, standing in a group of other boys, and smiled. The pace of his brushing slackened as he grazed the

sock guard. The little bastards, so smug, they thought they were putting one over on me -- they knew nothing about capitalism.

My shoes had a rubber sole attached to the leather uppers by semi-decorative yellow stitching. The shoes were originally designed for the British working class shortly after the Second World War, providing a supporting cushion of air in its waffled sole and resisting discoloration from petroleum and chemicals. I pointed at the rubber sole and yellow stitching and said "No," assuming that in his eagerness he would smear them in a black veil.

The black pap was rubbed in a haphazard manner. He covered the leather in a thin film, digging soft dark scabs from his plastic dish, glancing around distractedly. The boy possessed a searing, single-minded intensity. Now that the commission had been accepted, this had abruptly dissipated. He already took the money that I would give him for granted, and no doubt he imagined how much he could make if he found more people like me that morning. The money paid him was all out of proportion to the local system of value. He no doubt earned more money than his mother, who might sell limes, bananas and plantains every day, spread on a nylon fertilizer sack next to the market. They were the fruits of the soil, a combination of rain and the nutrients from the rot of long departed trees and volcanic ash. Fragile produce that had to be transported over long distances. Here he was macerating my leather shoes in preservative balms and restoring their glossy sheen. What was it that the son did that merited greater worth?

23. 24 Feb. 1976 / N. Lat.15.0 / W. Long. -92.0 / Magnitude 6.0

The boy put his living skin on the dead hide of the shoe. He had crumpled a rag into a knot and rubbed in tiny bursts of aggression along the

shoe's length. He tapped on the box to signal a change of feet while one dried. The toe sustained the most treatment, rebuffing the dull whip crack of the rag. It was finished in a shorter time than I thought. While he put his articles quickly inside the box, placed his shoulder in the angle of the sling, I dug in my pocket for two one quetzal notes, his eyes on me, the other boy beside him again. I pulled up a bill, a ten, and I felt ashamed for having too much money bunched together as if it were meaningless to me, an afterthought. I dredged up the distressed mass holding it at the lip of my pocket, found the green bills and handed them it to him. No words, only a brief look that may have contained either abhorrence or jealousy.

24. 6 Mar. 1976 / N. Lat. 15.0 / W. Long. -91.0 / Magnitude 7.5

I boarded the "Crucero," a metal boat slung with swathes of poppy red, black, tangerine, and banana. After we left the dock and began cruising east, I saw the two abandoned luxury hotel towers in a bay a kilometre from town. There had been a scandal in which their construction was linked to drug laundering. On top of that, the engineers had misjudged the foundations and they were structurally unsound. Light came through the windows of the twenty story towers, the concrete carbonized by dark fungus. At each village the boat left behind people carrying full mesh bags, stacked red racks of harmonic soft drinks, and took on people with baskets of fruit, children who hung onto their mothers. The men sported surly expressions in the slim chiaroscuro of their cowboy hats. The most precipitous slopes, impervious to cultivation, were covered by sage green shrubs, the shoreline populated by spatulate trees from whose branches hung matted, hoary beards. The young men shoved bicycles, or carried large strapped boxes on a shoulder, heads craned to the side, their steps heavy, almost stumbling under the weight.

Other women carried bundles of cloth on their heads in green netting or in bright bolts of cloth tied at four corners.

As Leiris said, the last persons to speak to my father were the German couple as they cruised to San Pedro La Laguna, following the edge of the lake counter-clockwise, as I did now, and stopping at every intervening village. Most likely, he sat by himself on one of the white plastic chairs and they made small talk for a while before they sensed he was no longer interested in their questions. He may not have let on to them that he knew German, that it had been his first language, preferring the anonymity of a North American identity.

At midday, I arrived in Santiago Atitilán. A wooden plaque on which a four rooted molar was printed hung from a pole. A man sat on an aquamarine chair in the shade of an orange tarp while another man reamed on his rear tooth with a pair of pliers. The patient's hands gripped the seat spasmodically, feet grinding on the cobble stone. Other market goers paused to watch the operation. Despite the cool air the "dentist's" face was covered in sweat and he breathed hard, trying to generate leverage. Occasionally, the patient moaned, an antediluvian sound that oozed viscously out of the hyper-extended jaw. The tooth gave off a dull cracking sound and a piece came out bloodied, dripping, and dropped in a plastic dish.

The Sunday market spilled down the streets that radiated from the square. Men and women watched passersby from a Pepsi stand, siphoning their drinks through grapefruit pink straws. The peanuts in a large mound linked the crotches of the pods together. Women wore huipiles of understated woven cloth or velvet whose necklines were embroidered with elaborate flowers. The shoppers massaged the firm round limes, sorted through oblong

white potatoes, military green string beans, bulb onions, brown bruised tomatoes, reefs of cauliflower, and cobalt-dewed broccoli patrolled by vendors who dispersed flies by waving rags. One stall was the equivalent of a general store: trays of multi-coloured combs and beret clips incarcerating simulated flowers in blocks of clear plastic; the repetitious heads of roosters on paper match books; Mary and other saints gazing out of key fobs; pocket knives dressed in rough plastic wood; tubes of "Blackie" toothpaste; cameod bars of Camay; small emerald bottles of Herbal Essence shampoo.

A pig was dragged by a thick rope, pushed from behind by a boy and a girl, its snout wedged open by fear. It skewered the market on thin devastating rods of sound as it was taken inside the concrete market building. The permanent concrete market beside the Catholic Church was dark and lined with stalls of wood and tightly woven wire. The vendors were surrounded on all sides by their goods. At the rear of the building was the carneceria. The air was filled with the saccharine smell of stagnant blood. A hind quarter of beef hung from a massive metal hook, the white fat and epidermis winding arabesques over the indigo blue and cochineal red muscle. The butcher chopped chunks of stewing beef in the deep saddle of a round tree trunk, his apron stained in an expressionistic rust colour around his waist. Two pigs heads faced out at me their pressed eyes shut, their small pale tongues protruding from the sides of their mouths. A half-dozen feet lay next to them, the skin crumpling down like loose socks. I came out the rear of the building into the sunlight where two men were counting money over the squealing pig.

25. 8 Mar. 1976 / N. Lat. 14.2 / W. Long. -91.5 / Magnitude 6.5

I sat on the sand and watched the sun descend behind Volcan Toliman. Guatemalan tourists were casually perambulating on the concrete lake-front walkways, occasionally solicited by fruit vendors. An old man was flying a kite on a promontory, to the delight of the young children with him. At first I could not understand what he was doing, gesticulating, until I saw a diamond shaped kite hundreds of feet in the air, traceable only by its tail undulating in the currents. Walking up Calle Santander I decided to go to the early evening film at the Ciné Tropical. Inside, it was a room crowded with bulbous vinyl sofas and armchairs, and I clambered over the pale legs of travelers. These kinds of video parlours proliferated in tourist towns. Tonight, "Five Easy Pieces" was showing -- a seventies film about a son who disappoints his family, abandons his talent and potential, and reconfirms the bias of an intellectual superiority. It was also a film about families and fathers, long silences, and the uneasy inheritance of artistic sensibilities.

If my father were sitting beside me I would be anxious and tense by now anticipating indecorous comments. He did not deliver his observations in a whisper but almost a normal tone of voice, consciously opening up a private comment to anyone else in earshot. This was mortifying at the art cinema we attended, where one was hypersensitized to the clientele's "sophistication." In order to discourage him I would turn stoic, engross myself in the unspooling credits. Any disingenuousness in a film or quotation of other films was construed as a sign of feebleness. He was a pedant. I caught a whiff of how he comported himself in front of others, his lack of reserve. There was no reason to impress me, as his son. It was as if he didn't want me to figure things out myself. As if he wanted to install himself there, to be a mental point of origin,

not merely a physical one. His books exuded a similar control: the leather of mastery.

As the film ended there was an abrasive sense of disappointment at being returned to that place. The credits, ablating the fictional world, were cut off by the owner as people began to get up and leave. This spurning of art house protocol irritated me. The viewers in this room wanted to ignore the film as a production by a group of people; they thought it was natural that it should just "exist." It did not proceed from a certain historical location. But then, I wondered as I re-tied my shoelace, it may be significant to know who the "Gaffer" was, but what about the "Assistant Carpenter?" Furthermore, I usually read the list of titles and responsibilities, not the names of the people who performed them in a particular film.

The three women and the man who sat next to me talked in English amongst themselves and tried to negotiate the doorway with limited aplomb. Hesitating on the curb, I wondered whether there was likely to be a bus later, and crossed the street diagonally to the nightclub "El Chisme," behind whose deteriorated facade pulsed light and music. It was in an old movie theatre, large enough to accommodate a small balcony. The lighting was dim, with a few yellowed bulbs hanging in wicker shades over the tables. Movie posters from the forties and fifties were framed on the wall, suggesting that they were once shown here. I had retained the idea that this town, and the communities encircling the lake, were hermetically sealed at some point in the past, taking cues from the geography -- its visual exclusion of everything beyond itself. Now there was hardly a Guatemalan in here except behind the bar, where there was a laudable selection of liquors ranged in a phalanx along the mirror and wood backing. A little nostalgic for another hemisphere and its style of

colonial affectation, I ordered a gin and tonic because the limes were bound to be astounding and carry the freight of the low-grade gin. One of the women from the cinema came up to the bar. She smiled at me and ordered a Cuba Libre with five year old Flor de Caña, not local rum.

"Did you like the movie?" she offered, speaking at a grimacing wallet, digging through wads of bills turning velveteen brown from prolonged circulation.

"Yes, it was good. . . to see a film like that here was illuminating, fresh," trying to tip-toe away from the fatuous even as I spoke. Her eyebrows were dark. Her brown hair was slightly hennaed, and fitted tightly around her head in a 1920's manner, the fringes ragged and softened, her bangs forming little curls. "You seem to know your dark rum quite well."

Her face was not entirely unfamiliar -- did I see her on the bus or street at some point? "You have to, unless you care to wake up in the morning with a brutal hangover. Ron Botran tastes like it's gasoline based, but this Nicaraguan rum has . . . historical overtones, as well as being incomparably smooth."

"I can't claim to be an expert on rum but I know my beer and the stuff they brew here is wretched. Even the imported brands are awful, putrefied by their aluminum containers."

"What do you expect?" she shrugged. "Have you ever tried Guatemalan cheese? It's flavourless. I should join these other people again, do you want to come over?" There was little else to do except watch pernicion and press secretaries on CNN, accompaned by psychedelia and Michael Boulton.

26. 13 Mar. 1976 / N. Lat. 14.5 / W. Long. -91.7 / Magnitude 7.0

"This is Nigel, Melissa, Jill. Oh, and I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself . . . Patricia."

"No offense taken, one never knows where to fit in introductions anyway, my name is Van. Are you all traveling together."

"They have been for a while. We only just met. They're staying at the same hotel I am."

Melissa and Jill were from Seattle and it seemed as though they were a little shell-shocked about crossing over the American border. From what I could figure out, they were determined to go as far south as possible before encountering the jungles that form the border of Panama and Columbia. Whenever I looked over at them, they were smiling with savage intensity, their teeth gritted. They had wonderful teeth, almost outrageously uniform. Nigel, a study in contrast, was morose and would only utter a sarcastic comment when questioned.

Jill was less effusive of the two. "We're basically keeping him alive while he figures out how to get his parents to send money from England. He thought he'd find a job, didn't you Nigel", flicking her head at his table, "but then he got into the drugs in Chiapas. . . we found him in a campsite living on digestive biscuits."

The sisters had a flair for charity. They moved their heads back and forth as if ricocheting off invisible plates of glass, and goosed their heads forward, staring at you full bore when they talked.

When you met people abroad the one absolutely taboo question was "why." There were so many other questions that you did not need to avoid in conversation. But you would never ask another person such a thing as "why" because it was one you would be uncomfortable answering yourself. So you

talked about where you're from and where you've traveled, how you got there, whom you saw and were with, how you were cheated or robbed. It sounds bald and sterile but it was actually very pleasurable for inevitably, in the multitude of experiences, there was a shared one -- "Ah! Ko Samui, gorgeous place, where did you stay, aren't the coconuts incredibly hostile, a friend was almost killed reading Lord Jim under one" -- and this could sprawl into a lengthy reminiscence for all involved, who inevitably trumped it with even more outrageous disclosures. "Why did you go there?" offended the migrant sensibility where everyone agreed that any place held its own discrete justification. Besides, you were mere acquaintances and there may have been a private conviction or call that sent them there, like a dying uncle who whispered through a mouthful of tubes, a commission crackling with viscous phlegm -- "Go to Dhakla Oasis." The absence of "why" was not exclusively a traveling phenomenon. It was neatly folded into settled life, but it felt all the more glaring because you expected things to be more naked and honest abroad, where you would never see the people you met, again .

When Patricia mentioned that she was from Western Canada, a city called Edmonton, vague recognition mixed with embarrassment and elation. Obviously she looked quite different from when I had known her in elementary school. I told her, "You'd remember me as David Neufeld."

27. 11 Jan. 1977 / N. Lat. 14.73 / W. Long. -91.05 / Magnitude 5.5

As we walked back to their hotel I told them I was staying at a relative's house two hours east along the lake. Music blared from a cantina, dazed drunks sat on the curbs inspecting their disintegrating sandals, murmuring. Potatoes percolated in a vat of oil. The glass shields of the cart were splattered by grease and gave off a homely yellow glow fed by lantern light, giving two

locals, looking on in expectation of their sizzling meat patties, a Carravagian look. The night watchman let us in, and it was determined as we stamped up the wooden stairs that I should "crash" in Patricia's room, as we were "old friends" and there was an extra bed.

Outside Patricia's room there was a balcony that encircled the second story of the hotel. We sat and shared a cigarette leaning on the railing. We watched two drunks who were lying on the curb -- one leaning against it, painfully contorted, the other on his stomach, the seat of his pants stained with urine.

Patricia spoke looking out onto the road. "When I was up in Tehutla, a small town north of San Marcos, it was fascinating to watch the drunks on market day. They call them 'bolos.' I was staying in a house near the edge of town across from the last cantina in the place. People would sell their goods all day, and then the women would try to get their dissipated husbands out of town before they spent too much of it on booze. There would be long discussions, stand offs, the man in the centre wavering, his wife speaking to him insistently, the children ranged behind him. Suddenly, he would make a lurch toward the door of the cantina, fumbling in his pocket. There was nothing the others could do but sit on the curb and wait, sometimes sitting beside him in the dark for a couple of hours until he sobered up enough so they could walk home."

28. 29 Jul. 1978 / N. Lat. 14.61 / W. Long. -90.90 / Magnitude 5.0

I woke up before Patricia to the noise of the street, the clamourous arrival of the vendors. Sitting on the balcony again, I quaffed one of the headache pills she left out on the table. A truck with speakers on the back drove by, acronymed gills billowing down the sides and flapping

presidentially at the edges of the hood. Words careened off buildings, penetrated them, piercing as the voice fawned over the candidate's name. There were no leaflets here, only verbal messages -- only half the men could read and the rate among women was abysmal. Many concepts important to the state were disseminated through ideograms like the one down the street for disease control, showing a man defecating next to a stream and contaminating the drinking water of those downstream.

It has been said that every act has political, ideological motivations, especially indifference. My father did nothing. It was entirely possible to demure from active engagement. Of course he knew about the drug planes shot down, the tourists killed during robberies on the Pan-American highway, of the repatriation of refugees from Mexico, the ransoming of a local businessman's child. When you were abroad it was fashionable to sympathize with the poor. In Guatemala these objects of earnest compassion were clearly marked off by their clothing, whereas in other countries there are confusions. Here, the Indian was unquestionably good and the Ladinos, their spirits one step removed from conquistadorial perversity, were the unredeemable imperialists. The Ladinos controlled most of the land and the wealth. The Indians owned small marginal plots in the mountains and sold their muscle seasonally to the plantations, following the rotating harvests. The Indians were picturesque, colourful, usually docile and motionless -- sitting in the shade of a blue tarpaulin on market day, selling a heap of corn, sitting on the ground waiting for a bus, and most poignantly, staring from the doorway of a house at a passing vehicle. The colourful clothing of the Indians conveyed a vague sense of their own homogeneity. Each pattern or style of weave or head covering had a local specificity. The Ladinos, on the other hand, could be seen cruising by in four wheel drives, arms jammed in window

openings flashing jewelry, jockeying for parking space in shotgun patrolled lots, ordering burgers from drive-throughs.

29. 10 Jan. 1979 / N. Lat. 16.4 / W. Long -92.24 / Magnitude 5.7

Patricia and I were sitting in a restaurant on the shore of the lake, waiting for our pancakes, fruit salad, and yoghurt. Chance is like that: we both found ourselves in Guatemala by very different paths.

She told me hers. "I started off in biological science at the U of A but by the second year I found the rationality of the discipline suffocating. I often felt as I sat in the Cameron Library that I had to claw my way out. The classes were enormous, the professors far away before rows of scribbling hands and bent backs, mumbling through the sound system about cellular structures and the adaptations of micro-organisms. My parents were very angry when I told them I was switching to a double major in Biology and Art History. I knew they would never allow me to quit the sciences completely, they had hoped I would go into medicine. I still wanted that too, having grown accustomed to the idea of prestige that accompanied it. Well, you tell me, what else were we raised to respect in that community -- doctors, lawyers, dentists?"

"How did Art History and Biology work together? It's such an unusual combination. "

"One of the reasons I took up Art History was because I took a survey course as one of my Arts options. In January, the coldest month, we arrived at the eighteenth century, a time period I became excited about. There was the appearance of order, yet fundamentally it was elastic and allowed for chaotic elements. I was particularly interested in architectural history. I ended up doing my major project on it. I got a job doing secretarial work during the summer at an architectural firm and became familiar with drafting, not very

good mind you, I had no training. I realized though that I had a facility for sketching and an understanding of spatial relationships. A summer later, I submitted my work to a program out of Southern California that offered a four-month intensive course in Switzerland on design and architectural theory. Their special lecturer was enticing, a post-modern guru named Lars Nielssen. He had written a number of influential articles on interstitial space, about how buildings exceeded the functional. This had been a preoccupation of the first part of the twentieth century. One of his catch phrases was not to 'give meaning to space, but give meaning space.' That ideas need a body."

30. 12 Jan. 1979 / N. Lat. 14.06 / W. Long. -91.53 / Magnitude 6.0

She explained what life was like above the Lago di Lugano, sun-warmed and humid. An intellectual conservatory, on a mountain slope, of retirees and pretentious vacation homes. The villa itself retained the three story rectilinear walls of the original stone building, but at the top there sprouted an attic studio space, opening the sloping roof of the original design up to the play of light. At the back of the building a meeting room and enfolding patio were cantilevered, close to the slope of the mountain. Pear and peach trees grew there in the rocky soil.

"My room was on the top floor opening onto a common workspace of drafting tables and desks, covered in unfurled sketches. Initially the place had a positive charge. Groups of the twenty-five students sat on the benches and tables of the public restaurant attached to the villa, also patronized by the locals eating from a daily selection of pastas, drinking overpriced beer or indiscriminately ordering wine. There was an openness among most of the students at the beginning, a desire to communicate ideas, argue positions, critique preliminary designs. When Nielssen and the other distinguished

lecturers arrived, the dynamic changed. A number of the students came from establishment families. They wore nice clothes and looked amused when I said I was from Edmonton -- 'Is that near Toronto?' I had the satisfaction of winning a series of table tennis games against a particularly arrogant fellow. He played in an expensive white cotton sweater, as if he were on the tennis court. I let him lose by a small margin in the first game, before completely extinguishing him."

"You know, I once played a game against a one-armed Uruguayan in a very chic Youth Hostel in Antwerp. He was pretty good."

"Did you let him win?"

"No. I think I've heard of Nielssen before. Was he a decent instructor?"

"Lars was very engaging, almost theatrical. When he lectured he would pace at the front of the classroom, carrying a cigar in his hand, pointing with it, gumming it, and occasionally writing down a word and playing with it etymologically, teasing out meanings. He stood in front of the window looking down at the lake, continuing to lecture, most likely gazing at a sailboat. Then turning and pointing to one of his favorites, a young woman from Boston, very cute, who obediently turned the slide projector on. There were pictures of the Pantheon in Rome, Hadrian, the skull-like grimace of the portico. This building illustrated the idea of 'double space.' It was an architectural sleight of hand. 'How did the space between the inner and outer layers function?' this was Lars' preoccupation during the weeks he was there. The slides descended, appeared, and disappeared. The lecture was over when in tight silence he grasped a large lighter on the table and lit his cigar, revolving it with obvious relish and appreciation in his mouth and releasing a plume of smoke into the light striated air. The polite patting of the desks ensued in the German academic manner."

31. 14 Mar. 1979 / N. Lat. 13.18 / W. Long. -89.57 / Magnitude 7.0

"Nielssen lectured on Foucault and the idea of the panopticon; the inside of the villa had that feel as well; a watchfulness. Even while in the tight kitchen making supper, one was expected to keep up edifying and topical conversation. On many occasions I escaped down the slope to the lake. Only when the villa was hidden by fir trees did I feel at ease. Don't misread me, it was a stimulating place, though its unrelenting pressure caused a certain amount of stress. The steep roadways switch-backed to the lake, shortened by stone stairs. My path, on a memorable day, led between high stone walls, over the top of which flowering trees stood in sunlight, diffused by waves of unclassifiable fluff. I looked through chinks in gates and slivers of fanatically tended gardens came into view. On the lake promenade elderly women pulled stylish shopping carts behind them, filled with paper-wrapped packages. Men drank wine on the decks of yachts, their briefcases latches and watches glinting. There seemed to be no children."

"Sounds like the Okanagan Valley!" I laughed, finding the reflex association, like a conversational tick.

"Yeah, only even more depressing. Far along the lake, near a point where the water made a ragged right angle turn, a town had grown without any centre or commercial concentration. A patinated plaque caught my eye: 'On the upper floor of this building the Dada movement was inaugurated - Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, Tristran Tzara,. . . ' The third floor flat had a shallow balcony and French doors looking west almost directly up a double line of Lombardy cedars, to a small Baroque chapel. The muscularly quoined campanile was twice as tall as the facade, and below a large bell were imposing clock faces. Through open doors I could see the kaleidoscope stained glass of

the choir, transposing the setting sun. Was it appropriate that a group who wrote so enthusiastically of the decomposition of cultural forms should be greeted by a shining picture, the very antithesis of austerity? It was absurd that the intentionally disruptive group should be referred to in such a sober and declarative bit of information.

"The 'neatness' of Switzerland, the punctuality of the sun, the mechanical lines of the shrubs and flowers, closed in on me. It is almost a platitudinous response: North American revolted by the frigidity of the Swiss ethos. And while I'll admit it's not an especially unique or ingenious observation, it was magnified by the claustrophobia of the villa. There were very few objects about that could be called in poor repair. The metal rubbish bins were not streaked with oxidized metal. The park benches were not bruised wet in places where the varnish had worn away. The mortar at the stone moorings was impeccable. The slate roofs were uniformly unchipped. There was not even the corrosive blackening of buildings by pollution, a sort of leitmotif that you see throughout Europe. I realized I wanted to see imperfection, imbalance and, above all, neglect: a tree whose crown was attacked by blight, or a car with a dented fender. There were no clochards to take advantage of the rich harvest of garbage. The lake community existed between urban and suburban, offered elements of both, the empty strollers and the small children crawling or stumbling in the park's grass, signaling vacationing motorists. Slowly, an insidious need for destruction came over me. There were not even the architecturally designed ruins, so attractive to wealthy, romantic people at one time: everything was shored and solid. Lars' pronouncements on 'double space' metamorphosed into my own contemplations on the way ruins operate.

"At around the middle of the term a fellow from Louisiana showed me a folio of pictures he had taken during a trip through Mexico and Central America -- a jumble of ancient temples, Baroque and Rococo churches, the Beaux-Arts arcade spaces of Mexico City, the mural-covered International Style buildings of University City. All of these structures were in varying stages of deterioration: the murals were covered by netting in places to catch falling slabs of mosaic, the temples were still sheathed in soil and trees that occluded their ziggurat forms, and the arcades were damaged by earthquakes and indifferently repaired, to become denizens of seedy businesses. It was his pictures of Antigua that really exhilarated me; a city repeatedly destroyed by natural disaster and much of it still left as it fell after the cataclysmic earthquake two hundred years ago, when the wealth that the Central American colonies generated was at its height. He told me that each time they were required to rebuild, the structures became more stylistically excessive, more insane."

32. 1 Jun. 1979 / N. Lat. 13.93 / W. Long. -91.53 / Magnitude 5.5

All the way up the mountain I kept wondering why we hadn't stayed in Panajachel. The light was dissolving along the western rim of the lake behind us, and the Cakchiquel men and women who sat around us looked stoically at it. The headlights reeled high into the trees and probed the rock strewn dirt as the truck navigated potholes. We had been told the robberies occurred in the early evening, gangs of men carrying rifles. I hoped that a truck full of campesinos would not draw attention to itself. We arrived at the gate to the villa without incident, but the yard light was not on down the hill. Lucy met us in the dark while I was fumbling with the locked gate and told us the power

had been off for an hour already. I lit a fire and we drank Gallo beers from half litre bottles in the dimness.

She wanted to see the tower. I was next to her and she was looking at the spines of books through the dim eyelet of a candle: George Simpson's Tour Through the Whole World, the journals of David Thompson, the reports of the Palliser Expedition. She looked up at me. The candlelight was piercing and it pained the eyes. I moved to her lips, eyes closed, and tasted a mouth redolent of cigarettes and fettucine. Her hands moved under the bushy sweater, easing the cotton T-shirt from the slight crimp of the belt. She felt the ribcage, the soft nipples in aureoles of immaterial hairs. Here was my body of bones and skin, the dreary rack of sparing activity, a body made unnecessary by choice, by implication. Her chest shuddered as I moved my cold fingers up, thumbs grazing past the navel, fingers gliding over the two slight swellings to nipples that swiveled under my fingers. She lay back on the ceiba wood desk to the sound of crumpling papers. I kissed, collecting the salty tang of her belly.

At six in the morning the roosters in nearby farms began to crow and I could hear trucks moving along the road, blaring their horns to announce their journey into town. Sleeping in was an involved process of denial. We had breakfast on the terrace. Carlos was relieving the avocado tree of its fruit and behind him the lake took on an unusual pale blue complexion, mimicking the sky softened by cirrus horsetails so that it resembled fibrous paper held up to a candle. The avocados thumped softly as they fell into the basket hooked on the ladder, handles creaking when he moved from branch to branch.

"I wonder if he's happy," I mused as I cleaned the broad edge of a knife encrusted with papaya jam on a piece of toast. "Almost every time I see him or Lucy working, I feel this piercing guilt. Why do we have so much money and

not they? Not that I really have much, but I have a choice, to be able to leave and find a comparatively high paying job."

Patricia took a long drag and scrutinized him. She exhaled calamitously, her lips pursed, shaking her head as if freeing the last length of grey rope. "He's probably as happy as anyone. More than likely, he gets up every morning and walks to his field. Occasionally he sees his sons who work on coffee and sugar cane fincas with their families, always on the move. He seldom sees his daughter, and then only when he goes to the capital. They're working as domestics for poor wages, their employers sometimes don't let them meet, afraid they'll run away if they talk to family members. It's no sacrifice for him to moil away on these slopes, this is his whole world. For us to live the life he does would be especially hard."

33. 22 Jun. 1979 / N. Lat. 16.7 / W. Long. -92.58 / Magnitude 5.9

We were of like mind and I felt the tremendous need to affirm her, urgently, as if rapidity itself would demonstrate a firm kinship. "I know exactly what you're saying. It takes time, though. I'm not sure if the first generation of immigrants, of peasants that is, not the incoming professional classes, can ever really overcome the poverty and restraint of their former lives. There is an unfaltering longing for the place that is left -- 'homeland' -- from which, for various political or economic reasons they were pushed out. I can recognize this in my grandparents, I understand them now, hearing stories about them, examining pictures, for I never really knew them. They died when I was still young and ignorant, unable to ask or even formulate the important questions. But I could sense their values, of course, scattered throughout the activities of my parents, especially my mother: clipping coupons, darning socks, the reusing and fixing of objects that were made to be

disposable, pushing 'just a bit more' grass in the garbage bag until it was a feat of strength and dexterity to twist-tie it, purchasing slightly cheaper hockey sticks, mixing powdered and regular milk. They couldn't rid themselves of the guilt associated with affluence let alone waste. "

"Well, my childhood," Patricia began, "was filled with religious overtones; my father was a United Church minister. In my teens my mother encouraged me to attend baptismal classes even though I had misgivings. My father led them and I remember feeling incredibly inhibited, my hands folded and resting on the lap of a chenille dress, in a circle of stacking chairs in his office. There were an older man and woman who had 'come back to the faith' and gone through a 'wilderness experience' and they were very talkative, describing the emptiness of their former lives, centred around material success. The rest were young men and women like myself, uncomfortable with the language, who spoke only in answer to specific questions going around the circle in terrifying sequence. I felt attracted to this consumptive lifestyle. I wanted to live depravity."

After breakfast we walked through the forest and I pointed out the pine trees, now quite large, that Detmar planted twenty years ago in response to the gradual deforestation around him. Though it was not a very large preserve, it was the sole block of forest on viable agricultural land in eyeshot. Where his land came to an end, open fields abruptly resumed. And then, down into the baranka where the stream coursed and where limpid pools collected, lined by lascivious hyacinths.

"Why is your name Van?" she asked me.

"It's slightly anachronistic, that's why I chose it."

Patricia began again after a short pause, and it was as if I heard my own voice. "One of the ideas I had become fascinated by was the escape from myself, the creation or alteration of my identity that going overseas made possible. I was bored and discouraged listening to myself talk and being revolted by the same old anecdotes, the fact that everybody knew so much about me. Traveling was the opportunity to disappear, perhaps even to oneself."

34. 9 Oct. 1979 / N. Lat. 14.12 / W. Long. -90.26 / Magnitude 5.0

My uncle sent me copies of an article published in the Edmonton Journal, a brief notice in the Globe and Mail, and Books in Canada. The Journal article was a column in the Entertainment section a month after he disappeared. They found out about it early despite External Affairs' discretion in the matter, their reticence to release information when so little had been determined. The newspaper had been scheduled to receive a feature on life in Guatemala from him, and a small travel piece on the Garifuna villages of the Caribbean coast. When the deadline lapsed, they began their inquiries. There was no telephone at the villa so a courier letter to my father routed through the embassy arrived at the Panajachel post office a few weeks later. Had their missive been entrusted to the regular postal system, it would likely have taken over a month. I unseamed the letter and wrote a reply, hiding none of the inconsistencies and vagaries of the circumstances, and left things open ended. In its stead I received a letter from the managing editor with his provisional condolences and expressions of sympathy. He had learned that I was an English major -- would I be open to contributing an article describing my experiences in searching for him? Subject to their "tidying up" if need be.

I had to tell Patricia about my father, thought I could trust her with it though there was really no reason to hide anything.

Patricia did not share my strong misgivings. "Why not? What is the point of covering it up, something that may never be resolved absolutely?"

I told her I needed to know more, that such an article would be ridiculous if it ended up being a complete mistake, or if he disappeared intentionally. "Besides, wouldn't I look as if I was 'profiting' or getting fodder from what was potentially a family tragedy? These things are private, personal, they can get their bits of material from official sources. Newspapers love this kind of crap, sensationalistic 'Canadian traveler doomed by wild country' material. Wouldn't it make him look ridiculously romantic, setting up in a place like this? 'Men of letters' typically retire to Corfu or a pastel shaded cottage in odiferous Grenoble. No, there is something loathesome in this."

"Do you want to let other people tell this? You'd be letting it out of your control. It would be a lot better for you to say it in your own words than to leave it to others. "

"Do you think I want control? I don't want to start taking charge of my father's memory. Why make that connection that explicit, public. Then it would be like I was still manipulated by him. That by attempting to control what is said about his disappearance I would disappear in the same process. Be subsumed within him."

"This is absurd." A garlic clove was squashed flat by a heavy German knife, her fingers working back along its fibrous length as she sliced, mincing horizontally in deft rocking movements. I was amazed that she felt at ease enough to become angry with me. There was the assumption of comfortable intimacy. Or was she merely frank and authoritative by habit? While one part of me thought this banter was good, another part was not

pleased, rebuked conflict. Elaine never let me see her anger, made me believe that it was an impossibility. Sometimes, though, she pressed her mouth tight shut and avoided my eyes. As if she was afraid something might escape.

"I'm worried that if I do write the article it will be perpetuating old habits, old styles of influence."

35. 27 Oct. 1979 / N. Lat. 13.99 / W. Long. -91.05 / Magnitude 6.8

That night I could not sleep. The windows were open. I stood at the parapet near the fuchsias. I heard the buffeting explosions of fireworks from down below, San Lorenzo and probably Panajachel. It must have been an obscure Holy Day. They seemed to be coming directly across the water on the strained stillness of the air, coming from between the volcanoes San Pedro and Tolimán, from the town of Santiago Atitlán. The long red strips of eighty crackers that went off in frenzied succession, like rounds from a heavy machine gun. Did the people who live around this lake ever confuse the startling introit of celebration with the sounds of fighting between the guerrillas and the Guatemalan army? Was there a split second of alienation that occured as the body bristled in surprise, jerking uncontrollably? The locals appeared unmoved. I saw a large firecracker explode just behind a woman, lit by truant boys, and she did not flinch noticeably. Was this because she had seen them gathered around it with matches as she passed, knew it would detonate soon, though not sure, of course, exactly when? Had she prepared herself, squelching any visceral reaction? If it was utterly unexpected, would she have started as I did?

The soldiers of the national army were Indian conscripts, dislocated from their home language regions. They were moved about the country so they could not communicate with the locals, could not develop sympathy. The

officers were Ladinos. Sixteen or seventeen years old, they rode around in open-backed five ton trucks, clothed in cast-off US Army fatigues. The paper the next day showed photographs of children with missing fingers, bandaged eyes, lacerated bodies, maimed while playing with fireworks on the holiday. Last week a German tourist lost his entire hand, save the little finger, when the fuse burnt down on a large stick and it did not immediately go off. The young Hanoverians must have been shocked by the drops of blood as the newspaper settled on the cobble-stones. Predictability was not a given.

36. 27 Oct. 1979 / N. Lat. 13.58 / W. Long. -91.08 / Magnitude 6.2

I searched in the tower and found two chapbooks written by Vera Stefanovik, and printed by the Contumacious Press, run out of a friend's home in Empress, Alberta. One had its pages held together by a spiral of vegetal material that at one time may have been intact but was now fractured. The pages themselves were very hard to read and may have been printed on paper with a high acid content, ingesting the ink, achieving a rich, brown freckled amber. They were descriptions of four perambulations taken on exact bisecting lines across Edmonton, starting from points, between the four cardinal directions, walking through people's yards if necessary (random entries: "standard poodle, strawberry nose, ecstatic sprinkler, salivating soaker"). They were not neat narratives like John Gay's "Trivia: Or the Art of Walking the Streets of London."

The other was the paper model for the construction of a house, using folds and scissors. It came folded flat in a box on one large sheet. It was designed like a 1960's ranch style bungalow, long bay window, and brick planter along the front. Every surface was covered with writing meditating on the separate materials -- plywood, cedar siding, asphalt shingles, stucco,

parget, cement. There was even writing on the parts that were destined to be cut off, the grass, the peat leavened soil. My father had never set it up as intended. He left it untouched, unacted upon. He wasn't that playful. The sanctity of the text stood for a lot. Perhaps he was frightened by the irreverent novelty of it, felt as if he should offer her mentorial assistance. That was some of her latest work, but it was the first collection of short stories that had made her name, winning a number of book awards.

37. 18 May 1980 / N. Lat. 14.12 / W. Long. -91.86 / Magnitude 5.1

The ride to Quetzaltenango was spent buttressing myself at the back of the bus. The guttural school bus -- "Winnipeg School Division No.1" lettered on both sides -- surged away from frequent stops on the dusty shoulder of the road, picking up speed. The back suspension swayed loosely on the serpentine curves, forcing me to clutch the baggage racks on both sides of the bus. The other men only came up to my chest so I could reach behind their heads with relative ease. The rear had a psychologically calming effect, like a restaurant table against a wall; you could keep an eye on everything.

Then inexplicably the bus slowed to a crawl and I stooped to see a line of cars and trucks ahead congesting both lanes of traffic. We edged around a crowd forming a glacial moraine in front of a wrecked car. The passengers in the bus whispered to each other and people rose and craned their necks for a look through masses of intervening heads. Instinctually I felt a sense of revulsion at their morbid curiosity. I had always found curiosity about the misfortunes of others abhorrent -- in seedy beverage rooms where couples got into loud stand-offs over alleged promiscuity, or on streets when police officers were arresting men spread-eagled against walls. I averted my eyes,

pretended I didn't know what was happening. I suppose I hoped to be given the same dispassionate response should a public spectacle be made of me.

But in spite of these ruminations on authority, I let myself look with them, examining the crumpled front end of the car oozing variegated liquids, reared up on the jagged edge where the highway had been blasted out of sheer rock, below it a smashed cart and a dead horse. I saw them pulling a limp body from inside the car, his face contused and wreathed by bloody tendrils, which they propped up against the car. People were yelling at him. Through the back window I had a clear view. I saw people standing around another small body thirty feet off. Through the gaps in the legs gathered around it, I could see the arms and legs in unnatural positions, a leg contorted backward from the left leg, raising the body up off the ground. More people, coming up a steep hill, were being waved across the road -- had they dropped their hoes in the fields to run towards the sound of the crash? They did not lean on each other or look away in horror. The children did not hide their eyes behind their mother's long skirts, stuff a small knot of it into their mouths, but stood pensively looking at the body, the tableau of the car, sometimes glancing at the cars rolling in both directions.

38. 20 Jul. 1980 / N. Lat., 15.89 / W. Long. -92.86 / Magnitude 5.3

At the bus station in Quetzaltenango I got off the bus with none of the urgency of my fellow passengers, reaming their canvas bags out of the overhead racks, spilling out the front door, yelling at the ayudante who threw down baskets from the roof. A long line of campesinos pissed against a ridge of dirt, the stench drifting over in acrid waves. A mangy dog moved slowly, its teats swinging independently, smelling and eating selectively from heaps of garbage. A white cart rusting at the seams held my attention while a warm

bottle of Coke was decapitated and upended, rushing effervescently into the plastic bag. Two ranks of bottles were rapturous with sunlight -- a corduroy orange Fanta bottle, the cucumber-dimpled green Sprite next to a lighter green 7-Up, the earthy tones of the colas, a quartet of canary yellow sodas.

Holding out the bag of liquid, the vendor pointed in the direction of the market when I asked him for the "Parque Central." I walked into the warren of concrete stalls, the cinder-powdered tarps casting it as an umbrageous netherworld. The air was tart with salted fish and heated by the mingling music from bootleg tape sellers. Citadels of taupe soap cakes and mounds of second hand clothing encroached on the aisle. A column of steam rose from an opened pot and fingers fumbled with a knotted banana leaf swaddling a tamale. A tortilla smeared with pasty indigo beans was pushed between teeth stained like wood. The aisle was jammed with people moving and loitering in both directions. I felt the pressure of those behind me pushing me forward. I had no idea where I was going and put my faith in the bisecting line. I was too tall to pass unnoticed as I was constantly stooping under tarp-anchoring twine. Luminous eyes from the stalls brushed over me, reaching from behind stacks of multicoloured wash tubs and dangling nets of marbleized balls. There was the neurotic satisfaction of being the object of fascination, that one's strangeness could intervene and momentarily suspend boredom.

Finally, the narrow alley of stalls ended and I walked through a mass of people standing with their ubiquitous bundles at the edge of a large traffic circle. A guidebook had prepared me for this vista. At its centre a Grecian temple, its pillars fluted in the Ionic manner and topped by plain Doric capitals. The temple held itself aloof from the ground at the near end, maintaining impeccable level, as the Acropolis does, given its unruly situation. Metal panels had fallen off the pediment, leaving gaping holes in

which pigeons strutted and launched themselves at the market to peck for edible remnants in the talcy dirt. Parque Minerva was built to inspire Guatemalan youths to new heights of learning at the turn of the century by President Cabrera. Few schools were ultimately built but temples like this were erected in each major city. The guidebook seemed to relish the ironies of the crumbling edifice, finding in its apparent renunciation a latent political truth. Corrupt indigenous elites, they seemed to say, were the reason that the standard of living was so low and human rights held in contempt. Foreigners read irony everywhere. If they knew more, that certainty would have been corroded by contingencies. The guidebooks seemed to derive pleasure from it, so they were hungry to "discover" more. It felt like I had access to special knowledge, a binding agent that made consoling sense of gross disparities and class structure. A bus pulled in front of me. I was the last in line.

39. 9 Aug. 1980 / N. Lat. 15.83 / W. Long. -88.41 / Magnitude 6.1

The German couple were staying at the finest hotel in the city, the Bonifaz, renowned for its exquisite pastries and unrivaled standards of service. The lobby was empty of those fitting their description. Germans, if memory served me correctly, dressed in a distinctive manner, eschewing subdued colours, their faces festooned with glasses that push the boundaries of tasteful fashion and industrial design. The noise of a pair of well-constructed, supportive yet light hiking boots on the high buffed floor caused me to swivel my head. They looked fit and were wearing expedition-style clothing. The Germans were ready for experience.

They demurred politely when I told them how sorry I was to make them return to Guatemala -- "Hopefully it hasn't disrupted your trip too badly."

"Can I take you out for supper here or would you like to go somewhere else?" I said brightly.

"A man from Augsburg staying here told me about a restaurant, Café Berne, in the arcade across the street. He said they have good cakes and schnitzel, though I don't know where they get it from."

Nils seemed to have discriminating tastes. I liked that, though I detected undertones of bigotry. Margareta didn't seem terribly impressed with the idea. "I hope they have lighter foods. I wish I could eat more salads here but the pleasure is lost by the terror of the bugs. We met an English man and he had amoebas. You see, they water the watermelons with water containing human waste. Poor man, he looked dreadful, vomiting out the window while the bus was moving, so difficult to watch."

"Ah, it feels good to be clean again." I only now noticed his hair was matted in places by lingering dampness. "We had a hard bus trip from Todo Santos, can you believe it left at five o'clock in the morning? The ride down from the plateau of the Cuchumatanes mountains takes forever. When we got to Huehuetenango we thought we should see the Mayan ruins of Zacaleu outside the city, although the guidebook has few positive things to say about them. Have you been there? Well, don't bother."

Not concurring with his assessment, Margareta broke in. "The site was very beautiful. The mountains rise behind it dramatically and it is situated on a hill that falls away on three sides to deep canyons. . . There are no trees, there must be very little rain."

"Mein Gott it was hot. The only shade was squatted on by vendors. The restorations of the buildings were dreadful and insensitive. They have smeared over the temple, residences, and ball courts with white-washed

concrete. In places like Tikal and Copan they have left the stone bare. Zacaleu looks like a model rather than the real thing."

"The archaeologists who trued and smeared it over in the 1950's wanted to bring it as close as possible to the way it looked when it was in use. Colour was important to the Mayas and all the smooth surfaces would have been covered with murals. Nils, you know that the interiors of most of the Gothic cathedrals of Northern Europe were covered with plaster and frescos. They deteriorated and were painted over or removed. This is not that much different. That is why we want to see Bonampak in Chiapas. There are beautiful paintings in the tombs. The government has built a lifesize replica in Mexico City which we want to see as well. The colours are supposed to be even more exuberant, though of course they aren't the real thing. Do you want to walk around a little first? We've been sitting in a bus for so long it may be therapeutic."

We went up the hill, I at a very slow gait enervated by the altitude. "What do you think of Quetzaltenango? I've never been here before though it looks like a curious mixture of things. It reminds me of the provinciality of some of the large agricultural towns in western Canada."

"Does it? It strikes me as a mess. That square looks awful."

At a park on top of the hill he had more opportunities to pontificate: "A gothic revival church in the middle of Guatemala? what absurdity."

On the white washed mid-section of a tree was a playbill announcing a "Volunteer Fireman's Ball" at the Municipal Theatre.

They lived in Berlin where Margareta had grown up. Nils had studied medicine in Erlangen, became disenchanted and went to study philosophy in Berlin, where they had met. She now worked for a publishing company and he was a paramedic. They had studied Spanish in Antigua when they arrived,

and had just returned from traveling through Honduras and Nicaragua to Costa Rica. They were retracing their steps and planned to fly home from Mexico City in two weeks.

"When the embassy tracked us down via my parents in Köln and explained the circumstances surrounding your father's disappearance and their desire to speak with us, I initially thought, what is there to say. I mean, we didn't really talk about anything that seems to make his disappearance any clearer. I talked with them in Guatemala City when we were there a number of weeks ago."

40. 2 Sep. 1980 / N. Lat. 16.07 / W. Long. -88.18 / Magnitude 5.8

We arrived at the Volunteer Firefighter's Beauty Contest we had seen advertised at the Teatro Municipal. We walked into the foyer unchallenged by the smiling security guards and assumed it was our status as a "Nord Americanos" that afforded us this unusual entrance. The dated dance music of Wham! blarred from the speakers on the stage, bathing the audience in puissant yet unrefined sound. The theatre had been designed as a simple version of a European opera house: folding wooden seats in rows on the floor, two levels of opera boxes in a horseshoe shape above, the lower boxes had curtained anterooms through which people made dramatic, laughter-magnified entrances, and rows of open seating at the very top. At the edge of the proscenium there were two boxes on either side with ornately decorated openings. Two young men in ill fitting suits sat in one of them, looking around self-consciously as if wondering when they would be asked to move, enjoying the distinguished air but clearly not at ease in it. The beau monde of Quetzaltenango society appeared to be gathering. Men in dark suits with shoulder pad creases, the women in gaudy satin dresses, highly wrought hair,

and the theatrically vigorous deployment of cosmetics. Four marimbas were rolled on stage and the taped music was superseded by their vibrant melodies. We decided to move to one of the opera boxes where we could talk without being disruptive. Above the stage a paper sign read "Bienvenidos Familia Bombarilos."

First to enter from the back and walk down the aisle through hundreds of sideways glances to the stairs of the stage, was the Ladino queen of Quetzaltenango, wearing a conventional fifties style evening dress, maintaining a painfully erect posture. The partisan crowd rewarded her with the benefit of their pent-up enthusiasm suppressed during the tardy start -- the culture of "mas tarde."

The second was a stout woman from Cobán in the area's traditional indigenous costume, a braided aureole of red piled on her head. The third, from Totonicapán wore a blue corte and colourful huipil and appeared to be extremely disenchanted with the entire production. Not so the representative from Retalhuleu, whose brilliant green blouse played off the jug she held with aplomb on her head.

"That is ridiculous," spat Nils above the noise of the crowd, "but what do you expect from a community of sugar cane growers. Singularly tacky. I had a great-uncle who owned a coffee plantation near Cobán at the turn of the century, a beautiful place. He was a very old man when he was kicked out by the government, under American pressure, because they accused him of supporting the National Socialists in Germany. Some of the coffee growers did, true enough, but not my great-uncle. I've read his journals, letters to newspapers. He was a man of principle who loved his adopted country, wanted to make it great. Actually, I have some pictures along you might find interesting." He rooted around in his backpack for a slender, horizontal art

book, and laid it on the wide velvet handrail. Opening it at a bookmark, two large photographs fit together to form a panorama of coffee plantation buildings.

"I was amazed when I realized that the famous English photographer, Eadweard Muybridge, visited my great-uncle's estate. That was in the late nineteenth century. Of course, Muybridge's photographs are much better than the ones commissioned from Guatemalan photographers. He gives much more attention to light and the arrangement of people. You see, this concrete pad is covered with drying coffee beans. Those men in the middle have to rake them so they will dry evenly. It takes a long time . . . And some of the women have baskets of beans on their heads . . . Of course it's a staged photograph, there would never have been this many people there at one time, but it gives you a sense of the hacienda in full production. The women did most of the picking, the men were too rough with the plants and tended to break the branches. They weeded around the plants instead, cleared and burned new fields, transplanted bushes from the nursery. The wooden house on the right is my great uncle's place. That's him and his family wearing straw boaters. This son, the one with the rattan cane, died twenty years after the photo was taken in Guatemala City during the 1917 earthquake. Can you believe it! He was at a performance of Strauss' Salome in the Colon Theater and the roof collapsed before everyone could get out - it was a gorgeous theatre, resembling the Madellen in Paris. The son was killed and his fiancé, a daughter of another planter, was crippled."

Killed during Salome. These photographs seemed to pull a focal length of Guatemalan history into clear definition. There were over one hundred Native Indian workers marshaled in the camera frame. What happened to their crops which ripened at the same time?

"We were up in Cobán and I found the old plantation. The remains of the water mill are still there but the place is now being used for cardamom production, completely changed. Coffee is just not as lucrative as it once was."

The woman from Soloma wore a flowing dress that looked like an Egyptian nightie in the Orientalist vein with its square neckline. Her arms were extended, accentuating the comely drape of her arm flanges, carrying a candle that gyrated violently. The crowd clapped enthusiastically, but without an appreciable change in volume from the other candidates. The Nebajan came in very slowly, wearing an extremely dignified, almost morosely white robe and veil, elaborated by an embroidered panel on her chest. A little princess from Mazantenango had an exquisite Botticellian face that completely stole my attention.

Nils wasn't terribly interested in the production. "While we were in San Cristóbal the Zapatista rebel insurgence was going on. On the road into town we passed Mexican army barracks and there were troops dug in in foxholes around its perimeter. The rebels had stormed a base a month earlier and walked off with lots of weapons. The rebel activity was good for us, we had no trouble finding a great hotel room, very cheap. On the Sunday that we left there was some kind of meeting between the government and rebel leaders in the town cathedral. The entire square was ringed with armed troops and church observers."

41. 2 Sep. 1980 / N. Lat. 13.17 / W. Long. -91.74 / Magnitude 5.0

The Swiss Café was located in a Beaux-Arts building constructed shortly after the earthquake of 1902. Photographs of Quetzaltenango's square in the mid-nineteenth century showed a range of buildings in the squat, heavily colonnaded style of Spanish Colonial rule. The earthquake had allowed them to

rebuild using other models, again deploying styles that reflected the symbolic capital of imperial power. The building was designed in two identical parts of four stories joined by a glass-roofed arcade, a foreshortened version of those in Milan and Paris. I intimated that the coffee growers and middle class of the city wanted to emulate the styles of the great cities in which their harvests were imbibed. The café worked contrapuntally against the general tendency of the structure. The European owners had put a lot of money into achieving an "alpine" look -- wooden beams, chunky chairs with edelweiss cut into the backs, white table cloths embroidered with flowers, a plethora of cowbells -- unusual in the faded mock-grandeur surrounding it. Water evidently dripped into the arcade when it rained, as there were buckets at various points in the arcade surrounded by amber stains in the parquet. Bits of plaster had crumbled away from the cornices and window frames, leaving flashing white contusions. Needlessly large holes had been bored near the shop ceilings to allow access to electrical wires that slithered down the facade from the roof. At my insistence, we sat at a table in this vast space, slightly draughty as a breeze slithered through the open wooden doors from the square and out the other side. There were noises, the cooing of the doves that took advantage of the numerous ledges, and there were the volleys of concussive typewriters from the raised windows of the secretarial school two stories up.

"So you were only in Panajachel for a few days?" I said trying to sound very casual when we sat down.

"Yes, there were so many tourists around that we didn't want to stay long -- half the population must be foreigners. It is very beautiful, of course, but we wanted to go where we would be the only travelers, and see the real, hidden Guatemala. That was why we went north afterwards, to the Ixil

Triangle and across the Cuchumatane mountains. The travelers stick to the south and Tikal."

I felt obliged to concur. "Yes, it seems they stay in areas where they can still get a good cup of coffee and a dish of something approximating pizza. You have a feeling in Panajachel that it is not quite there, the town is that insubstantial." I was attempting to put them at ease and build some good will, though I didn't respect their disdain for tourists much.

When I brought up the boat trip with my father again, Nils explained that he took notes afterwards as practice writing. He wanted to develop it into a character sketch. "Though I work as a paramedic I sometimes write articles for German magazines, travel articles. Last year we went on a caravan across the Sahara (he pronounced it in an particularly langorous way, redolent of exoticism) from Morocco to Niger, and I published a piece on it afterwards. I admit I am deficient in taking notes and capturing specific details. I'm a little lazy, so this trip I have made a point after interesting chance conversations to try and write down certain elements of them . . . With her help of course, she has such a good memory." He reached instinctively for her hand and squeezed, polished it on the arm of the chair, receiving her curt, indulgent smile. "Without these notes there is no way I could remember all this stuff."

I set a plume of cigarette smoke adrift, without inhaling, toward the dappled skylight. "So, is this conversation going to appear in your article as well?" I said, looking back at them with an affected jocularity. They both laughed, but refrained from answering. "I'd be flattered; I don't know how something like this could be of interest to anyone else."

"It really is an awful situation you are in," said Margareta hurriedly. "We thought we should do something to help since we were the last ones. . . I

guess. . . I don't know how helpful we can be, the conversation was pretty straight forward, though maybe it will put your mind at rest."

"We talked about Lake Atitlán, trying to ascertain the exact elements of its beauty, whether it was just the volcanoes and the ridge of mountains containing the lake, or whether it was more imprecise in its origin." Nils played with the salted peanuts in a bowl. "Of course, the place is being messed up -- indiscriminate wood cutting, garbage around the towns, the mansions cluttering the lake edge -- but the cumulative effect remains astonishing." He spoke with many phrase breaks, hanging on a vowel while he thought of the word. "Your father was getting very excited about the absence of large fish in the lake, only small, sardine sized specimens. He thought there must be a large mythological creature in there but he hadn't heard any stories."

"Don't let him deceive you, Nils did most of the talking. " Nils was shaking his head as he took a long draught of beer. "At the first port of call we watched the people get off the boat. There were women in the water washing their clothes, the white soap around them, pounding it on the rocks, young boys swimming."

"I told him about what we did in Berlin. Margareta works for Insel-Verlag of course as an assistant editor, mostly copy-editing and proofing eh? Not glamorous, but maybe some day . . .Me, you should see the traffic accidents I have to deal with, people in so much pain they are amazingly serene, horrible, hit by cars while they are walking their dogs, cut to pieces. . . When we have a holiday on the same day -- which isn't often! -- we go to the Tiergarten and rent a row boat, it gives you the illusion of being in the country. The lake is quite crowded and you have to watch for the ducks They have some kind of eye problem from inbreeding. I said this to him, to your father, and I boasted that I had never been made sick on a boat no matter how

rough. Although, on Lago Nicaragua I had to take a Gravol -- maybe exhaust smoke. Your father said he always got sick on boats."

I remembered seeing my father on an English Channel ferry, kneeling with his arms around a toilet bowl as the door, following the side to side rock of the boat, swung open, hit him square in the buttocks, and closed again.

"He attributed this to the fact, of course you know all this, that he was born on a boat -- the Atlantic in winter of all places. The heaving of the water induced labour."

Expulsion precipitated by an act of nature. I made no effort to correct him as he mock-snorted laughter. My father was capable of embroidering his own origins a little, for effect. I can't imagine he was self-conscious about his predilection to vomiting. It was a family trait, one I avoided by heavy cross-stitching with my mother's family, a strain of whom had not made a passage by water for almost a hundred years.

42. 4 Jan. 1983 / N. Lat. 13.77/ W. Long. -91.52 / Magnitude 5.0

Margareta was talking in German to the owner, Nils laughing encouragingly, when appropriate. Across and down the arcade a vendor sat reading a comic book by the light of a bulb which cast twin cowboy hat curls of light from under the umbrella onto the wall. I needed matches. I mumbled an apology as I rose and jettisoned the unwrinklable serviette. "Hay fósforos" I practiced in a whisper as I advanced toward him: tuning an instrument, getting the timbre right. He was not an older man, and he was not a young one either, despite the cartoons book. He was somewhere in the middle. I enunciated my need and he reached into the cabinetry of the stall. I hadn't noticed its many pigeon holes and drawers.

"Margareta, I don't remember how we got onto it but I think you were talking about your publishing work."

"Umh, yes, I mentioned some of the tedious, boring aspects, and he said, in effect, that I should do what I really want to because in the end I'd regret following the easy path."

"Was he speaking from personal experience?" I broke in. "Was he disappointed with the choices he had made. He didn't talk much about those things with me."

"Music, he regretted becoming a teacher when he really wanted to devote himself to the piano. His parents didn't have enough money to pay for lessons."

The piano! That was what I had studied. He had shown very little interest in music of any kind when I was growing up. Clumsy practicing from my stumbling fingers was endured, how could he not, but I rarely saw him put a record on the turntable on his own initiative. There were things I didn't know that much about when he was at university. . . he seemed to have a "sporting" background at one point that was never brought up. Was there a sort of cache of identities placed out of reach, like a discreet safety deposit box off-shore?

I refrained from asking my father too many questions. Indeed, I did not know which questions to ask, which verbal locks to force open, or to improvise another means of entrance. Piano. He was using those dozen years listening to drills and expressionless repetitions in silence, his study door open, inviting it in, as a repertoire, a rucksack of ideas for his self-portrait. In a hard to define manner, he was using me, my experience as a surrogate. Fabricating desires, culling them from the opportunities I had benefited from. And yet, when I pressed him, he chided me for my urban childhood, disguised that in

pity for my narrow range of experience. Privation, he implied, and a limited compass of stimuli had made him what he was. Focusing on small things at an early age taught him to be a discriminating observer, attentive to his individual sensations, and not become inundated and irretrievably lost in those orchestrated by popular culture. This strength, with which he had garlanded his youth in retrospect, made him intrinsically unique. He had grown up poor, isolated. From the moment I was drastically pulled from the uterus in the tiled delivery room, I was engulfed by systems of stimulation, care, expectation. He made his childhood into an idyll and mine inferior. He disavowed any role in shaping mine.

"Then he told us that pathetic story of how he would sneak into the church near their homestead and play the piano with the dampening pedal firmly depressed. All there was to play were the songs in the Gesangbüch, although when he went into town he heard songs on the radio and memorized them, tried to duplicate them. After church someone had shown him how the lines of the musical stave corresponded to certain keys on the piano. The building was poorly heated and dry so the piano went out of tune quickly. Discord was a constant feature of his naive music making. He amended the melody in his mind, cutting away, as if cutting away vines from an ancient artifact in a jungle, amputating the riotous overtones."

My father knew enough about Germans from his travel and research conducted there. He knew the language. That a university professor was held in high esteem. Maybe that was why he reiterated his connection to academia for them, to place them off balance, to plug into a culturally grounded hierarchy of professionalism. Was I being unnecessarily hostile? Everything he said indicated calculation, ferreting out and exploiting openings. But what could he get from them? Nothing. That was what made it hard to understand.

Nils was a romantic, in the sloppy sense. He made a point of telling me, and I'm sure my father, that he traveled with an alto saxophone, hoping to play it frequently. It seems, though, that he was quite shy and hadn't found many simultaneously secluded and inspirational spots where he could unleash his lyrical strains. On the boat, his saxophone with him, he had hoped to climb San Pedro, moisten his reed, and play. He could not reach an uninhabited and unspoiled area because the farmers had cultivated fields well beyond the height of his hiking ability. My father's quashed musical aspirations were most likely introduced to pique Nils' curiosity.

"I was happy to hear that as well as teaching history at the university he continued with music by playing the carillon at the Ratshaus, I mean the State building on weekends. That sounds wonderful, such a gift to the surrounding community."

I revered Glenn Gould, an obstreperous, brilliant pianist. I played the records of his work constantly on the record player. I measured my pianistic technique against his and was destined to be disappointed as he skated over the runs in the Well Tempered Clavier. My father presented himself as a stifled prodigy. Given different times, broad minded, enlightened parents, things could have been different. There was something disturbing in his false representation of himself to these travelers. Certainly, I perpetrated a few exaggerations to make my life in Canada look more attractive and successful than it actually was, but this wholesale fictionalization was unnecessary. I could admire his gamesmanship, objectively, but placed in the context of the other speculations it became onerous. He was making a caricature of himself. Or, like a commissioned painter doing a portrait and in the process fixing a slightly bulbous nose and beautifying the eyes, painting on a stylized background with classical ruins, mountain crags, cackling brooks. It was no

different. But what did it really matter? They would never know and I won't tell them.

I cared deeply for my father. I loved him. But it was the biological obligation that made this love unpalatable. When I thought about him, his actions, broke them down into Cubist details and examined them in isolation, that tepid abstraction of love disintegrated and indifference took its place. The possibility of his death was irksome. If he were alive I could have continued to leave him on the periphery, unexamined. With death, there was the commensurable instinct to the protection of one's infant, that of cleaning up, of settling things. Both entailed a confrontation with a life altered. A forced concentration on them, an involuntary imposition. Complacency was impossible.

43. 18 Jan. 1983 / N. Lat. 13.01 / W.Long. -88.97 / Magnitude 5.8

"This is not veal," Nils declared having sheared off a piece of the heavily battered meat.

The arcade was an aquatic realm. The glass above us was melting and mobile with rain, the elongated space layered with cold and warm humid currents. An old man was shuffling toward us from the doors at the far end. The grating glissandos of his shoes were monstrous, erasing the drone of the typing instructor, trebled like the tapped glass of an aquarium. The other two looked back at him as if out of a disorienting bathysphere of light formed by the three candles on our table. The old man's face was slicked by rain, his hair forming dozens of drooping strands. He held out his hand -- "Por favor." Nils and Margareta looked at him, their expressions transfixed by incomprehension. They had heard him approaching them from behind and yet there was surprise when he addressed them.

At that moment the arcade felt cold and sterile. I saw our tête-à-tête from a mental and physical distance: our oblong plates filled with food, our glacier blue serviettes draped across our loins, our utensils embedded in food or hovering in delectation, our glasses full of cloudy German Weissen beer. Nils was slowly beginning to shake his head, issuing a feeble, "No." An earlier rebuff of begging children on the street fidgeted on the edge of my consciousness. I put down the fork and knife at four and eight o'clock and felt in my pocket for a quetzale, the bills crackling in the cotton pouch. Nils was glaring at me in disapproval as I straightened out the bill. The back depicted a school room scene from the education of nineteenth century President Barrios. I was handing him five quetzales, not one.

"Gracias, señor. Muchas gracias." Raising one hand slightly in a sort of withering salute, the man grasped the bill in both hands and stooped a little. The glissade of feet resumed. I saw he was wearing only one beach thong, which accounted for the odd rhythm and eccentric carousal of sound.

"You shouldn't have done that," Nils murmured. "You're corrupting them, they'll think all foreigners are flush with cash."

I craned my head when the shuffling feet slowed and saw the man cross the threshold of the arcade, pausing on the first step, and by degrees his figure was enveloped in the midnight blue of the street. "I didn't intend to give him five, I thought it was a one! "

"Even one is too much, twenty-five centavos would be appropriate. These kinds of gratuitous gestures throw them out of whack, it upsets the order of things, gives them unrealistic expectations." He poured some beer quickly, augmenting the flagging head. "Ach, it doesn't matter really, it's just not good to set such a precedent. Money is a new and unfamiliar thing for some of these people, they don't know how to handle it. In the Highlands there exists a

subsistence economy that still rests on barter to a certain extent. Disposable income is unthinkable, could be catastrophic."

The paramedical habit had emerged in a didactic, lecturing tone of voice. The voice was out of place here in a situation of shriveling magnitude, a voice that went on auto pilot. It was the discourse of a technician, summarizing how a particular organism reacts under variable conditions.

"Five quetzales." I said, with affected levity. "This will ruin him? Perhaps he will buy a bit more food than he is used to tonight, but that is all."

"Don't take this personally, now, I'm speaking in general terms: the foreigner is in a precarious position. As a guest he must respect certain customs, mores, or else jeopardize the social fabric. Of course, it doesn't happen all at once but over time and with reinforcement, expectations mutate. Individuals must act carefully and fairly. We know that governments do not always abide by this kind of code. They are operating with a different frame of reference. Look at Egypt. Two hundred years of tourism has profoundly disturbed that culture. One should observe but not unsettle. One should adhere to the prevailing dictums and not cavalierly undermine them."

44. 2 Mar. 1983 / N. Lat. 13.48 / W. Long. -89.35 / Magnitude 5.0

It was all there in the bus. Every sense could find its expiation. Music distorted in a half-dozen tiny speakers. The Tex-Mex idiom with its pounding beat and quaint wood blocks, hooked up to a picture of the bus above the driver, its yellow body outlined with little red lights that pulsed to the music. The air smelled of wood smoke, mostly spruce, and unaired huts. I was sitting three to a seat on the aisle, one buttock and leg on green vinyl, the other hanging in space, wedged against a man, the perfect agreement of opposed forces. I could feel my leg beginning to tingle from sweat, but whose was it?

Was it mine? Up against the window in front of me was a silent child on the floor, her head, looking from between her mother's legs. My foot resting against her shoe, or was it the sack of potatoes? The air blasting through the line of open windows played with the music. The sight lines were low and the mountain tops hidden. All I saw was heads and shoulders and the swerving road ahead.

At the Iximiche turn off, an older man got on climbing through the back emergency entrance. He held onto the ladders, swinging on weak arms, and squeezed himself into the aisle seat across from me. Our legs pressed together. He was clothed in standard "equatorial wear": the off-white polyester imitating the weave of linen and shouldering large payload pockets, decorative piping, and matching trousers creased with conviction. He never needed to appear dishevelled. He was on his way back to New York after a difficult three month assignment in China for National Geographic. In his voice there was the tone of a professional talker, one who was not by nature garralous but was compelled to be so out of circumstance.

There were the de rigeur questions. "Where are you from?" (Ah! Canada. I have a lot of friends up there.") "How long have you been here?". There was a dash of the professorial in Tom's tone and I was immediatedly put on the defensive. I tried to sound more travel weathered and diffident than I really was.

"Guatemala is very different from when I was here twenty years ago. So many tourists. The character of enchanting highland towns has been completely destroyed. . . You're going to study Spanish here?"

"Yes." I needed to turn the conversation back on him. "Do you just write travel type pieces?"

"I write 'new journalism'. Actually, National Geographic is pretty stuffy but they pay well and my daughter is working there, a paleontologist in the Gobi desert. I've got a fossilized egg the size of a honey dew melon in my pack. Strictly legal, of course, heavy as hell."

From what I knew of "new journalism" the writing was saturated with the point of view of the writer. I don't know if I'd like to travel vicariously with Tom. Besides, was it really that "new" and renegade anymore?

"This highway is awful! You know, a friend of mine in San Marcos was telling me that a Swedish aid organization had given the government millions of dollars to specifically fix the Pan-American. That was three years ago. Sure they tarred and gravelled a few potholes but the rest of it went into the bank accounts of regional officials. The corruption never changes, it just gets more sophisticated." Tom saw things in totalities, constantly made the shift between details and the wider picture. "The thing is, the Swedes knew that would happen and were using it as leverage so they could continue their efforts to repatriate the Guatemalan Indian refugees from Mexico back into 'sensitive' areas."

This was the familiar Mailer-esque stance, the drive to reveal the story "hidden" beneath the surface facts. The satisfaction derived from the suturing of these acts also had an air of cultural condescension -- as if corruption was an inevitability that had to be used to achieve "higher" purposes.

45. 14 Apr. 1983 / N. Lat. 14.07 / W. Long. -91.55 / Magnitude 5.4

When Patricia and I descended from the bus, the young touts propositioned us while we waited for our bags to be passed down from the bus' roof rack. Already the bus driver was yelling in triplicate -- "Guate! Guate! Guate!" -- announcing the continuation of his odyssey. The first hotel was

quite bleak and the sounds of the buses accelerating out of town promised to be excruciating. The second had a row of concrete rooms with windows facing onto a courtyard. It was dingy and the pillows were lumpy, but it seemed to have hot water and the parrots in the high, domed cage at the entrance squawked attractively.

We wandered along the Spanish colonial avenues, attempting to look through chinks in coach entrances studded with imposing rivets. The buildings presented austere facades. They were focused inward on courtyards, the windows covered in protruding metal grates or carved wooden spindles. Bougainvilleas lavished indigo, aniline, and cadmium flowers over stone walls, their scent mingling with a rose nursery's effusion. There were many churches, earthquake-shattered churches that had been left as they had fallen for over two centuries. Weeds grew on fallen vaults and in the febrile recesses of decapitated rococo facades. The town was a memento mori, a dead place that pretended to be alive. We followed the closed grottoes of the stations of the cross in reverse order, the niches built in arched structures along a cobblestone axis anchored by cathedrals. At one end of a rectangular park, towards which four rows of royal palm trees led, was a clothes-washing pavilion constructed of nine arches, each enfolding a shaded corduroy washing basin and a pila of water. At each basin a woman was scrubbing long rolls of lushly coloured cloth in traditional patterns and men's T-shirts and trousers. Laughter and loud exclamations echoed in the interior amid the splashing of water. Each niche was a proscenium for a theatrical performance. The dirt imbedded in each garment went down the drain amid the rising and falling action of the soap suds. They were not oblivious to those watching them. They looked down the shredded shade of the palms to where we sat on a bench, and at the sellers of trinkets spread on blankets. Washing

was an activity that was public, not hidden away, and it derived energy from the fact that people watched.

46. 29 Apr. 1983 / N. Lat. 12.22 / W. Long. -88.48 / Magnitude 5.0

Standing under the arcade in front of the Café, I looked across the square to the Catedral de Santiago whose smartly white washed facade, alive with lurid grey undertones, was a burning ember. Its niches were empty of saints clutching a bible or crucifix, one hand raised blessing the commerce of the square. The massive vaults of the cathedral were sundered by earthquakes. The edifice had contracted into two side chapels. To the south was the long facade of double arches once called the Palace of the Royal Audiencia and Captaincy-General of Guatemala. For 250 years it served as the government administrative centre for all of Central America. Now the covered passage protected three dysfunctional orange pay phones, each with a curlicue of loiterers, the strutting and loquacious police, and a tourist office that contained a rack of brochures which spun in parched protest. The municipal hall and the Palacio del Ayuntamiento occupied the north side, as did a threadbare restaurant and pharmacy.

We sat on one of the benches around the fountain at the point where all the square's axes converged. What must have been an American, wearing an Oakland A's cap, looked at recipe cards and stared at the sky, his lips moving, lisping silent earnest conjugations of Spanish verbs. A Guatemalan family tried to enjoy ice cream cones that were melting on their hands and shirts. Water spurted and coursed down the cross-shaped fountain, with two petaline basins layered above. It was called the fountain of the Sirens. Four stone women stood in the diagonal crooks of the cross, their lower bodies enveloped in corn husks. Each cupped their large breasts in their hands, nipples

protruding between cleft index and middle fingers. The water dribbled down their long hair, over their unsmiling lips, streaking their breasts. The water fell and ran haphazardly, spewed a flashing silver cord in the air that bent and fell in plashing light-filled pebbles.

On the floor of the tile arcade, a woman leaned against the wall, sitting on a wafer of dirty cardboard, a pathetic child sprawled across her lap. She looked from the plastic cup in front of her up at me. The next beggar's eyes were milky with carcinoma, his deformed hand lay on his thigh. Another man was prostrate and the exposed portions of his body, displaying a severe, hideous skin disease. The soles of his feet were two large scabs and it appeared as though it was eating away at the very structure of the toes themselves.

The café, redolent of colonial privilege and separation of work and pleasure, appealed to the visitor. Could I kid myself by saying I prefered the earth-floored huts of mud and straw bricks that covered the mountain slopes and valleys? The remoteness of the past evoked by these rooms, its unchangeability, affected the foreigner's conscience. There were a number of separate rooms and Patricia and I sat down in padded leather chairs at a wooden table near the courtyard. Tourists with colourful knapsacks sat near us reading newspapers, laughing as they flipped through the Guatemalan press, deciphering three sentence digests about North America. They were here to study Spanish. The courtyard was shaded by thin-trunked, broad-branched trees and each table had a beige canvas umbrella. I looked at the offerings of dated in-flight magazines and a series of New Yorkers that came out two years ago.

47. 11 Feb. 1985 / N. Lat. 15.24 / W. Long. -92.61 / Magnitude 5.2

Patricia and I went to a book shop and café, "Un Poco de Todo," that claimed to have the largest selection of used English books in Guatemala. From what I had seen, it didn't seem difficult to garner that distinction. There were ranks of "classics" that appeared to have been brought by the case load from American thrift stores -- lots of beat up copies of Updike, Mailer, Chandler, Didion -- which, when you opened them, gave off hisses and crackles from exhausted spines, spitting out solitary pages, almost illegible from yellow discoloration, humidity. I saw the bright violet spine of a New Canadian Library edition, John Marlyn's Under the Ribs of Death, and further along Sinclair Ross's As For Me And My House. Who could have brought these here? My father? Why would he bring these volumes down in the first place?

Patricia wanted to play Scrabble, a game she took very seriously, a sort of rarefied calesthentics. It was better when other people joined in because there was more pressure on her. I made her go slack with my disinterest and irrepressible sighs. She liked competition, the counterforce of equal or greater energy. I loved words, in a linguist manque kind of way, and could spend hours prowling in dictionaries. But when I saw the words separated into consonants and vowels, my mind lost its poise -- I thought in complete words, never giving much attention to their constituent parts. Patricia's face was very pert and vital when she rummaged in the pseudo-velvet bag and arranged, shuffled, and rearranged the pieces on the wooden rest, her hands folded together near her chin, her eyes held by the seven letter span. I was astonished by how remote she could make herself, how her concentration was unruffled even by the arrival and obligatory pleasantries of cappucinos.

Even if I had a word, there was the need to anchor it on words expanding on the board like frost on a window, and the dissonance between

the "ideal" and the playing field could be unnerving. Then there was the question of points: to not only skillfully exploit the "double letter" and "triple word" scores, but to use them in concert with high value consonants; and do this without opening up an advantage to the other player. Quite frankly, the game reminded me of my parents, of social events during the sixties held in Polynesian style Rec Rooms or sparse living rooms, where even the light spectrum of the fire log was curtailed. Needless to say, Patricia won again.

48. 10 Mar. 1985 / N. Lat. 13.15 / W. Long. -89.33 / Magnitude 5.01

While doing research for her trip, Patricia had read about the well-preserved ruins of the 18th century convent of the Capuchin nuns. The poor women who entered this order did not need a dowry. It was difficult to avoid a direct correlation of their pennilessness and their form of conventual life, which was much harder than other convents. Once they had joined the order, they were not allowed to leave the convent except during earthquakes.

"Just think," Patricia mused as we walked down a freshly restored and white-washed hall in the convent and up the stairs to the wall's parapet, "the only time they could break their confinement and have conversations with people outside was during periods of disorder and catastrophe. They must have come out every few years. Tremours of varying magnitude came quite regularly, you know. What a distorted view they must have developed of civilian society. Perhaps they even had to live in the streets for a few days. Talk about disorientation, an intervention demolishing the stability of routine as well as the fabric of civilization. It was 'carnivalesque.'"

I wanted to be a little contrary. "But look at the view from up here. They must have been able to observe the streets, that is, if they were allowed to loiter here in the first place, and be sullied by the conspicuous commerce,

maybe even fornication going on around them. From the courtyard they would always have been able to see Volcán Agua, which must have grounded them. Patricia, they weren't naive, they didn't enter the convent blind to its rules. They wanted isolation."

"Look, there weren't a lot of options open to single women. They were basically forced here by economic circumstance and social codes."

We proceeded directly to what had been described as the convent's most "baffling" feature: a circular tower-like structure with a wide patio, encircled by eighteen cells, each with a door facing the centre and a window for light high up on the outside wall. The tower also contained hot baths and a refined sewage system servicing the vented niches in each cell. In effect, the novice nuns did not have to move from their cells at all. Beneath this layer was a vast circular gallery, lit by two angling window vents, supported by a massive central pillar. When we talked, our words slid about the curved walls and dissembled into a series of lisping ricochets.

The next day, Patricia left for a two-week trip to Nicaragua to examine the bombed city of Leon and the earthquake-disordered environs of Managua.

49. 21 Sep. 1985 / N. Lat 14.81 / W. Long. -91.41 / Magnitude 5.15

In order to summon the courage to meet Vera, I walked around the central square, sitting down on the benches, ruminating on possible turns in the conversation. I worked furiously on what I should say. Her books were imposing, filled with dense intertextuality and subversive prose. She promised to be daunting in person. I approached the store, a half block up along the cathedral. There was no real need to impress her. I was her lover's son, that

was enough. On my way into the gift shop, a man holding a poster board of photographs walked beside me.

"Volcano tour?" He queried. "Very safe, we have armed guides."

An impassioned American told me over beer at the "Sueños del Quetzal Bar" about tourists robbed ascending Fuego. He went into graphic detail as to how a rock, spat from the volcano, had crushed an enraptured tourist's skull. I questioned the impossible precision of such a parabola, but he assured me of the mathematical probability of this coincidence given a control variable of a set number of expulsions per day.

"I don't believe a hard hat could have saved him."

Entering the gift store, I saw a short woman behind the counter and I wavered, thinking I had the wrong store. Persisting when I heard voices in the next room, I saw Vera discussing Catholic icons with a camera-ladened tourist in Birkenstocks and a soft and sagging painter's hat of voluble indigenous fabric. She had a very sultry and oddly conductive voice that was amplified for the eavesdropper by the tall plastered walls and red tile floors. The shop was located in an old mansion, converted for use by different crafts stores and the large courtyard, again with a fountain but possessing a jarring John Cageian vocal ability. I went and looked at the icon the customer had been examining, one in which God, a hoary white father, spread his arms and displayed the tripartite paths open to humanity. I looked back through the front door. Across the street were the public sanitarios. Outside, men emerged adjusting their pants and belt ropes, the position of their machetes, glancing around, either looking for someone or they had time to kill.

Did it matter that my father had a mistress? It may be the thought of a sexual union that was disturbing -- the braided legs, the petting and stifled groans -- and unsettlingly arousing at the same time. My reveries took the

form of tableaux, as if leafing through a collection of nineteenth century Japanese Shunga drawings. Was it a relationship consummated after my mother died, or had it preceded it? After that point she would have become a "lover" and not a "mistress," an adjunct. He had been married to my mother for thirty-nine years. There was a picture of my mother as a young woman standing in front of a vegetable garden, mostly beets and potatoes, wearing a stylish dress sewn by her mother. She was smiling unreservedly, joyously; a smile I saw rarely, if at all, and then inadvertently, when something unexpected and ridiculous happened. I couldn't make her smile like that. She was vaguely disappointed by life and I was part of the problem, the nexus of what kept her, protected her from the remorse of unfulfilled dreams.

I felt reasonably confident embarking on the conversation. Vera was intimidatingly intelligent and quick-witted. But I held the emotional trump card. She did not own the gift store, her sister did. Lenore was a former high school teacher, perennially unhappy, who moved to the obscurity of Central America. There she could "ground herself," escape from the "joyless scramble for money" that was the raison d'être of North America. Vera was on sabbatical, working on a book about contemporary Canadian travel writing and exile. Canada had long been the object of descriptive investigations, and now, in a succinct reversal, it sent its members abroad. She had just come back from Vancouver where she had completed research, collected materials, paid bills.

"I read your article on Ronald Wright's Time Among the Maya in Al Fresco last year. You really went after him if I recall correctly."

"You think so? It was motivated by certain theoretical observations I wanted to work out. Besides, Wright and I have disagreed for some time. We meet at conferences occasionally, have arguments and Manhattans in noisy

bars. He certainly moves between the historical, analytical material and the anecdotal with skill -- it's a pleasure to read if I pretend to be detached. But I think he goes wrong when he privileges the indigenous experience, its alluring subjugation and exploitation. The distinctions are not as neat as he presents them; it is a straw dichotomy, easily trampled when you read more about Guatemala."

She paused, roving about the exasperatingly confused menu. "Yes, he is very romantic in his presentation of contemporary experience, yet he moves about in privilege, driving Land Rovers, staying in nice hotels, roughing it conspicuously for good measure, talking with experts. That is the problem with all travel writing; its entanglement in the vision and ethos of the readership, the activities and postures that are natural, the hollow declarations of indignation when his whole luxury of movement, voyeurism, and intellectual access is dependent on the exploitation that the Spaniards capitalized upon."

"How do you find Antigua? I like the half-ruined feel of it, though there are so many tourists here -- look at that group over there -- this street is full of overpriced restaurants serving trendy food, catering to the healthy vegetarian set."

"Do you have a problem with tourists? What are you or I, for instance? It's just semantics -- tourist, traveler, expatriate. When does one pass over into the other? Take the classic example of Paris in the early twentieth century. It was OK then for Americans, even Canadians, to derive energy from its atmosphere, the proximity to 'cultural foment.' It was fine because it was an imperial nation. A centre of cultural authority. Now there has been a reversal of sorts, a resurgent nationalism, where if you live abroad and write, you're deemed exploitative, like you're putting one over on your host country.

You're not there because you respect them, merely using the 'Other' as a fulcrum."

"Well, what I meant was the package tourists, the chaperoned tour bus types who float in and out, stay in chain hotels, carry big automatic cameras."

"I see nothing wrong with them. They're probably the most honest in their expectations and offerings. They're a hopelessly easy target. They don't pretend to be involved. They want new sensations dispensed in a controlled way. Antigua is rife with tensions and ambiguities. There are ruined monasteries here whose cloisters have been made into beautiful flower gardens. They both function in a similar way for this society. Once places of religio-political authority, natural disaster broke these old structures, burst them open, so they had to be abandoned by the systems of power. Now they are flower gardens. Anyway, it's not just foreign tourists who come here. A good number of them are Guatemalans from the capital. These haughty attitudes of tourists toward each other stem, in part I think, from the ideas perpetuated in contemporary travel writing -- 'life imitating art' -- which seems to be stuck in a modernist morass. No great revelation there. It's all organized and seen through the first person narrator, although now the sprinkling of grounded voices acts as a sort of antidote. Look at Paul Theroux, coming through here on a train, of all things, and claiming insight. He is the most obvious target. He had an overriding intention that excluded local expression and generated its own logic, its nostalgia. He came knowing he would be disappointed -- how very 'post-modern.'"

50. 9 Oct. 1985 / N. Lat. 16.18 / W. Long. -88.08 / Magnitude 5.01

There was a long pause. "Carl didn't tell me that you were coming. I know he hasn't seen you that much recently."

I tried to look nonchalant but I could not look at her directly, choosing instead to stare at the railing, glide over the finger bowl of salt. "No, I thought I would come down through Mexico again, see Guatemala. I intended to send him a message, a telegram, but I kept procrastinating. Actually, I was at a Telmex centre in San Cristobal waiting to send one, when the power went off. I guess I should have made more of an effort earlier."

"I think he would have been gone by then, anyway. When I last talked with him he said he was going to Honduras for a while. He's never been there. Go to the ruins at Copan, perhaps even swing through Tikal again on his way to Belize. He had a travel piece he was contracted to write for Saturday Night on the German colonies there, what else?"

"Curious, isn't it, how he gets ghettoized by his ethnic identity." So often my platitudinous statements warbled out, more appropriate to an earnest discussion in a senior English course.

She continued. "I don't think they asked for the German material in particular. Belize is becoming a very attractive destination because of its coral reefs, not its cultural diversity. But I think it would provide the perfect counterpoint to such a piece, the usual stuff about gorgeous fish and beaches spoiled by commercialism. Besides, one of them was founded by an offshoot of the failed Nuevo Germania, established in Paraguay by Nietzsche's sister. And then of course there are the industrious Mennonites."

"Building a subsistence Zion, no doubt." There was really no point maintaining the pretext that I did not know anything about his disappearance. Did Vera in fact know about his disappearance, his apparent death by drowning. Was waiting for an appropriate juncture? Why were we playing games? Regardless, as we continued to talk along these lines, developing

fictions, withholding and suppressing elements, it became more difficult to turn back.

Vera's eyes were very powerful, throbbing with intensity. The way her body had filled out slightly from when I last saw her, using the author photo of her first book as a template. The body was small and very powerful -- she probably liked to "work out"; the wrists that emerged from the neatly rolled off-white linen shirt were lined by sinew and vibrant muscle. Could I see my father placing his broad hand in hers, or his arm pressing her right shoulder to him? I avoided thinking along these lines. There was a distinct incestuosity buried in even thinking about my father as a sexual being -- tracing her collarbone, smoothing the silken floss of her underarms. Her mind was robust, confident in thought and expression. Her face and body did not distract one from what she said, by being either too exquisite or too plain. For Vera, the right balances had been achieved. It gave me pleasure to objectify her while she sat across from me, explaining to the waitress idiosyncratic amendments to her ceviché and tomato salad. She was well versed in French and Anglo-American feminists, and though I couldn't think of what the precise nature of her objection to my ruminations might be, I mobilized a diffuse illicit pleasure from them.

A different tack. "How did your sister get into a business down here?"

"It's not easy I can tell you, although it's a small shop. The paperwork is incredible, and transferring money out of this country hopelessly complicated. She was traveling down here, wanted to stay on and got a job at one of the gift stores. It turned out the guy was a very poor businessman and didn't pay her regularly. She is quite business minded, so she put some of her savings into a business of her own. She's doing reasonably well."

In the tower I had come across an inscription by her in a novel by Marguerite Yourcenar -- "For Carl, Who understands the delicacy of negotiations . . . and the ravishment of Hera's hearth. Love Vera, February 29/88." This could only have been a reference to the difficulties surrounding their furtive liaisons, undoubtedly couched in professional duties and intricate obfuscations. Could "Hera's hearth" refer to anything but my mother? She had not succumbed to sudden illness for another two years. It might be nothing but a little jab at his domestic propensities. One could not expect savvy responses in book dedications, true. I had inscribed a few unfortunate ones myself. But this seemed beneath her. I detested myself for these nosy interventions, hated him for the simplicity of the labyrinth he left for me, executor by default. The relationships that operated beyond my sphere of knowledge and care. I remained calculatedly aloof for so long. Why did the excavation of this material have urgency now?

51. 12 Oct. 1985 / N. Lat. 12.70 / W. Long. -89.94 / Magnitude 5.22

We walked down Second Avenue Sur past the ruins of Santa Clara to San Francisco, which had been largely reconstructed, though sparingly, its interior stark and white washed. The Rococo system of signs and interplay of textures was no longer comprehensible. The church was one of vestiges and contemporary replacements to alleviate the anxiety inducing bare walls. The space had become a container shorn of its ability to express, to baffle, to overwhelm.

Vera pointed out an icon of St. Gabriel holding a lantern aloft in one hand and a jasper mirror sprinkled with white spots in the other. "The light is to make the way for travelers, and on the mirror the divine orders are recorded, though they are intelligible only to God."

I didn't get it. "I find the stone a curious metaphor for a mirror."

"I think it's extraordinarily clever. . . Only God can see the stone as a mirror, and then the orders proceed from God's face, if we are created in God's image. Stone as mirror, as a means of communication, that is fundamentally narcissistic. The body, in the mirror, having an intimate connection to divinity, holding meaning in its structure."

San Francisco was not a dead church, a hollow museum by any means, Ladinos and Indians both came there, not for aesthetic reasons but to make a petition to the remains of the venerated Brother Pedro de Betaneur. Spreading up and around the walls of a small tomb decorated with a cameo bust, were framed testaments to his intercession and help, many accompanied by photographs. Points of light flickered from banks of candles embedded in shallow boxes of sand. The floor was strewn with long grass and palm branches, and though it was mid-afternoon, many people genuflected and crossed themselves, kneeled in protracted prayer.

We walked to other parts of the abbey and looked wistfully down on a shattered printing room. Pamphlets calling for the conversion of the indigenous peoples in the mountain ranges around them may have been produced here. It was impossible to fantasize that brothers might have anachronistically illuminated manuscripts in this space. These derelict walls enclosed means of reproduction, hymn books, tracts phonetically translated for evangelical purposes.

The Baroque facade of the church held sets of spiral or Solomonic columns. The cyclical, upward tendencies of these constructions framed the saints in intervening niches, suggesting the conflation of a long church history, reverence for it, with the tribulations of the present. The facade resembled a body turned inside out, the intestines exposed. One could read

downward tendencies. Connected to their entablatures, the columns appeared to be not so much supporting the structure as draining it of vitality. I knew their roots in the late Renaissance constructions of Bernini, but here they acquired a polymorphous aspect.

52. 14 Dec. 1985 / N. Lat. 13.75 / W. Long. -92.56 / Magnitude 5.10

The main streets of Antigua had been transformed overnight into corridors covered by bright sawdust carpets. We drank sangria on the roof of Vera's sister's apartment in front of which the Good Friday processions would pass. The roof was two stories from the ground, fringed by a parapet forming a comfortable coign of vantage. The terraced roof had an ordinary wooden chair with ineffectual arms and a white plastic lounger trussed with pastel cushions. The space between the two items of furniture was occupied by a coffee table whose glass top was faceted in the manner of deliquescent ice. I was keenly aware of the aridity of the unshaded space, the inebriating quality of the light. The floor sloped evenly to the periphery where the rain water would drain through spigots that pierced the wall, and empty onto the street. Along the rear, clothes dried on lines of aluminum wire, their colours already slightly powdery from too much sun.

"Why do you think they make those carpets?" I asked her.

"I don't know. Out of habit? They do it every year."

"No, really, I mean what could it have represented historically. The carpets must be rooted in traditional rites. Perhaps the streets of the city were seen as spiritually unclean and needed to be covered. The ornamental covering brings the quotidian streets closer to the sacred."

"I was only joking. Though all acts, all vistas initiate a pursuit for origins for you, don't they? A restless urge to dabble in cultural anthropology.

Sorry, I'm being mean. But too many conversations in Antigua revolve around the ordering and systematizing of the things around them. Take the dress of the Mayan people, for instance. A theory currently making the rounds has it that the association of woven cloth designs with specific towns and villages was not a natural outgrowth. The styles became formalized under colonial rule as a system of control, as a way of marking the indigenous subjects and regulating their movement."

The censer bearer at the front of the procession had the privilege of introducing the first disruptions into the sawdust designs. His perforated silver globe swung like a pendulum. A thin film of smoke hung in the air, tortoise shelling the breezeless space in curling wisps of smoke. As the smoke faded only the scent remained, blowing like feathers over the tile roofs. Red sawdust smudged furtively into yellow, green into blue and white. His right foot left a run on ellipsis, his left the philosophical stutter of a hyphen. The spectators lining the edge of the sidewalk braced against the pressure from those at the rear; their thongs and rubber boots planted against that momentum. I tried to distinguish the carpet artists in the front row. I imagined they wished to be there when their patterns and images came apart, were transformed into abstractions. The procession of death altered the registers of beauty.

I turned to Vera. "Palm Sunday was always my favorite. Good Friday seemed too heavy, too loaded. I liked the idea of the donkey walking on palm branches. After Jesus had arrived, he lamented the eventual destruction of Jerusalem on the steps of the temple. He said, 'Do you see all these stones? They will be thrown down.'"

"You're quite right, Palm Sunday is an intense moment. The people misconstrued Jesus' meaning -- at least that is what we are led to believe in the

New Testament books. They believed in a militaristic prophet so strongly that they ignored the pathetic presence of the donkey. They had been waiting for the moment for a long time, all the manoeuvres had been choreographed in the Hebraic writings. Jesus disappointed them at a fundamental level."

The angular geometric patterns on the street were disturbed by softly edged curves with every pass of people carrying small icons. At the edges the carpets seemed to be limited to the forms their local looms could make, despite the free form of sawdust. A series of fused blue diamonds including red daisies with white centres was scattered into a green medium like a pointillist wave. A yellow frame that imitated the cords of braided hemp burst from a contusion resembling astral flecks of light pricking through a sumptuous purple backing. A vased bouquet of large petalled flowers was torn in uneven halves by a sweeping foot. A silverine chalice radiant in a green ellipse was falling apart, as if decomposing back to the trace mineral dust that once secured it in rock. The kicked wood chips resembled the frozen flight of amassed birds when startled by a sharp sound.

When the sangria was at my lips the ice bristled audibly in the warm sun. The wine and lemon juice were the "mise en scene" in which the ice-cubes and the sun expended energy - cooling, warming. They would hold each other in check until the ice inevitably capitulated. My hand conducted heat up through the bell of the glass, capillarily drawn up its stem. The cubes became hoary with discretely detonating fractals. I took a hand full of pistachios nuts from a quadruped bowl. The glass' hand blown surface was wrinkled and crevassed, suspending minuscule seeds of air. The fleshy interiors of the nine nuts were rouged by paprika dust. Their shells burst open like steamed mussels.

Men in purple robes with white sashes and head cloths were carrying a massive wooden float, on top of which was perched a statue of Jesus bearing his cross, fringed by long sprays of flowers. Jesus was very bloody. All his clothes were traced with flecks, and his head was covered in tributaries of blood. Over fifty men were moving him forward, their shoulders resting in scalloped groins around the perimeter of the platform. More carriers walked behind, skillfully relieving those who carried it every block or so. Two men lifted electrical wires slung across the street using long forked poles so the jutting cross would not become entangled. The patterns worked into the sawdust were confused by the heavy shuffling of the group's feet, forming craters, exposing the cobble-stones beneath.

"Look at those volcanoes over there. " I pivoted on the parapet to follow Vera's gaze to Agua and Fuego, the lip of their cones chipped and worn like heirlooms. "They occasionally spew hard resilient material or merely give off vapour. Our ways of looking at the world, the people in it, are accumulations of cultural and political debris. Take Agua, a strato-volcano, in technical terms it is dormant, inactive, extinct. What do these words mean? It looks beautiful, comfortable, it is covered with fields and trees, people build houses on it. But it has been created out of pure, unequivocal violence. A volcano is a pile of subterranean material disguising a rupture in the earth's crust, a conduit for molten materials at the core of the earth. It represents the cool, static outgrowth of fatal forces."

"Yes, their ability to annihilate is an inextricable part of their beauty."

"We try to control our understanding of volcanoes, tame them through language. A whole language has been developed specific to volcanoes: they may scatter dust in beautiful 'nuées ardente,' incandescent clouds that burn lungs and incinerate buildings; lava follows unpredictable routes called

'lahars'; 'maars' are circular craters with inward facing slopes; the nut sized fragments ejected during eruptions are called 'lapilli.' Take it a bit further and link it with the theory of continental drift. The globe is in a continuing state of adjustment. We build our lives on flux. We try to predict their eruptions through data and formulas. Central America is ringed by subduction zones where plates meet, producing a grating energy that breaks through existing boundaries, spurts out of sequestered caverns and reservoirs."

"Is this what my father sees in this place? Its capacity for malice and the unsettling of human pretension? That would fit into the anxieties about the environment that are part of the rural experience in western Canada. Though there it is the sky, not the ground that is the agent of fecundity or destruction. Given his childhood on the prairies, I'm trying to understand why he came to Guatemala, what he expected to see. I choose not to believe it was arbitrary. He is too orderly for that."

She cut a wedge of mango and left it lying on a plate. "He seems more preoccupied with notions of sublimity than despoliation. For me, destruction and fertility are inseparable. Think of Vesuvius. Volcanoes are seismic lesions, altars that mold cultures."

53. 16 Dec. 1985 / N. Lat. 13.74 / W. Long. -89.43 / Magnitude 5.12

We took her sister's Japanese station-wagon, complete with histrionic wood paneling, down to the coast for the day, to a place called Champerico. We descended from the confused mass of mountains in which the volcanoes of Antigua and Lake Atitlán arose. Past coffee plantations, the red berries visible on bushes shaded by fruit trees, and plantation settlements of shacks with frayed sacking doors, the ground around them covered with pale corn husks. The air warmed noticeably, vibrating through the windows as we lost

elevation, became more turgid and intimate. Then, in fabulous contrast, we crossed onto the smooth roads south of the Pacific Highway, passed sugarcane fields with pockets hacked out by rows of machete-swinging men, and pastures grazed by Bhraman cattle, their tasseled tails moving like languorous fans. Two vultures picked at fragments of flesh and offal baked on the asphalt, hopping aside indignantly for our car. Craning forward to examine the side mirror, I saw them hop back to resume their flaying.

"I came here a number of times with your father"

Why didn't she use his name, why did she have to phrase it in terms of family relationships?

We approached the beach, located on a long spit of sand cut off from the mainland by a fetid stream. The pilot's hat said "We Kicked Sadaam's Ass in the Gulf" and depicted the familiar eagle crushing lightning bolts and arrows.

At the west end of the beach, a high rusting pier projected into the water beyond the surf's compressed climax, the white froth crocheting the dark, sand-engorged water. The volcanic sand was already fiercely hot and radiant, searing the edge of my thigh as I threw myself on the towel. Two trawlers jutting diagonal booms patrolled the horizon, and intervening, a line of white pelicans cruised parallel to the coast, slightly angled, compensating for the steady offshore breeze.

"What is the difference between a shrimp and a prawn?" She asked as she sucked the juice out of a quartered lime.

"I've no idea. Isn't one larger than the other?"

There were six on her oblong plastic plate, entirely intact, offering up their ink dauber eyes, long rubescent whiskers, and paisley tailed legs, macerated in oil and garlic. My ceviché arrived: a mass of marinated shrimp, the delicate meat of their bodies hovering between raw and cooked. The

proprietor slowly explained that the tubs by the kitchen were filled with young turtles. They were endangered by the gathering of their eggs and the indiscriminate nets of the shrimp boats.

We were the only "Nord Americanos" on this beach. Young men sauntered down its length with battered styrofoam coolers selling ice cream cones. We walked in the froth of the surf to the west pier, pausing to examine shells, the translucent crowns of jellyfish. The rusted rail bed curved off into a group of scruffy homes, shaded ineffectually by anorexic palms, their detonating fronds trained back by the sea breeze, skeletal, like a series of rotting, sun-bleached ribcages on poles held aloft in bitter victory.

"From what I've heard, there used to be a series of ports built in the 1870's linked by rail lines that loaded ships with coffee all along the Pacific coast. Now they send it by truck to a big container port straight south of the capital. Obviously, these things haven't been used intensively for years."

We had to watch our step on the pier. Through rotten holes in the planking we saw the sea throttle the barnacle encrusted pilings, releasing asthmatic gasping and sucking sounds.

"Your father likes this the best of all; the wrecked machinery, the old men with their fishing lines, and the manual lift mechanism that raises the small boats out of the heaving water. There is no motor; six men help turn the large cranks, an attractive solidarity."

54. 22 Dec. 1985 / N. Lat. 14.75 / W. Long. -92.57 / Magnitude 5.11

We were reclining in a stupor on the beach. Vera had put on a straw hat, its wide brim following the line of her nose at the antipode of a rakish angle. We took turns drinking chilled coconut milk from the green shell. The

young man sliced off the top with a machete, winnowing a small hole into the inner chamber, introducing a straw of dubious hygiene. Vera poured a golden filament of rum through the hole and gently revolved the gourd. "We can offer nature a little spirited improvement once in a while, can't we?" Through a sun induced torpor I riffled through a dossier of questions I could release into the sweltering, radiant air. It would be easier now, when I couldn't see the expression on her face, the intimidating scintillation of her eyes.

I shucked my T-shirt like a chrysalis and went down to swim in the surf only after Vera had counseled me on the ferocity of the rip tides. "If you should get dragged out, don't fight it, you'll eventually be pushed ashore down the beach. The ocean is quite forgiving." Up to my shins, the full sweep of the Pacific ground sand across my ankles like pumice stone as my feet became instantaneously entombed. I leapt into the soft vault of a wave just before it broke, and coming out the other side, intemperately snorting salt water, I looked back at Vera who waved encouragement. I decided to swim beyond where the waves broke to the docile region where they swelled on a plateau of sand.

The water felt as if it was at body temperature, maintaining none of the bracing chill of Canadian lakes, demanding the warmth of effort. I could no longer touch the bottom. I saw Vera on her side reading a book over top of the swells. She might have been watching me, it was difficult to tell. My body already ached from the total demands placed upon it and I attempted to float on my back as I had executed during years of swimming lessons. The exposed skin seared in the sun. I closed my eyes and listened to the gurgling of the water. I was still frightened by the idea of something brushing against me in the milky green water, anticipating the shock of an errant fish or a ribbon of seaweed. I had never been completely at ease in open water. In a swimming

pool, I could open my eyes and see the reassuring lines of black tile, demystified by burly lights. I floated near the surface where I was less likely to encounter such terrifying contact.

The immediacy and closeness of the sound, no way to register distance, the compression of the spectrum to a thrashing white noise soothed me into a false sense of peacefulness. It was good not to feel the necessity to speak, gauging the conversational pauses, calculating when to break the silence with a comment asking no response. These were the most difficult to form. How to make the companion feel that her presence was appreciated but that you weren't desperate to resume an awkward exchange. Where were the tortoises that the restaurant owner reared in his pens? Moving away from the engines and dragging nets of the trawlers?

I treaded water and looked back at the beach, bathed in austere, shadowless light. The counter-current had drawn me far out. Breast stroking leisurely, with my head above the water, spitting salt water, I became angry with myself for my predicament, and tried to avoid panicking. I had felt nothing. The current was subtle yet powerful in its rocking motion, which gave me the illusion of remaining in a fixed position. Vera was looking at me from the shore, lazily waving her hat in the air, either in greeting or out of alarm. I was a hundred feet down the shore from her now, away from the pier. After struggling for a while to get level with the swells that preceded the surf, I gave up, tired, and let myself drift as Vera had instructed. The palm thatched restaurant and the sitting form of Vera became more remote, as the sea massaged me in an equilibrium of outflowing and in rushing waves parallel to the coast. I got to shore half a kilometre down the beach. As I walked back along the beach to Vera I thought I saw her smiling impishly, as if she were amused by my miscalculations.

"Hell, that water is devilish. The current is bloody powerful!"

"There are no well-constructed safety systems in this place." She said, continuing to read her matte-covered novel.

"I was really struggling out there."

Her eyes slid off the page to look at me, briefly. "I have confidence in your abilities. Your father told me about the athletic skills you don't like to admit to. The water is only dangerous if you panic and do something rash. "

I slumped back on the towel, took a long drink of water, and began rubbing the sand from my toes.

"When you're tired," she murmured into her book, "that is only the beginning."

Down the beach, a child stooped to pick up a freckled beach ball, her body etherealized by radiant heat. I felt a shadow of confidence shift inside me.

55. 15 Feb. 1986 / N. Lat. 14.50 / W. Long -91.85 / Magnitude 5.25

An old woman stood calf deep in the water, her back to the waves as her grand-children played nearby. I saw a large wave rushing up behind her, anticipating the result, and it hit her at the knees, pitching her forward. She rose wet and laughing, aided by her horrified children who attempted to brush the sand from her blotched dress.

"This reminds me of going to Lesser Slave Lake on a weekend in high school," she mused, "lying on the sand and listening to children playing around me, the thin pabulum of an AM radio, the bog-like musk of an agitated boyfriend propped against a weathered log."

"I never really went to the beach much. They seemed too banal. What could you do there? The glare was so bad you couldn't even read a book. Although now, obviously I can see their charms."

She shifted and I knew she was looking at me from under her hat, but I didn't open my eyes. "You must have had a girl friend in high school. What did you do together."

"We went to a lot of films. We weren't very discriminating."

56. 5 Jul. 1986 / N. Lat. 15.12 / W. Long. -92.24 / Magnitude 5.37

There was a Polaroid of us sitting on the beach, stapled to a pink cardboard card with edges serrated by sewing shears. On the back the photographer stamped his name -- "Sebastian Salvador Zapeta, 'El Chato'." The shot was slightly out of focus, behind us were a spray of coconut palms and frazzled frond roofs. Vera's pale legs angled off awkwardly, leaning on her elbow on her knee in the manner of Manet's "Luncheon on the Grass." I was leaning forward, holding onto my right knee. Our shoes sat in the foreground on the textured sand, accentuated by the angle of the late afternoon sun. Hers were garish white tennis shoes, one leaning against the other. Mine were black, almost undetectable on the dark sand save for slight polygons of reflection in the shadows, the socks spilling out of them like collapsed arteries. Off to the side, a blue straw telescoped from an afflicted coconut. Vera flagged the photographer down on an impulse. I waffled, mumbling about "his price," thinking about how many quetzales I had in my pocket.

57. 6 Jul. 1986 / N. Lat. 12.87 / W. Long. -88.77 / Magnitude 5.51

All her toes were embedded in the sand, except for the smallest one, which was memorably bent inward and trained to a dagger point by

unfortunate footwear. The photograph had been taken. We were walking down the beach to get back to the boat and the car across the inlet, and she was dragging her bare feet through the sand. The sand left a dry film on the skin when you handled it. This sand felt dirty, was too finely grained perhaps, more comprehensively pulverized. After I handled it, I wanted to wash my hands of its residues. She made hyphens with her feet in the sand. I was looking ahead to a ragged group of young men, potential ruffians with dishevelled clothes and tag-team scrutinizing stares. We had lingered too long on the beach. The glaze of tawdry quaintness was cracking.

Vera gave a constricted cry that opened into a high-pitched yelp and stumbled to the side. She had dropped her beach bag, the bottle of water was draining into a dark hole in the sand. A sound of disgust and revulsion writhed in her throat. White and hollow-eyed, a puppy protruded from the sand. It was large enough to have lived a few weeks after birth. "God! Shit!" she hissed, backing away from it. Transfixed, I was held by the movement in the conch of its ear, the black-lipped grimace over small teeth. The group of young men began to laugh. A boy and a girl rose from a sand castle and came, running at first, toward the dog to look at it. Vera kicked a wave of sand over it to cover it again. I looked back from the lane between the restaurants and saw the two children brushing the sand away with a palm frond.

58. 8 Jul. 1986 / N. Lat. 14.94 / W. Long. -89.54 / Magnitude 5.20

We stopped at the junction of the Pacific coast highway for liquados. Poised on high pink stools, we watched our cantaloupe and pineapple staining the milk, at first in hiccups, and then the smooth searing whine of the blender. Long Del Monte trucks sped by, their collective breeze rocking the netted bunches of oranges that hung from the perimeter of the roof.

"Do you get nervous traveling here at night?" I asked her. "I've heard of gangs waiting on desolate stretches of the mountain highways."

"I don't do it if I can help it. I'd never do it alone, actually."

I tugged on the viscous beverage, generously sweetened with heaping spoons of sugar. "You know, looking at the map it seems like it would be an hour and a half less if we just went to the villa on Atitlán. The highway north goes right next to it. Avoid the Pan-American altogether, which is pretty risky. We might even arrive before dark."

We headed back up the hunches of the mountains, but when we entered the town of Patulul we were caught behind a line of trucks and vans, sputtering plumes of black exhaust at the shuttered windows of the narrow one-way street. We leap-frogged our way past them after what seemed an interminable length of time, weighing the approaching curves and the gradation of the road, the station wagon quivering uneasily on its leaf springs. Supernal orchards passed to the west, the coffee plant's shaggy silhouettes. On a tight corner I looked past Vera. In the foreground, the gilded tips of maize blurred into contrails of fine dust, and at the base of the precipitous slope, briefly, the early street lights that dappled San Lucas Tolimán. She turned west at the fork in the highway along the north rim of the lake, made the decision to go to the villa wordlessly for me.

When we got back to the villa I would have to explain what I had needlessly complicated by disguised motivations. She pulled into a viewpoint above San Antonio Palopo, the town of Santa Catarina hidden from view by a crease in the mountains. The burnt umber tones of the sun smoldered behind the ridge of the crater and San Pedro volcano in the west. I imagined the light setting the trees ablaze, standing at the lip, like Gideon and the Israelites, the

pots covering their surreptitious torches. There were no trumpets; the fear and surprise were more elastic. I could see Volcán Atitlán, the one that was hidden by Tolimán when I looked from the villa on the northern shore.

59. 2 Aug. 1986 / N. Lat. 13.80 / W. Long. -89.70 / Magnitude 5.28

Vera shivered audibly. The sun's rays had vanished. "Every time I see this lake it exceeds my expectations, it's so surreal. It's like the gardens of Belvedere in Vienna. You come out the central doors and the verdure and statuary unfold rectilinearly before you. Viewed from a different angle it doesn't make sense, its patterning is different. Here, every stopping point holds the same composite. Perhaps the prairies have trained us to be more comfortable with the organization of the garden. There the limits are clearly defined - the horizon, a river bank, or the lissome elbow of a coulee."

"It's strange to hear you say that. It reminds me how odd it is to imagine my father enjoying this place, enough to want to see it month after month. He may not really care. He could ignore things like that, like an itch. The lake is extraordinarily beautiful. But I can't imagine the basin looking as dramatic from the other side, from the volcano slopes."

"This lake, and I have been thinking about it as a problem for a while now, folds together aspects of both prairie and mountains." As she spoke her body was convulsed by swarms of shivers, and she twisted her jacket tighter around her. "There is an insularity and cradling. The edges of the mountains are not chiseled but softened. It is like one of those tidal pools whose pellucid waters are filled with beautiful sensitive creatures that find their home between the moonlight and the warm stillness of the day. Some of the organisms are just caught in the pools, inadvertently as the water recedes. They do not have any will. Morning and night represent catastrophic change.

By contrast, there are the creatures that cling to the rock, barnacles, anemones, starfish, mussels, hermit crabs. They depend on the water's return. What I mean to say is that there is a separateness inherent in this lake, and the communities around it. The fact that it is a site of migrancy: the fetishized object of tourism; the site of labour and production. One cannot truthfully call this pristine, except maybe now when the diffused light disguises the fields and houses."

60. 5 Aug. 1986 / N. Lat. 16.55 / W. Long. -92.58 / Magnitude 5.16

She got out of the car and embraced Lucy who came to greet us, wiping the cornmeal from her hands on her apron. Carlos waved to me, "Buenas noches." They talked quietly. I picked up a few things about "Natalia" (her daughter?) about water and corn. I took the luggage into the house. There was not much to eat so I reheated some frijoles and warmed wheat tortillas, making burritos with avocados and olives. I built a fire and dug out the remains of a bottle of cognac -- Duty Free -- put on Mahler's "Tenth Symphony."

"I guess you know Lucy pretty well," I hesitated to say.

"She's an amazing woman: up at five to sell hot chocolate to the workers taking the bus to Solola or Los Encuentros, and then she has her cow to look after in a small pasture up the hill, a lovely spot actually. There are phenomenal white lilies growing along a stream which the cow occasionally tramples. So she does that, dries and husks the corn in season, cleans the weevils out of the stored sacks periodically. On top of all this she weaves corte cloth on a loom in their house, spins the thread herself -- she says it's cheaper than the commercial stuff, but I'm not sure. When she's spinning I sit and talk

to her. When she's weaving there's too much to concentrate on, I only slow her down. "

"Detmar didn't tell me much about them when he was here, and my Spanish isn't much . . . doesn't he pay them for looking after the place?"

"A small retainer I guess, but they get to live in the house for nothing and use the excess from Detmar's garden. They have a plot up on the mountain, you know, which produces well."

"I was looking at some of the books in dad's study and I came across your Bungalow Chapbook. He never made the incisions and fit the thing together. Do you want to show me how to put it together, or . . . better still . . . why don't you assemble it? It will be as if you're reading to me from it, a book launch." I merely wanted to veer the conversation onto literary topics, particularly her writing.

"It's for the reader to decide what to do with it. It's out of my hands."

We stood on the veranda trying to look out of the light cast by the villa, through the penumbra sheen of the corn.

"The staircase up to the office is dangerous isn't it? It would be easy to mis-step climbing them in the dark, fall off the edge. It's good that pot of fuchsias is there."

"I put them there," she said. "Come, I want to show you something." And she led me up the stone stairs to the room in the tower.

I lay awake and heard a truck winding along the road from the east. The wavering whine of its transmission as it hobbled over the ridges and potholes. The sound of the vehicle with its unknown payload filled me with fear. There was no moon that night, only the weak contribution of the yard light picking out the flanks of trees and lazy tresses of corn. That bulb, its

delicate atmosphere of gas and filaments, could have easily fallen in a brittle shower of darkness. I was alone in a room with a brooding wardrobe and the spires of the end board, the door bolted, the window covered in a grill of twisted bars. The whine came closer and I waited in dread for the insistent pounding on the door, the word "Gringo!" and obscene laughter as feet moved in the grass, looking for a way in.

61. 12 Mar. 1987 / N. Lat. 14.78 / W. Long. -92.06 / Magnitude 5.03

My grandfather's hands were massive, engorged, swollen with labour. He had never worked his own land, never experienced having his own capital, borrowing against it, accumulating more. The land in northern Saskatchewan was not his but the Canadian Pacific Railway's. He borrowed against his body, the labour he and his family could perform. The land had to be paid off as well as the cost of coming across an ocean and two continents. He had to pay for being transported to a place where he could be tied to the solidity, the anchor of paying down a loan premium. In exchange, he was given peace and the gratification of building a private familial world. The Russian officials let him flee the country because he possessed nothing of value.

In Southern Russia, the Crimea where he grew up, there was no more land for the sons of large families, so "daughter" colonies for Mennonites were arranged in distant, less productive places. He got some land in the foothills of the Ural Mountains. He had to work in the Forestry Service with other Mennonites who refused to join the army. His eldest brother was wealthy from inheriting the family's land from his father and he died in a prison camp, his land seized. Other relatives escaped over the Amur River into China, developed mythologies of escape into new kinds of rigid control. In the west it was merely made more attractive, voluntary. The Canadians allowed his family to

live there because after the quarantine inspections they were found free of communicable diseases.

After his arrival in Canada, he quickly came to worship the child. He nurtured this idolatry to forget the hardship of the present, the dependence, the marginal nature of his position in society. He did not allow it to lead to disenchantment but to create an idea of a new kind of escape for his children. My grandmother pickled vegetables for winter in a steam filled kitchen, pregnant with pectin, the chatter of the glass lids in the percolating water muffled by red rubber seals. I imagined they began to see life in Canada as regimes of control, of order, preservation and laying-away, in reaction to the arbitrary character of their treatment in Russia. The operation that transformed wild saskatoon berries and strawberries into jam that could be opened and used at their discretion, sweet and good at any time. When I went into the empty chicken coop behind their last house and smelled the faint ammoniac smell of old droppings, I realized what was lost and not looked for.

Three vultures were turning in circles at various levels above the shoreline of the lake. They had discovered an updraft and were cruising on its differentiated strata, wavering at its infidelities and checking their balanced pitch. Waiting, loitering, the scavengers possessed an inexhaustible capacity for deferral and reassessment of the terrain.

My grandfather and I once watched a family of birds together. Near where he lived there was an old aqueduct that brought water to an arid part of the Palliser Triangle, where it filled reed-lined ditches. A walkway ran along beside it and I watched the water flow southwest. The water had to go underneath a rail line, obeying the momentum of a siphon. A few metres above the descent of the siphonic chute a female duck and five ducklings were paddling against the current. My grandfather stared at them for a long time.

The water made a pleasant gurgling sound, winked gregariously and scrambled the cumulus-speckled blue sky. Crickets and frogs found an uneasy unison. I wondered where the water came from and how the family of ducks came to find itself transported in it. The movement of the water may have been imperceptible at first.

"We should do something!" I said because I was afraid for them. The words, the subjunctive tense, moved my grandfather very slowly. Did he think of its equivalent in High German or Plautdeutsch, match them up and found them expunged of feeling, or did he pause because he had not yet come to a decision himself? Did he even think that there was a decision to be made? Maybe he felt no particular emotion for the birds at all.

"They will be OK," he responded, finally, " they live in the water."

I trusted him, then, was comforted by what he said because I thought he knew the world. Language, for a child, still has the power to alleviate all ills, assuage all doubts. Had he grown, out of necessity, accustomed to a passive spectatorial position? Had the orders and directions of officials become ingrained like the dirt from the sweet potato fields under his finger nails? He refused to know everything about water. He had lived his entire life on the solidity of the earth. Out of Hamburg, in the middle of the Atlantic, he came up from the hold and leaned over the railing, hurling the bread and cheese from his stomach into the prow's dilapidated foam. Water moistened the seeds the seeder pushed into the soil. It was the sweet liquid that filled the bottom of the well he dug. It steamed about him in the metal tub on Saturday evenings. It affectionately lapped on the shore of a lake where his children ran in school races. But water could also mean other things. It could fill you and pull you into itself, compel you to follow its path.

62. 12 May 1989 / N. Lat. 17.17 / W. Long. -92.28 / Magnitude 5.02

The sky in Guatemala maintained an ashen appearance, only infrequently substituting a washed-out blue with frayed clouds. The seamless clouds filtered the light through gauze that muted the sun, disguised its outline and transformed it into an antique gold broach. Eadweard J. Muybridge's manipulation of the photographs he took in Guatemala in 1875 showed his unwillingness to reproduce a flat and reticent sky. All his photographs of Lake Atitlán were emended by the overlay of a second negative, depicting dramatically broken and towering clouds. His artifice drew attention to itself by projecting phantom clouds, out-of-scale bodies, on the torsos of the volcanoes, lowering a fantastical sky into the earth and lake. Muybridge facetiously emulated features of the picturesque to satisfy the expectations of the steamship company that had sponsored his journey. The company wanted to awaken the interest of capitalists and tourists in North America by disseminating images of a peaceful, orderly, progressive region. Muybridge left tools in his photograph that could be used to demolish the pleasure it initially gave. A quiet act of contempt.

63. 16 Aug. 1989 / N. Lat. 15.13 / W. Long. -92.47 / Magnitude 5.11

Not wanting to wake Vera, I listened on headphones. The twinned black wire and paper diaphrams pressed to my ears returned me to another place, a cathedral in Strasbourg after Sunday mass, where people moved from the pews to side chapels, to genuflect in front of banks of flickering candles, beneath the rose window that quietly smoldered to itself. A few continued to face the altar screen where vestments paced carrying silver, the organ Voluntary coming from above on the side. I listened to the "Ciacona in E minor," a piece that Johann Sebastian Bach walked from Arnstadt to Lübeck to hear the

composer, Dietrich Buxtehude, play. He went to learn from the master organist, but also to explore the possibility of succeeding him at his post. The outgrowth of this experience was the only ostinato organ work Bach ever wrote - the "Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor." Based on a theme executed on solo pedal, he devised twenty variations, proceeding from simplicity to phenomenal complexity. The space of the Grötkirche in Alkmaar was palpable in the reverberations of the peacock fan of metal pipes and wooden reeds. The mechanism of each stop was connected by relays of wood to the organist's hands and feet. The apparatus, offering no impediment, swelled her body so that it filled the vast space of the nave. When I shut my eyes only the chair could tell me where I was.

64. 19 Mar. 1990 / N. Lat. 15.94 / W. Long. -92.86 / Magnitude 5.14

Patricia sent a fax to the Panajachel post office. "Managua is completely amazing. Finding your way around it is like entering a labyrinthine dream world. And all the time you feel as if you are being stalked, or sized up by thieves, who could be anyone, they blend in so well. There was a devastating earthquake in 1972 and the city has been rebuilt in a disarrayed fashion. The Sandanista Revolution in 1979 and the subsequent boycotts by the States crippled most efforts at urban renewal. The old centre of the city is locatable only by the plaza in front of the ruined Municipal Cathedral; all the other public buildings are now located elsewhere. The old cathedral on lake Managua, whose dome fell in the 1972 quake, has been left as a ruin. Its disfigured profile reminds me of pictures of the ruined observatory in Hiroshima.

"Even if you can find a document that passes for a map there are very few street names aside from the main thoroughfares. Can you believe it, a city

expunged of names, very Italo Calvino-ian. As a traveler you are dependent on the descriptive directions given to you by strangers. Consequently, your only reference is the point at which you stand when you ask for further directions from passersby: you are continually stepping into and out of private geographies. To make things more intriguing, the cardinal points have been exchanged for a geographically relative system: 'al lago,' means north, though the city is flat and the lake not visible from most points; 'arriba,' means east for where the sun rises and 'abajo,' means the west; 'a la montaña,' means south. As you can see there is a strange mixture of movable and immovable objects that are not in visible range at the same time; the citizens orient themselves without discrimination for the object of reference. Directions must be grounded according to certain landmarks.

"I was given a lesson in this art of orienteering when I asked for the way to the Huellas de Acahualinca Museum. The magnificent part is that many of the landmarks people refer to no longer exist. Yet the obliterated structures endure as phantom guide posts. The city is pressed along the southern shore of the lake and to the south is the high and smoking and steaming volcano, Masaya. In the lava tunnels of this volcano many skeletons have been found, lending an air of truth to the legends that the indigenous peoples threw virgins into the crater to appease Chacintique, the goddess of fire. I plan on climbing up the volcano and looking into it, imagining its lip as a point of termination and renewal. Volcán Momotombo is on the lake and visible from most points in the city. The volcano, a good corporate citizen, has been conscripted to generate geo-thermal electricity for the city. Water, pumped into the core, produces steam and drives turbines. It is odd to think that its threatening vulcanicity provides energy for the lights that allow me to write this letter to you. There is a reciprocity in the harnessing of the volcano's

energy for quotidian uses -- the powering of a radio, a soft drink cooler, traffic lights, features of urban comfort and order -- it is not only a menacing reminder of the unsettled strata that grinds beneath it. I eventually found the museum I was looking for on the lake front, after a series of contradictory directions. The museum preserves some of the earliest evidence of human life in the region, tentatively dated at ten thousand years ago. They are the footprints of women, children, men, and animals running towards Lake Managua during what is believed to be a volcanic eruption of Masaya. Discovered in 1874, the layered ash preserved the imprint of their flight.

"I like this city very much. It is not really fair to compare Managua and Antigua, for they function in such totally different ways and on incompatible scales. Here the natural disasters, the ravishment and vandalism of the city by the ground it is built on, has been greeted not with despair and abandonment, but renewed energy. Managua is a city of resistance. This city is being lived in, exploited, in Antigua that changed in the late seventies when they instated codes for commercial hoardings and building codes: now, you can only build newer structures there if they conform to the old colonial style. The aroma of piety and religious conviction still lingers too strongly from the burst decanter shells of the old churches.

"Van, I don't know whether I will make it back to Guatemala before you leave. I'm sorry. Patricia."

65. 25 Mar. 1990 / N. Lat. 14.66 / W. Long. -89.79 / Magnitude 5.11

Antigua was a city under siege by the invisible yet malevolent forces of epidemics, earthquakes, and eruptions. Above the city squatted three volcanoes: one priestly, one prophetic, the other sage-like and stoic. Agua flooded the earlier site of the capital -- Ciudad Vieja -- with mud when its

water-filled crater collapsed. The volcano was considered inactive. Fuego spat liquid flame and exploded in spontaneous recitals of thundering kettle drums. Acatenango, the highest of them and more difficult to see in profile, was dormant. A chronology of the waves of devastation showed that no human lifetime could be spent on the fertile plains in and around Antigua without experiencing cataclysms on a number of occasions. In an attempt to counteract the mobility of the earth, the architects of the capital of Central America tried to nullify it through increasingly robust walls and foundations. The smaller window apertures produced a pleasing dissonance of light. During the 18th century, they clothed this in rococo ornamentation, affecting an atectonic appearance that denied the supporting function of the walls.

The lightness evinced by the inner sheath could not be achieved through the European forms they mimicked, but was accomplished through a suspension of disbelief. In them there was the familiar flux of changing perspectives, open, tense, fluid forms moving on to dissolution. Patricia had explained to me that after the devastating earthquake of 1773, the inhabitants of the city were ordered to move to the new location, present day Guatemala City. Many citizens were reluctant to abandon their property in Antigua, which had definite value. They saw themselves as forced to move to new unimproved land, to which value had not yet been attached. The desire to remain, to adapt and flourish in a hostile environment, persisted. When many refused to move, the Spanish Crown issued a royal decree, making it illegal for anyone to continue living there. Using Indian labour under threat of death, Antigua was sacked and pillaged by its own inhabitants, stripped of all movable goods and transported to the new city -- doors, wood beams, locks, tiles, furniture, ornate columns, statuary -- the remains of the luxurious ecclesiastical interiors, gutted.

By virtue of the illegality of living there, Antigua became, in effect, a dead city. A Carthage on paper. Antigua had become the domain of the stroller, the walker freed of aims, a museum. Guatemala City was molded by the metropolitan convulsions of the early twentieth century. It became a "post-modern" city of zones between which symbolic capital could move. In mere decades, newness withered into decrepitude. The bourgeoisie moved up the hills, beyond the airport and closer to the volcano. The centre of the capital was jammed with tawdry businesses, compact and despondent mall spaces. Everything had a dirty film, a palpable dinge in the air. Guarded parking lots had been established between the roofless walls of old colonial buildings.

66. 8 May 1990 / N. Lat. 13.74 / W. Long. -88.34 / Magnitude 5.33

My father thought it was possible to disappear. Borders were too rigid, their controls too invasive and all seeing. Convincingly simulated illegitimate documents had to be produced by a person with expertise. There would always be at least one person who would retain the knowledge of his transformation. There was no way to completely sever the link to a past life. He was a man who respected the law, had accumulated property, leaning on the legal system that made property rights paramount.

And yet, he had placed his photograph in a stolen Canadian passport. An official from the Canadian consulate had come to visit him in a hospital in La Paz, found him in a room with very little of the equipment that accumulates around the critically ill in developed nations. The official knew the passport had been reported lost. When he saw my father's face, a face devoid of a real name, obscured by the paraphernalia of maintenance that pushed sustenance into his prone body, he felt the itch of recognition. As he looked, he struggled to fit the patient's face to an occupation. He nudged the template of his face

around in his mind. A reporter, someone who had inhabited television, no, one of the professors in International Studies, a parishioner at his parent's church?

The consular official drove back through the centre of the city, his head lights brushing like feather dusters across the white patches of bullet-pocked walls. His car passed the dark hulks of two burned-out mansions, remnants of an aborted coup that drove a hypochondriacal general to a lonely hacienda. He alternated between ransacking his memory, breaking open boxes indiscriminately like a vandal, and trying to relax, a strategy he knew might allow the hospitalized man to come to him. One of the tenors in a performance of Tchaikovsky's "Vespers," a political figure, he looked like the Immigration minister in the old government -- the substantial presence of his nose and the almost wild beard that framed and encroached upon the mouth, darkly shrouded the jaw. He paid the old man who watched the cars parked in front of the block that housed the consular offices, and, turning down the flagstone sidewalk, looked at the plaza. The government palace stood to the rear, a fountain floodlit from under the water in the green and red of the Bolivian flag colouring the jets blue. My father's face, striding figure emerged from a poplar forest, and the official remembered watching the National Film Board documentary. The name came to him like a sign caught in the sheer light of a flashbulb.

67. 30 Jun. 1990 / N. Lat. 13.33 / W. Long. -88.39 / Magnitude 5.28

There was a large rock in my father's pocket when he was stricken in the shoeshiner's chair of black vinyl and chrome metal, the silver capped bottles of leather polishes and conditioners in a row by his feet. It miraculously arrived among his effects in Edmonton. The consular official

and his staff traced his movements two months into the past via his illegitimate passport, thanks to government regulations which required hotels to hold all guests' passports overnight, for "safekeeping." He had stayed for a few weeks in La Paz after entering the country and then at Copacabana on Lake Titicaca. Bolivia was at the centre of a continent. Land locked, its western flank contorted by the Andes, miles above sea level. The stone in his pocket, flecked with silver ore, was from Potosí.

I could not fathom why he should come to this place. Every day I lost a bit of hope that I would ever find out. What confounded me was how to reconcile his enduring regionalism, his western Canadian fixation, with this expression of a desire to go to a burned-out nerve centre of capitalism, a point of origin. There was a precise and exquisite smallness to his vision, its vernacular container, that fertilized his writing with local meaning. "El Cerro Rico," the mountain next to which Potosí became engorged with workers and wealth, was the largest silver deposit in human history. A mountain striated with massive arteries and veins of ore, fibrillating with capillaries, yielding over twenty thousand tonnes of silver for Spanish coffers. The mountain had been mined for centuries, its interior tunneled by five thousand probing shafts, blown apart into rubble-filled chambers with dynamite and pick axe. The mine had consumed the lives of five million Indian forced labourers. The "Rich Hill," so I saw in a coffee table book, was rivaled by another mountain rising between, next to the city, built of mining slag. Intensive mining was no longer profitable, and the slag was now being picked over and scavenged, the inside of the mountain being turned back in on itself.

68. 6 Aug. 1990 / N. Lat. 12.03 / W. Long. -88.11 / Magnitude 5.22

The message about his heart attack went to Ottawa where, through the peculiar myopia of databases, they made a linkage to my sister in Paraguay. Joan was eleven years older than I, a gulf of time and experience that did not intersect at any point. When I was a child she was listening to rock music and involved in the High School yearbook. When I was an adolescent she went away to an insular varsity social world. When I was in university she was having children, her intellect as virile as ever, yet circumscribed by the need for stability. For the past three years she had lived in Paraguay, working for an international development organization as an administrator for their work with the Guarani Indians of the central Chaco. Her work kept her in Asunción four days a week. On the others she went back to the town of Filadelfia in the Chaco, where her husband taught at the Mennonite Hauptschule. They felt that this isolated and only recently prosperous Mennonite colony was an excellent place to "raise" their young boy and girl, away from the threats of Asunción streets, spared the crass materialism, the social conformism and television of North America. On the Fernheimer Colony there was mutual aid, a collective market for their goods, communal medical services and insurance safety nets.

Many of the Mennonite social attitudes were very dated and quaintly provincial -- the discouragement of beards, the almost impossible logistics of dating, the systematic exclusion of the native Indian population from the settlement towns, the abhorrence of women's slacks. But I suspected these were an attraction for my sister and her haplessly conventional husband from small-town Saskatchewan. Here they could feel enlightened and progressive, while in Canada they could only be conservative in the face of excesses. They could maintain the private fiction that they were fundamentally unimplicated

in the Mennonite community, could laugh at the hypocrisies and performances of moral contortionism. They derived ironic pleasure from the unsettlings of the Mennonite ethos that came with affluence. They assumed their children would be "better adjusted," well grounded, because they were enfolded by the "simplicity" of values they associated with the world of primary resource production. Agricultural life gave off a wholesome aroma that narcotized their imaginations.

69. 21 Oct. 1990 / N. Lat. 12.32 / W. Long. -88.09 / Magnitude 5.00

My father has been effectively immobilized for almost a year, now, though there are glimmers of renewed activity along the left side of his body. This does not bode well for a recuperated ability to write. He was left handed. If, at some distant point in the future, he can write at all, it will be with extreme difficulty. I feed him meals that I liquefy in a powerful blender, spooning broths on deep-set spoons and dribbling beads of it on his chest, which I dab with a moist cloth. Three times a week a Home Care nurse comes to the lodge for two hours from the hospital thirty kilometres away. She gives me instructions on how to care for him, advice and treatment of certain sores that have developed, and helps me lift him in and out of the bath. My father smells a little. He used to shower every day, and despite the inability to move his extremities, his hair follicles religiously produce oils of a scent that reminds me of when he used to manhandle the chainsaw with a woodsy aplomb or stack a truckload of studs on the plywood floor. I comb the shining hairs that cling together compressed between the ordering tines.

70. 16 Nov. 1990 / N. Lat. 12.40 / W. Long. -90.47 / Magnitude 5.06

The aspen is chewed through to the dark meat of its inner core, glistening soberly with the slow autumnal metabolism of sap. The wound is not really a wound. It is unfinished, like the half-dressed marble blocks a sculptor leaves behind, the chisel marks still peppering the contours, rubbed with oil. The gnawed stump is a monochrome rose window. Each indented detail is held in place by a frame of lead. At the base of the tree are white chips leaning against the long grasses, scattered among the blushing leaves.

Head up, I see him moving through the water. He doesn't see or hear me inspecting his creative debris. I look at the white shards and I realize I have no idea how the beavers live, aside from the structures they make and the stumps and partially gnawed trees they leave behind. They collect their timbers and build their dams in the dark, inconspicuously, save for the vague ruffling of moon chromed water. They embed young branches in the mud of the creek bottom and create a dense forest beneath the ice, so that they can eat the unseasonably green stalks under the thick crust of winter. The beavers whittle and pare the branches to a fine thatch that they weave into a wicker dome for their den. They must select the perfect trees by their sense of smell, passing by acrid balsam poplar and the sickly aspen drooling black sap.

There is an old beaver colony in the bush across the creek, an oxbow lake that was abandoned when they had consumed the supply of adjacent trees. Water still sits in the complicated network of dredged canals, over which trunks of old trees with gnarled bark lie in confusion. Here and there, as on the brow of Frenchman's Butte, foxholes were gradually filling themselves in. The wicker and mud plaster roofs had collapsed, pouring light on their feral interiors and the slide that communicated with the winding lake.

These wood chips in the damp moldering grass, fragments of Scrabble chits, lie here as waste, carefully, exhaustively removed. Beavers find only the skin of the tree delectable. The rest has to be chewed through so that more of the surface will be exposed to them on the ground. I have been told that the beavers' teeth grow at a constant rate. That in order to be able to hold them at a manageable length, they must keep chewing. There is a biological imperative to bring the trees to the ground. It is not only that they are hungry and think of the advancing winter that they eat, but because if they abstain they will die from two causes.

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Appendix

"Flânerie" and Contemporary Travel Practices

In what follows I elucidate and contextualize my understanding of the "flâneur" within contemporary critical debates and sketch out possibilities for the recuperation of the "flâneur" to illuminate certain practices of travel in the late twentieth century. Explicitly defined over and against "mass tourism," "backpacking" in the "Third World" carries traces of "flânerie" in its disinterested, predominantly visual interaction with foreign cultures, and its eliding of the economic privilege that enables "budget" travel.

In the investigations of the figure of the "flâneur" as it was deployed by French writers in the early years of the nineteenth century, there is relative agreement among them that it was an artist or writer, in most cases a man, who walked about the metropolis observing and contemplating the crowds and commodities.[1] At the outset, it is important to emphasize that a precise definition of the "flâneur" remains elusive. Even Charles Baudelaire in his extremely influential essay "The Painter of Modern Life," a text that many commentators continue to consider authoritative, is deliberately ambiguous in his rehearsal of the "flâneur's" activities and motivations. The "flâneur" is a protean figure who, as Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson explains, "writers recast . . . in the image of their own changing conceptions of the social order and

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[1] The gender exclusivity of the term "flâneur" as it was in use in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries has been fruitfully, if equivocally, explored by commentators such as Susan Buck-Morss ("The Flâneur"), Elizabeth Wilson, and Janet Wolff, who have played it off the possibility of the "flâneuse." While the "flâneur" entered the language at the beginning of the nineteenth century it appears that the activity of "flânerie" only lexically migrated to women with the mid-century emergence of department store shopping.

their place in it" (23). Contemporary writers who deliberate upon and attempt to apprehend the "flâneur" inscribe, at the same moment, their conception of their own relationship to cultural authority and the social order.

Echoing Edgar Allen Poe, Baudelaire contends that the "flâneur" is "the man of the crowd" (9 emphasis mine) as distinct from the man in the crowd. By doing so, Baudelaire forges a substantive, material link between his subject and the social life he studies. In his introduction to a recent collection of essays provocatively exploring the "flâneur," Keith Tester describes "flânerie" as the "observation of the fleeting and the transitory"(7), the scrutiny of unrecoverable vistas and the soldering of chance correspondences. The distinguishing feature and raison d'être of the "flâneur" is his mobility and the acuity of his observations. He is a "kind of perambulating Panopticon" (Mazlish 50) who makes sense of the city simultaneously in terms of parts and as a whole.

One of the unresolveable tensions encountered in any formulation of the "flâneur" is that which resides between his self-declared, inconspicuous "sovereignty" -- "a 'prince' who everywhere rejoices in his incognito" (Baudelaire 9) -- and his complete participation in the activities of the "crowd." In his note on the "dialectic of 'flânerie,'" Walter Benjamin exfoliates this point with greater subtlety: the "flâneur" is "on one hand, the man who feels himself observed by everyone and everything, the totally suspicious person, on the other, the completely undiscoverable, hidden person" (qtd. in Frisby 92, emphasis mine). The "flâneur" knows that he can be observed while observing, and his self-confidence is located in the fact that a passerby would find him unremarkable. When the "flâneur" is brought alongside the dandy, another subject of discussion in Baudelaire's pivotal essay, the former's unusual "crowd practice" is exposed. Highly resistant to the leveling processes

of democracy, the dandy possesses "first and foremost the burning need to create for [himself] a personal originality" (Baudelaire 27) that is so utterly obtrusive as to signal, in itself, revolt and opposition. The dandy embodies -- in dress, deportment, and expression -- the reactionary, while the "flâneur," circulating discreetly throughout the arteries of the metropolis, only expresses his indignation verbally. In a sense, both of these figures are caught in the dialectic of self-definition and definition from outside, the dandy embracing the cult of personality and the "flâneur" engaging in a hopeless quest for and refusal of impersonality. Whereas the figure of the dandy unites the contrapuntal desires to "combat and destroy triviality" (28) and yet maintain an impeccably placid exterior, the "flâneur" suspends any "active" opposition to the prevailing order he might have and effectively subordinates it to his desire to "blend in" and mimic normalcy.

"Flânerie" can be understood as a way of reading the city and the population that animates it -- its market economy, its manifold sightlines, its privileged and disenfranchised denizens -- and translating these into text; in so doing, the "flâneur" becomes an agent of production. The "flâneur" is grounded in the response to certain historical tensions in nineteenth-century Paris. Benjamin points out that the "flâneur" gained prominence in discourse during the same period that the public appetite increased for the grandiose representations of the metropolis attainable in dioramas and panoramas (35), through which the spectator could pretend to a brief visual mastery of the dauntingly massive metropolis. It also coincides with the inception and development of photography, and the subsequent proliferation of reproductions of Parisian street views. Epitomizing the obsession with visual reconnaissance, as Parkhurst Ferguson trenchantly explains, the "flâneur" offers a way of textually controlling the crowds in the rapidly expanding

metropolis, a technique for managing the attendant insecurity, an "intellectual" who can, by dint of his gaze, bring order to the "masses": "[a]midst the disorientation of what must have seemed a population explosion, the 'flâneur' is entertained, not distressed, by the ever changing urban scene. The 'flâneur' domesticates the potentially disruptive urban environment" (31). Shields concurs that the "flâneur" operates as a "utopian presentation of a carefree individual" who is not swallowed up by the changing metropolis but actually "excels under the stress . . . (of the new) social 'spatialization'" (67 emphasis mine).

By mid-century the "flâneur" is pushed from the boulevards that have become inimical to "flânerie" and into the shop-lined space of the glass-roofed arcades. Benjamin observes that as a consequence of this shift -- "he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city" (54) -- the "flâneur's" relationship to consumption and to "empire" becomes more explicit. "The most direct expression of empire is through the commodity," Rob Shields states, and it is in the arcade that "empire is transformed into the emporium" (74). Though the "flâneur" can be seen as vicariously carrying out the mapping of these distant territories via significant objects, Shields does not seem to give him full credit for the agency he retains. The "flâneur," preserving a cultivated distance, observes and records the exchange involved in the solicitation and purchase of the objects, and he resists consummation despite being surrounded by the enticing spectacle of consumption. The "flâneur" derives illicit excitement from the kinetic energy of the marketplace, yet heightens this by renouncing and denouncing its processes and intellectually disassociating himself from them.

After the devaluing of the discursive field of "flânerie" in the later nineteenth century, I would argue that the practices of "flânerie" were

displaced into other areas of public life. "Backpacking," as a form of contemporary travel, exhibits traces of this older form of "crowd practice" that in turn illuminates many of its underlying neo-imperialist assumptions. As a phenomenon of "youth" travel beginning in the 1960's, "backpacking" is predicated upon the rapidly rising standards of living in the Western economies in the period following World War II. It can be described as a way for burgeoning middle class individuals, not yet entrenched in the economy, to accrue distinction or cultural capital through experience abroad rather than, say, home ownership or investments. As with other forms of travel, "backpacking" became a commodity that signaled social status. Therefore, while "backpacking" ties into prefigurative forms of heuristic travel it also has linkages to imperial exploration and conquest, naturalizing modes of intercourse between the privileged and marginalized.

Trinh T. Minh-ha points out that "the traveller maintains his difference mostly by despising others like himself" (22). In a way that parallels the "flâneur's" relationship with the "crowd," which operates as both subject and medium, the "backpacker" is <u>of</u> "mass tourism" not <u>in</u> it. But unlike the dynamic of "flânerie" in nineteenth-century Paris, the geographically displaced "backpacker" has two "crowds," indeed two cultures, to observe and interpret -- other tourists, and the "Others" of the visited country. The "backpacker's" attention functions on two interpenetrating planes -- the self-reflexive contemplation of the premise of travel itself, and the engagement with the chosen "exotic" surroundings and peoples. Arising out of the perception that "tourism" always already "ruins" destinations, there is the constant, urgent need for the "backpacker" to find unspoiled regions or "micro deserts" in reaction to the "blindness and myopia of the tourist whose voracity in consuming cultures as commodities has made hardship and

adventure in traveling a necessary part of pre-planned excitement rather than a mere hindrance" (Minh-ha 22). The "backpacker" seeks out the "new," exemplary and arresting in much the same way that the "flâneur" perused the recesses of the city in search of galvanizing insight.

On the streets of Paris, the "flâneur's" primary mode of apprehension is the visual, and from there he makes the synthetic leap into narrative. Traveling in the "Third World," the "backpacker" generally finds him/herself unable to communicate in the local language, and therefore places an increasing importance on sublimating the local culture and representing it to those at home in the form of postcards and letters. "Taking photographs can be a way of maintaining a relationship of controlled proximity and distance to the environment" (Curtis and Pajaczkowska 210), and it can also be a practice of turning experiences, depicted in still photographs, into narrative. Unlike "flânerie" where the metropolis is contemplated at the moment of immersion, photography is a strategy of the "backpacker" to defer cross-cultural interaction until the negatives are developed and can be interpreted on their terms.

Where the "backpacker" fundamentally diverges from the "flâneur" is on the question of mobility; anyone, of a particular dispositional bent, could practice "flânerie" on the metropolitan avenues, but the geographical dislocation on which "backpacking" is premised decisively delimits those who can participate. Which raises the crucial question of how to conduct a relevant discussion of the traces of "flânerie" in contemporary culture and also account for the all-encompassing shift from nineteenth-century imperial economics to those of global corporate capitalism which threaten to dissolve national boundaries? On one level, the "backpacker" emulates the "flâneur" by being disinterested in the marketplace, but on another level the

"backpacker" is inextricably entwined in that system, as it is the dominant "hard" currency that enables his/her fantasy of unfettered, self-directed travel. By restlessly seeking out the "new," the "backpacker" ironically recirculates colonialist exploration narratives, at the same time that he/she wants to "discover" regions unsullied by global capitalism.