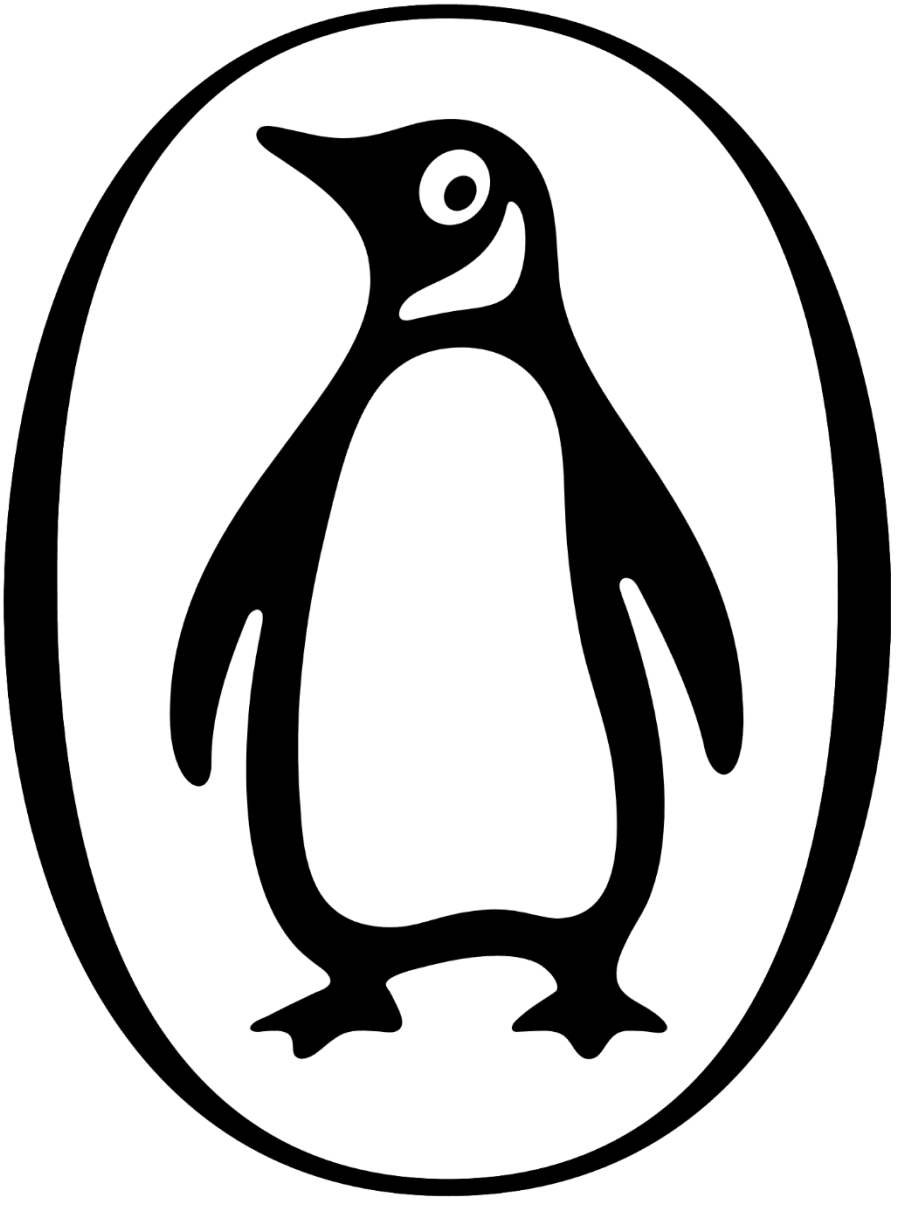

Wild

AN ELEMENTAL JOURNEY

Jay Griffiths

HAMISH HAMILTON

an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

HAMISH HAMILTON

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road,
Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,
Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published in the United States of America by Jeremy P. Tarcher, a member of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 2006
First published in Great Britain by Hamish Hamilton 2007
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flight, silhouetted in the primal

—PENNY RIMBAUD

WILD EARTH

ABSOLUTE TRUANCY

I felt its urgent demand in the blood. I could hear its call. Its whistling disturbed me by day and its howl woke me in the night. I heard the drum of the sun. Every path was a calling cadence, the flight of every bird a beckoning, the colour of ice an invitation: come. The forest was a fiddler, wickedly good, eyes intense and shining with a fast dance. Every leaf in every breeze was a toe tapping out the same rhythm and every mountaintop lifting out of cloud intrigued my mind, for the wind at the peaks was the flautist, licking his lips, dangerously mesmerizing me with inaudible melodies that I strained to hear, my ears yearning for the horizon of sound. This was the calling, the vehement, irresistible demand of the feral angel —*take flight*. All that is wild is winged—life, mind and language—and knows the feel of air in the soaring "flight, silhouetted in the primal."

This book was the result of many years' yearning. A longing for something whose character I perceived only indistinctly at first but that gradually became clearer during my journeys. In looking for wilderness, I was not looking for miles of landscape to be nicely photographed and neatly framed, but for the quality of wildness, which—like art, sex, love and all the other intoxicants—has a rising swing ringing through it. A drinker of wildness, I was tipsy with it before I began and roaring drunk by the end.

I was looking for the *will* of the wild. I was looking for how that will expressed itself in elemental vitality, in savage grace. Wildness is resolute for life: it cannot be otherwise, for it will die in captivity. It is elemental: pure freedom, pure passion, pure hunger. It is its own manifesto.

So I began this book with no knowing where it would lead, no idea how hard some of it would be, the days of havoc and

the nights of loneliness, because the only thing I had to hold on to was the knife-sharp necessity to trust to the elements my elemental self.

I wanted to live at the edge of the imperative, in the tender fury of the reckless moment, for in this brief and pointillist life, bright-dark and electric, I could do nothing else. By laying the line of my way along another, older path, I would lay my passions where they belonged, flush with wildness, letting their lines of long and lovely silk reel out in miles of fire and ice.

I felt that my blood could only truly flow if it coursed into red, red earth. That I would only know my deepest glee if I could dive in an oceanful of trilling fish. I wanted to climb mountains till I cracked with the same ancient telluric vigour that flung the Himalayas up to applaud the sky. I was, in fact, homesick for wildness, and when I found it I knew how intimately—how resonantly—I belonged there. We are charged with this. All of us. For the human spirit has a primal allegiance to wildness, to really live, to snatch the fruit and suck it, to spill the juice. We may think we are domesticated but we are not. Feral in pheromone and intuition, feral in our sweat and fear, feral in tongue and language, feral in cunt and cock. This is the first command: to live in fealty to the feral angel.

I wanted to put my cheeks against a glacier, to drink direct from hot springs, to see vistas untamed. It's ferocious, this feeling: vigorous and raw. Wanting to touch life with the quick of the spirit, to feel the wind in my hair, the crusts of mud under my fingernails, the sun on my naked body, ice cracking my lips, tides flooding my body inside and out. Immersion is all.

I sketched out my journeys according to four elements of ancient Greece, earth, air, fire and water, but adding ice as if it were an element in its own right, which in a landscape it is. The only chapter I never planned to write was the last. It

forced its way into the book, like a court jester with a dirty laugh and a deadly serious look in his eyes, leaping onto the stage just as Act Five was closing, and offering an answer to the deepest question: the quintessential coupling of wildness with life.

I took seven years over this work, spent all I had, my time, money and energy. Part of the journey was a green riot and part a deathly bleakness. I got ill, I got well. I went to the freedom fighters of West Papua and sang my head off in their Highlands. I got to the point of collapse. I got the giggles. I met cannibals infinitely kinder and more trustworthy than the murderous missionaries who evangelize them. I went to places that are about the worst in the world to get your period. I wrote notes by the light of a firefly, anchored a boat to an iceberg where polar bears slept, ate witchetty grubs and visited sea gypsies. I found a paradox of wildness in the glinting softness of its charisma, for what is savage is in the deepest sense gentle and what is wild is kind. In the end—a strangely sweet result—I came back to a wild home.

I wanted nothing to do with the heroics of the "solo expedition." There was no mountain I wanted to "conquer," no desert I wanted to be the "first woman to cross." I simply wanted to know something of the landscapes I visited and wanted to do that by listening to what the knowers of those lands could tell me if I asked. I was exasperated (to put it mildly) by the way that so many writers in the Euro-American tradition would write reams on wilderness without asking the opinion of those who lived there, the native or indigenous people who have a different word for wilderness: *home*. I was angered by the nineteenth-century Europeans who called a landscape a "hideous blank" and who, knowing nothing of the land, ascribed their ignorance to it. And I was enraged by the modern species of "adventurer" who risks killing "uncontacted" indigenous people by forcing themselves onto them.

From shamans in the Amazon I learned something of how the wastelands of the mind, its dark depressions, could be navigated and from them I learned to see the world through feral eyes, through the eyes of a jaguar. From Inuit people in the Arctic I learned something of the intricate ice and how all landscape is knowledgescape. From whales and dolphins I learned how much we do not know, the octaves of possibilities, the maybes of the mind. From Aboriginal people in Australia I learned the belowness of things, how land is heavy with significance and how it sings. From West Papuan people I learned how freedom is the absolute demand of the human spirit. From a Buddhist monk I learned that you can cycle on ice and fall off laughing. From indigenous people all over the world I learned that going out into the wilds is a necessary initiation and that for young people, lost in the wastelands of the psyche, the only medicine is the land. Everywhere, too, I learned of songlines, how people who know and love a land can hold it in mind as music.

As I went, I found myself increasingly needing to distinguish wildness from wasteland. Wastelands, such as forests razed to the ground, are the inscriptions of tragedy while wildness erupts with the raw carnival of comedy, laughing its socks off, grace notes galore, honouring the erotic. For wildness is flagrantly sexual—the longest passion of all species, the longing of the daffodil for the spring sun, the thirsting of all roots for water, the sensual relationship between humanity and nature, humming with it, earthy to the core.

To me, humanity is not a stain on wilderness as some seem to think. Rather the human spirit is one of the most striking realizations of wildness. It is as eccentrically beautiful as an ice crystal, as liquidly life-generous as water, as inspired as air. Kerneled up within us all, an intimate wildness, sweet as a nut. To the rebel soul in everyone, then, the right to wear feathers, drink stars and ask for the moon. For us all, the growl of the primal salute. For us all, for Scaramouche and Feste, for the scamp, tramp and artist, for the furious adolescent, the

travelling player and the pissed-off Gypsy, for the bleeding woman, and for the man in a suit, his eyes kind and tired, gazing with sad envy at the hippie chick with the rucksack. For us all, every dawn, the lucky skies and the pipes. Anyone can hear them if they listen: our ears are sharp enough to it. Our strings are tuned to the same pitch as the earth, our rhythms are as graceful and ineluctable as the four quartets of the moon. We are—every one of us—a force of nature, though sometimes it is necessary to relearn consciously what we have never forgotten; the truant art, the nomad heart. Choose your instrument, asking only: can you play it while walking?

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall," wrote Robert Frost in "Mending Wall." Something there is in me, in so many of us, that detests a wall. Or a fence, reservation or golf course. That detests the tepid world of net curtains and the dulled televisual torpor of mediated living, screened experience in two senses, both life lived via screens and life itself screened out.

I know this chloroform world where human nature is well schooled, tamed from childhood on, where the radiators are permanently on mild and the windows are permanently closed. School seemed to me little more than a trooping process to educate the young to the cautious life of temperate contentment. Everything was made into corridors: corridors of convention, corridors from term time to term time, corridors from school to university, corridors from sensibly studying maths to marrying an appropriate accountant. Intellectually, the corridors were supermarket aisles, tinned thought. Politically, the corridors offered one-brand, off-the-shelf, right-wing views. Outdoors the corridors were pavements of nonevents, pavements for those who take no risks. Pavements that trod past semi-detached houses, semi-the-same, semi-skimmed milk semi-tasted and always lukewarm. Emotions came only disinfected. The furies of grief or joy were somehow considered unhygienic, passion a nasty germ.

I was educated—as we all are—to stay inside, within the bounds of my tribe (physical bounds and intellectual bounds) and to stay within the protected zone, to let the traffic of routine smother desire for the real outside. I was taught—as we all are—to be scared of the prowling unknown, of the wild deserts of Beyond.

And we were taught to play golf. Golf epitomizes the tame world. On a golf course nature is neutered. The grass is clean, a lawn laundry that wipes away the mud, the insect, the bramble, nettle and thistle, an Eezy-wipe lawn where nothing of life, dirty and glorious, remains. Golf turns outdoors into indoors, a prefab mat of stultified grass, processed, pesticided, herbicided, the pseudo-green of formica sterility. Here, the grass is not singing. The wind cannot blow through it. Dumb of expression, greenery made stupid, it hums a bland monotone in the key of the mono-minded. No word is emptier than a golf *tee*. No roots, it has no known etymology, it is verbal nail polish. Worldwide, golf is an arch act of enclosure, a commons fenced and subdued for the wealthy, trampling serf and seedling. The enemy of wildness, it is a demonstration of the absolute dominion of man over wild nature.

So I wouldn't play golf, preferring to play Mozart as if he were the first of the great Romantics—it would have made a proper musician pale. I played Beethoven's furies and passions (badly) till I thought the piano would burst and detested the cool arithmetic Bach. I felt an unavoidable and total rejection of the nice, easy, convenient, narrow terms of life as offered, because those terms were stifling, life-reluctant, torpid.

I felt hungry. I've always been hungry. Whatever it is, I want more. When I was a child, it was a ferocious discontent: a feeling that this small and narrow place was not all, not nearly all and not nearly enough. There was a wide and wild world without, visible only through books, and though I could only see little fizzes of light from it like matches struck a mile away, I felt charged with desire for it.

There was a library in the house where I grew up. One wall was entirely covered with books, floor to ceiling. The children's books were on reachable shelves. I read them and stared upward for there, always out of reach, were the farther shores. I remember more than any other book the yellow spine that said *Seven Years in Tibet.* I climbed onto the filing cabinet, then up the shelves, fingertips on one shelf, toes on another, until about ten years old and ten feet in the air, I reached Tibet. But. If I let go with one hand to grab the book I would fall. I gazed at that spine for years. Tibet talked to me. Timbuktu too. Lapland lapped at the shores of my desire. Lhasa, Sahara and the Himalayas. Siberia and the road to Mandalay. When a maths teacher said to me in class that I'd understood her about as well as if she were from Outer Mongolia, I was thrilled to bits. I'd never heard of any such place and yet it existed now—*plink*—suddenly in my mind. I was swept away. Outer Mongolia must be at the edge of the world. She had given me an Ultima Thule and I wanted to go there. Percentages could wait.

I ran away (for a few hours) when I was nine to sleep in the wildest garden in the street—a three-acre jungle where a tramp lived in secret. I ran when I was seventeen, hitching around the country, pitching a tent at night. (I'm a runner; I've run for hours until my feet were bleeding.) When I was eighteen I tried to go to Tibet but only reached India. When I was twenty-four I went to Thailand, living for six months with the Karen hill tribe in the northern forests on the Burmese border.

That time was profoundly important to me. It was the first time I had properly lived without construction, without shops, money, towns, artifice. You live on the earth, in the seasons, right within nature because there is nothing that is not nature. You eat what is hunted—a wild cat once, bamboo rats, wild boar, including testicles. Rice with everything and sometimes only rice. For once, I felt what it was like to live essentially. Water was from a river, not a tap, fruit was from a tree, not a shop, and I felt life stripped, pared to the core. And while there

were footpaths, there were no enclosures.

I wanted to live for the fire though it burns you in the process. And it has. After I walked the Annapurna circuit in Nepal with dysentery, I ended up in hospital when I almost stopped being able to breathe. I lost all my toenails climbing down from the peak of Kilimanjaro. I had frostbite once and when I've had altitude sickness up mountains I've continued climbing to the point of utter recklessness. I've known what it is like to whimper with sheer loneliness on a Christmas Day in a jungle on the other side of the world. I've felt the fear of being ill alone when in Ladakh I contracted a sudden and shocking fever and, just before I became delirious, I scribbled a note containing my passport number, everything I could remember about getting ill and my medical insurance details, then pinned the letter to my shirt, left the door open and passed out for two days. The kindly hotel owner found me and came up every two hours with a huge pot of ginger tea.

My feeling for wilderness or wildness was both a revolt from something and an impulse towards. Towards unfetteredness, towards the sheer and vivid world. Towards the essential freedoms, freedom of water, of fire, of ice, of earth, of air. This is political, for both the site and the idea of freedom depend on free nature and for us to be truly free, nature must be unenclosed, untamed by road building, logging and mining. And in conversations with indigenous people around the world I have felt a savage fury as they are thrown off their lands. My feelings now, personal and political, run to a savage love, and a savage rage.

It is a rage against the cruelties committed for the sake of this bland consumer culture. A rage against the effects of factory farming, so a bird, flying exhausted, without seeds or hedge margins, drops out of the sky, falling dead to a desiccated earth. A rage against out-of-town shopping centres, placed on the last little chinks of commons, the wild places on the edge of towns where children play, teenagers fuck, the

homeless sleep and the artist idles into life. The commons up for sale—another enclosure. And the common flowers of the commons, sweet heathens, are rare now, and the sparrow, little brown jug of a bird, is scarce. A rage against the hollow men, the stuffed shirts who are the agents of the wasteland, making the Amazon arid and the Arctic an overheated suburbia.

When I was a small girl, awake on a long car journey one full-moon night while my brothers were fast asleep, I stared at the moon for hours, fascinated, compelled. I thought I was the moon's daughter. That common moon, that wild moon, belonged to me that night—and just as much it belonged to you. But the moon is being made a wasteland, a dustbin for detritus, the bibles and bunting of nationalist superiority. Outer space, the ultimate commons, the absolute wilderness, is being weaponized till there are rifles trained on every human being on earth and the stars look like searchlights.

There are two sides: the agents of waste and the lovers of the wild. Either for life or against it. And each of us has to choose.

DRINKING HEMLOCK AND STARS

The first part of this journey began by being lost. I had lost my way in a wasteland of the mind, in a long and dark depression, pathless, bleak and bewildered, not knowing which way to turn. Weeks leaked into months, lank and unlovely as greasy hair. I couldn't walk, couldn't write, and it felt as if I couldn't survive the violence of my unhappiness. I had a repeated image in my mind of a little night-light guttering in the wind and I had to wrap my hand around it to protect the tiny pale flame on the brink of being extinguished. I was protecting something very ancient and unmetropolitan: something shy, naked and elemental—the soul.

The sick body knows it lacks certain vitamins and minerals and seeks food containing them. As the body, so the soul. A handful of times in my life I have felt an absolute demand to go to a specific place or to know a specific person, recognizing immediately something my spirit needed. My journey to the forests began like this, in an imperative odyssey.

One May morning during this long depression I was sitting in my little rented flat in Hackney, in tears. The phone rang. It was an anthropologist I had never met but whose work with Amazonian shamans intrigued me and who had also admired my writing. He asked how I was, in the kind of voice that encourages an open response. I'm drowning, I choked.

He invited me to meet him in Peru the following September, to visit shamans he knew there, and to drink ayahuasca. Ayahuasca is a shamanic drug, the Amazon's most powerful medicine, which is used to treat—among many other things—depression.

Yes, I said.

Why don't you take a few days to think about it? he asked. It

would be an expensive flight, a big trip.

No, I said. I knew a lifeline when I was thrown one.

So I learned Spanish, withdrew all the money I had in the world, bought an open return, dubbined my boots and left.

The journey from Lima to the shamans' centre was long—a small plane, a car and a boat, a *peque peque*, one of the little motorized dugouts that zip up and down the rivers of the Amazon. The boatman dropped us off at a particular point of the riverbank where one of the shamans met us, and then we walked to their retreat, an area of natural hot springs. This retreat was called Mayantuyacu, meaning, in the Ashaninca language, "the water and the air"—a name that was so appropriate for my journey in the elements.

The walk to their centre was my first meeting with the Amazon; Amazon stinging, itching and stroking you with velvet; Amazon biting, scratching and softly feathering you; the whole forest winks at you, rubs your warm thighs and grins. A tree bark smelled of nutmeg; certain plants smelled of rotting flesh; there were flowers sweet as honey and a fungus smelling of old and thoughtful mould. I could smell a fine mist of rain and a sour smell from a plant here, a fetid smell from a pool there, the consoling smell of moss, the zinging smell of sap. I could almost smell the sunlight, heavy and lovely as hops.

Palm fronds rattled like a snare drum in the hot moistness. The tower of an oil exploration mast jagged the horizon. A dove fluted in the trees. Logs that had fallen over the path were worn down by the passage of feet. Dalila, sister of one of the shamans, screamed as she saw a poisonous snake. The shaman knelt by the path to pick up a dead toucan, which he had shot on his way down to the river.

When we arrived, the anthropologist, Jeremy Narby, who

had visited here before and worked on land rights for Amazonian people, was warmly welcomed back and Juan, the chief shaman, gave him an amulet whose base was the fossil of a prehistoric animal. It was adorned with agate, quartz and turquoise with guacamayo feathers, crocodile teeth and seeds at the cardinal points.

Juan was lying injured on a pallet in his house. A few weeks previously he had stepped off a path and straight into a trap set by a hunter. His leg had been splintered, he had lost a lot of blood and had nearly died. He interpreted his accident metaphorically: he had strayed a little way off his path in life.

Shamans say that ayahuasca shows you your path. Not "the" path, but your own. It is a songline of sorts, not as a map of the land but a map of your life. The songline can untie the choking riddles of your life and show you the winding way, deep in the green heart's forest, simple as sunlight and resonant with the motivation of a soul's journey.

Ayahuasca (pronounced "eye-er-*wass*-ka") is a powerful hallucinogenic drug widely used by shamans throughout South America. It is made from the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, boiled for twelve or more hours with certain other ingredients added and the bitter, foul-tasting liquid is drunk. It has many names, many properties; vine of visions, vine of souls. *Aya* means, in the Quechua language, spirit or ancestor or dead person, while *huasca* means vine or rope. It is thus sometimes known as the vine of the dead, because shamans say it puts you in touch with the ancestors, and through it they can communicate with the spirit world. (The name is perhaps influenced by the fact that drinking it can make you feel as if you're dying.) It is also known as *la purga*, the purge, for it dramatically courses through the body, often making the drinker vomit furiously. Perhaps the most common term for it, though, is *la medicina*, for it is used as a medical diagnostic tool, and as a curative for physical and psychological problems. Noe Rodriguez Jujuborre, a healer of the Muinane people of Colombia, told

me once that under its influence, he sees the diagnosis of an illness, and the image of the plant that will cure it is "imprinted on my mind."

So that night I would drink ayahuasca. It was dusk and the insects of twilight were hissing and thrumming and all the forest's night players were coming to life, the fizzy, zestful *chicharras*, cicadas, were fermenting their song and frogs honked, bellowing for a mate. I took my notebook with me as ever, though writing anything in the near-coma that ayahuasca induces was hard.

In Juan's hut there were rugs, blankets and mattresses around the walls, with buckets if anyone needed to vomit. As well as Juan, there was another shaman, Victor, and an apprentice who poured out measures of ayahuasca into a carved wooden cup, like an egg cup. Just before I drank, I felt a vertiginous fear; this is a "pure alkaloid poison," I remembered reading, and the hallucinations may be terrifying. But then, I thought, my journey of depression was already frightening and I already felt poisoned. I drank. It was like drinking hemlock and stars; as foul as the one, as brilliant as the other.

Juan began to sing an *icaro*—a gentle song, thin as the wind in the reeds, ethereal, sweet and far away. As he sang, he repeated the word *ayahuasca* like an invocation; its sound onomatopoeic, soft and shimmering, a word of whispers and mystery.

Suddenly I wanted to be outside and I left the hut and went to watch the mists rise from the hot springs. After a while, Victor followed me out, asking if I was *mareada* (seasick). At first I didn't understand what he meant, but a few seconds later I felt a wave of strangeness and dizziness; then the visions began. I knew a little about the typical ayahuasca visions, of snakes, plants, eyes and rivers, but I was entirely unprepared for the visions I had. Garish and cartoonish, they were a

kaleidoscope of tourist-shop junk, silly plastic toys, giddily repeating, row on row of fake London street-name plaques, tawdry key rings, cartoon traffic wardens with seaside-postcard bottoms. I felt mocked by the ugliness and stupidity of the city I had left. I've never taken acid, but I know of acid visions, and this seemed to belong in that category; a Xeroxed crazy paving, a zigzagging shopping arcade, jangling with febrile urban banality, the jag of enervation, the blaring buzzing of nothing, in a chivvying, gridlocked triviality.

I was grateful that Victor had followed me out and during the next hours I felt that he had not only found me physically but also psychologically. He put his hands on either side of my head and pressed his lips to my head and sucked. Then, still holding my head, he turned his face to the sky and spat out his breath far away. Each time he did that, my head felt cool at that spot. It felt as if he was sucking out of my head poisoned needles, some five inches long, hard and thin, dangerously sharp splinters.

We talk of being "stabbed in the back" by someone, being "needled" or "knifed" by someone's words. We refer to "barbed" remarks. Language is wise to the mind's experience and I had felt, as many people have, that such sharp, thin spikes had been shot straight into my head, where they lodged, creating the infection of depression and nothing I could do would dislodge them. My mind had been knifed. "An ugly word can be like the scratch of a needle on the lung," wrote Ibsen in *An Enemy of the People*. It felt now as if Victor were sucking out Ibsen's needles, saying, as he did so, "They're gone. Just gone. Away."

As I later learned, Amazonian shamans "use" such splinters or darts, either throwing them to injure someone or, as in Victor's case, extracting them from someone who has been wounded. I had "seen" these in the mind's eye, and experienced them as a powerful metaphor, before I'd had any idea that this was a common perception to them.

Then I nearly fainted, and Victor yanked me up from the earth and pulled me back into Juan's hut, where I collapsed on a mattress.

Depression is a wasteland all of its own. No animation, no vivacity. The psyche, hurt badly enough, will withdraw and won't come back easily—or, for some, at all. Like a plant without sap, the body is without dynamism, flair or potency and the psyche wanders far away, lost and lonely. Before I went to the Amazon, I wouldn't have used the term *soul loss*, because I'd never heard of the concept. Nor did I know anything about the "soul retrieval" practised by shamans, who understand that if a person's soul is lost, it takes a sure-footed and skilful traveller in the landscape of the mind to find it. In the Amazon, shamans undertake these journeys into the deep forests of the psyche; they say they see their way to search for a soul as you would see a path in a dream, finding their way in the wildernesses of the human mind.

Previously, if I had believed in a soul, it would have seemed implacably bound to one's body till death. Now, though, *soul loss* is a term I would consider because that night I felt that my soul was found. I felt as if I were in a deep river, drowning, and that in these seasick visions Victor had sent his soul out of himself to come and find mine. I was too weak, too far gone in ayahuasca even to hear the *icaros* that Juan was singing. "Try to concentrate on the songs, use them like a rope to climb out of a bad place," said Victor, but I couldn't. He poured a little water on my head and it was like a benediction. "*Más tranquillo*," he said, gently. Be calmer. The words were half command, half comfort. They were like water when he spoke them, the quiet drops of water in the syllables of his words like the water on my head.

He held my face in his hands and I could feel his strength passing into me. For a shining moment, I felt as if I saw his soul in the river where I was drowning and he rose to his waist out of the water—so he came to me and in doing so he healed

the devastation of my isolation. In finding me, he brought me back, unlonely. Then—*vamoosh*—on the instant the job was done, he was gone.

Day came up in a surge of song. When the creatures of the morning come to life, they soar for the dawn as if there's never been a sunrise before and today is the only day there'll ever be; they clamber out of the cocoon of night to shout up the day, swelling with warmth and light, and the hummingbird, for whom sunlight is the first and most necessary nectar of the day, bathes in the sun which warms it enough to give it first flight. (The hummingbird stores no fat so if it cannot find flowers it will die. It "hibernates" every night, waiting for the first sunlight to warm its wing muscles enough to fly to a flower.)

I heard the bird that sounds like a xylophone underwater and all the jungle birds were singing, in rattles and squeaks and octave-sliding hoots and whistles like a joke shop full of ten-year-olds.

The depression that had so darkened me for months had gone, and though during my months in Peru I had a persistent worry that it would return, it did not and I was free of it for years. I said my good-byes to Jeremy and stayed on in the Amazon, my spirit as green, happy and elastic as a grasshopper in summer, tromboning in the grass.

TELLURIC THOUGHT

The world is wild-minded. Thought dialects thrive unknown to us: ants with their dictionary of pheromones; the dogged bee, trundling from flower to flower, for whose mind all that is not scent and colour and waggle dance is mere refuse. "Wildness is the state of complete awareness. That's why we need it," writes Gary Snyder. Indigenous people have long extended their intellectual horizons by learning from the minds of other creatures. Claude Lévi-Strauss commented that many plants and animals were totemic because they were "good to think with." The Amazon forest itself, according to a Desana elder, "is a wide expanse, similar to a perceptive human head."

But the Western way of knowing has denied validity to every mind save its own. Socrates, pithily summing up an entire way of thinking, said, "I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in town do." Descartes said grimly that the aim of knowledge was to be "masters and possessors of nature." For the rationalists of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century, there was a hatred of "enthusiasm," for its emotional, wild surges of knowing were too natural, too bodily, too animal. Rationalism demanded superiority to, and separation from, nature and nature's ways of knowing. The primacy given to literacy and the superior quality ascribed to written text over spoken words has deafened us to other voices and persuaded us that our meanings are the only ones that matter. So rooted is the idea that nature is stupid that one word for an idiot is a *natural*. Words for wisdom in the thesaurus include virtually no natural referents, whereas *fool* is full of them: "ass, donkey, goat, goose, owl, cuckoo … greenhorn, calf, colt, buzzard, clod-poll, clod, clod-hopper, bull-calf, bull-head, moon-calf."

In the Amazon it is not so. Here there is telluric thought, sunk deep in the earth, a wild way of knowing so utterly different from that of the West that while we use the term

vegetable for a comatose mind and *vegging out* as a slang term for mindless laziness, in the Amazon the wisest men and women are called *vegetalistas*—plant experts steeped in plant knowledge. But there's more: people don't just learn *about* plants, they learn *from* certain plants called "plant teachers" or *doctores*, which teach people medicine. This is a contradiction in terms to the Western mind—it balks at there being intelligence in anything other than humankind. But to shamans who use it (*ayahuasqueros*) the vine is a wild intelligence of a vegetable kind. (Once in another part of the Amazon, drinking ayahuasca with a shaman, I "saw" a crown of speaking leaves on my head, vibrant in eloquence. The shaman interpreted it as an image of knowledge: the plants would speak and I should learn.)

Chief Luther Standing Bear, of the Native American Lakota people, wrote that for "the old Indian … to sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply" and the earth was "a library, and its books were the stones, leaves, grass, brooks, and the birds and animals." In Russian, the term *Zapovednick* is a fourteenth-century concept denoting a protected land, and the root of the word means "knowing," as environmental historian Malcolm Draper points out.

Trees have long been associated with knowledge; the Buddha meditated under a tree and sought wisdom from it. In India, Saddhus have always retreated to the forests for wisdom; the pipal tree signifies universal wisdom and in traditional Indian thought, trees, in their previous lives, were great philosophers. The English language recognizes an association between wisdom and trees: an idea "takes root"; a book has "leaves"; a small book is a "leaflet"; an avid reader is a "bookworm"; you "branch out" into a new area of study—and even corporate language doffs its cap in the form of Amazon.com.

University thinking is "drily" academic and the term is important. Western ways of knowing use dryness not only for

practical reasons (the dry books in dry libraries) but also because dryness itself is a characteristic of the unwild environment, no rain, no rivers, no lips. In the Amazon, by contrast, knowledge is wild and wet. Amazonian shamans feel they are drinking knowledge when they take ayahuasca and they say they are inebriated or "drunk" in trance. Their knowledge is passed on orally, wet and fluent from lip to lip, and in practical terms, knowledge travels along the liquid, flowing rivers, the communication system of the forests.

To the missionaries, this wild and wet knowledge was devilish: knowledge should come from dry Bible paper, made from dead trees, or be given soberly on dry stone tablets, not drunk, drunkenly, from the moist world of living plants. Christianity, like every other ancient system of thought, equated trees with knowledge, but—peculiarly—it chose to associate the Tree of Knowledge with *sin*.

A "wise man" of the Aguaruna people pointedly sums up his people's history of thought: they gained knowledge from plants, particularly ayahuasca and tobacco, but the end was abrupt: "This took place until 1953, when the school system of education began and the ILV prohibited the drinking of those plants." ILV is the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a right-wing American missionary outfit, responsible for cultural genocide. They consider indigenous knowledge evil in itself, because it deals with the relationship between the visible world and the spiritual world. For the Ashaninca, the story was the same: you cannot find *ayahuasqueros* or *tabaqueros* "unless you go looking in the deepest forests, where there are no schools." But if you do find such people, they will tell you of different ways of knowing. The Western way, they say, is merely theoretical; their own way is better, for it is both spiritual and practical, involving a constant moral dimension that includes respect for nature. Knowledge of successful hunting is knowledge of ethical hunting—because a hunter must learn never to be greedy, for instance. But with the arrival of missionaries and government

agents and Western school systems, “we were taught to feel shame for our old beliefs.”

There is a certain bitter irony in the fact that now prospectors come from pharmaceutical companies in order to exploit wild and public indigenous knowledge of plant medicine. “They rob us and make large amounts of money from our knowledge,” I was told. Not for nothing is wild knowledge called “common knowledge.” Common knowledge is free, open, unenclosed—and “free” financially: it must not be bought or sold for profit. But now in the Amazon an act of enclosure is taking place—people’s common knowledge is exploited for commercial gain, often privatized with the patent laws, which are the PRIVATE: KEEP OUT signs in the open fields of knowledge.

Literacy is an epistemology of the built world, physically, in libraries in towns, but metaphorically too, the constructed artifice of our written culture, book-bound, which encourages our philosophies and values to move ever farther away from nature—to say nothing of the constructs of deconstructionism and postdeconstructionism.

I was tired of the tamed thinking and desiccated worlds of dry books, and I was following that wild call, familiar to us all: the young, the old, the sad, the curious, the footloose and all who yearn just to bugger off for a while. It is an ancient need, made heroic in the past: the anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr, in *Dreamtime*, writes, “Yvain, Lancelot, Tristan left culture behind to become mad in the wilderness. Only after having become wild could they rise to the rank of knight. Following this same path, the Tungus shaman runs out into the wilderness … until he finds … the ‘animal mother’ … and has experienced his ‘wild,’ his ‘animal aspect.’”

Go to the wilds. The Amazon drew me and, once there, held me fascinated.

ON THE RÍO MARAÑÓN

After some time, I went north, with an Aguaruna woman, to the river where she was born on a tributary of the Río Marañón. She was taking twelve chickens and several baskets of chicks to communities in her area and the journey took days; by plane and then by bus, crowded with people, parrots and puppies and a man selling antiparasite pills. After the bus, a long car journey took us to the banks of the Marañón and she introduced me to the river as if to a close friend. We took a *peque peque* upriver.

Small, shiny children were playing like otters on the riverbanks and a dugout canoe softly paddled along the shoreline with a man at the back and an alert little dog at the front. There were biscuit wrappers in the water and trees dripping with moss and vines. A log, fallen in the river, looked like an alligator. If you come here without permission, you may well see your last arrow here; the Aguaruna shoot people who come uninvited. A little boy in a red T-shirt was fishing with a line from a canoe and a mother, surrounded by children, washed clothes. Smoke rose into low clouds from isolated shacks and "Bar. Rest" was marked incongruously on one hut. One of the chickens tried to eat my boots and a buzzard hovered over the bank. Bright green plastic Portakabin toilets, government-provided, stood in a comical row. They were locked. It didn't matter; no one in their right mind would want to use one of them, because if used they smelled awful and attracted mosquitoes. Outdoors, all excrement is gone in hours.

We began having trouble negotiating a shallow part of the river, until a couple of men appeared on the banks and shouted directions to us. After many hours, we reached the first of the communities Chinita wanted to visit, and we pulled up at the bank. A fishing net hung from a tree to dry, and close to it, a man was fishing. The river, canoe, man, paddle and line

together created the elegance of sheer simplicity. There was a concrete schoolhouse, with iron bars on the windows. It was nearly evening and fires were lit, Aguaruna style, three logs pushed, tips together, so that one end of each log smouldered in the fire. Someone fanned the fire with a fan made from bird feathers sewn together. There was an accidental frog in the soup and a rat in the bedroom and on the steps crouched two huge rainbow-coloured insects with fluorescent eyes.

Apart from the rivers, people can communicate here through jungle drums, made from dugout trees. The Aguaruna traditionally have three messages. The first is a lively dancing rhythm, an invitation to a fiesta. The second is for emergencies, a rapid series of sharp knocks. The third is a steady, calling song, which means that ayahuasca is ready. One man showed me how to play a tortoiseshell like a violin. With beeswax on the tortoise's arse, and using the edge of your palm like a violin bow, you draw your hand over it, scraping it till it sounds like a haunting violin string.

People talked fearfully of a religious sect that lives close to Aguaruna land and they were worried these people would start to build roads through the forests, which the Aguaruna are emphatically against. I mentioned Britain's anti-road protesters, and they were tickled pink at the idea of people living in treehouses to stop a road. But when I told them that some people had made tunnels and lived underground to prevent building work, they lay back and hooted with laughter.

At night, the palm trees were like fish bones, lively verdant skeletons, and Chinita and I swam in the river under a bright moon, while the stars vied with the fireflies on the riverbanks. There are parrots that sing at night, and their song is pure laughter.

We journeyed on, going to the confluence of two rivers for a rendezvous with a friend of Chinita's. At the rivers-meet, there

was a sinister office building on the riverbank. It had been built by the Sendero Luminoso (the Shining Path guerrilla movement) and used for bulk coca transactions for cocaine. Most people happily chew coca; unprocessed and in small quantities, it's mild as tea, and is part of Amazonian culture. When coca is processed in large quantities for cocaine, though, the trade is dangerous and frightening for local people. Inside the building was a desk, a chair, a fridge and a pink plastic piggy bank. Chinita's friend was late and we spent hours and hours plagued by mosquitoes, listening to the wails of a funeral coming from a village in the distance; an old man had died of cancer the previous day and the forest was full of weeping. People here don't fear death, said Chinita: it's a "crossing to the other side" like crossing a river.

Chinita's friend arrived and we left together to go to another village to stay a night, but going upriver our *peque peque* ran out of petrol so we stopped by a tiny path on the muddy bank and went to the nearest hut to buy some. We were invited in to eat and drink; someone passed me water in a large hollow gourd and I played face-pulling games with a five-year-old girl. A big moth fluttered by and she caught it and pulled it apart matter-of-factly. There was a woman there, in her mid-thirties, with feet worn like leather from a shoeless life. Her heel was cracked as leather cracks; an unhealable split, deep into her sole. She scraped tiny mites out of my legs, which had bitten me and left dozens of swollen, itchy spots.

Outside, the moon was bright over the misty river. *Zapetas* (crickets) chuckled, and the lechusa bird called *wow* from deep in the forest. A storm crashed through the night.

People talked about the illegal gold miners in Aguaruna land and told me in angry indignation how functionaries from a mining company would fly helicopters over Aguaruna land, prospecting. One helicopter had landed, and the Aguaruna kidnapped everyone on board, except the pilot, whom they ordered to go back wherever he came from and fetch 13,000

soles, or £3,000, and return with this ransom; only then would the hostages be released. They were understandably proud of this, one of the few times when forest people have been able to robustly defend themselves.

In some areas, Aguaruna women are committing suicide because their culture is becoming "rotten" or "broken"—devastated by European contact, when their lands are threatened. Here, deep in the heart of Aguaruna territory, it seems impossible to believe, but the edges of their lands are where people feel most vulnerable.

The days stretched into weeks, in the elastic time of wild lands, and we travelled farther and farther north until we got close to the Ecuadorean border. Here, there was a problem. The border guards were used to Aguaruna people paddling up and down the river but no Europeans ever come here, they told me. They were very suspicious. They called their chief. He studied my passport and didn't like the look of it at all. We talked. Nothing doing. So I took the only option and gently, firmly and unstoppably flirted with him. We went on our way, with his blessing.

Lianas the height of a three-storey house dropped from tree branches into the waters and much farther upriver a man rafted past us, his craft made of bamboo with a small four-poster "wigwam" on the back. Our boat nuzzled its way into the mud of the riverbank and we went to visit a village, where people kept pigs, on reins, in the houses. I forgot to take off my sunglasses and a small child cried at the sight of me. "You look like a huge insect," I was told. We stopped for the night and stayed with a herbalist, whose knowledge of local plants was famous up and down the river.

Another night we stayed with relatives of Chinita's, whose house was full of chickens, children, cats, dogs and pigs. In the evening we ate hot banana soup, and oil lanterns lit the night as the fishing nets were hung out to dry. A small girl, with a

WILD LANGUAGE

Language expresses itself in the rivers. News travels along the rivers in the Amazon; communication and travel is primarily by boat, but beyond the practical reasons there is a deep affinity between rivers and language. Rivers flow like language—we say that someone is "fluent" in a language, their speech flows like a river. Languages, like rivers, run roughly the same course, but always change their details: you never step into the same language twice, because a meaning has newly shifted here, a connotation has just been formed there. Rivers and language are both gloriously wild. Careless of their courses, rivers won't run straight. Both languages and rivers are extravagant—who cares how a river wastes its meanderings? Who asks why language wastes its windings in splendid, luxurious, uneconomic curls of meanings? And then there are rivers that double back, meet themselves returning from an aside in the conversation they were having with the land. Picture a river that gradually makes a loop, like a U in a line. Then imagine how, in a season of fast-flowing water, the river would push for a more direct route, going straight from one tine to the other without flowing down and up the U. Then, after a while, the old loop would be cut off from the main line that the river is now following. Similarly language, finding a more rapid route to communicate, will leave unused obsolete words behind, still in the dictionary and perhaps in memory but no longer in the *currency* of language where language is flowing fastest.

Land seems to cross-fertilize language and language the land in an intricate chiasmus of mind and wildness, each a simile for the other. Land likens to language as the viridian green lichens onto trunks; creamy olive mould molds the fungus on the bark; the young green shoot shoots first and later asks questions of the sun, and the radical green root roots itself, complicated, into the simple earth. And the roots of words reach deep down into the earthy past. New leaves, cocky as

new words, shine and gleam with sheer delight at being green, and chlorophyll spins sunlight to greenness in lively wordplay, a pun spun of the sun to make "life" from "light."

Metaphor is where language is most wild, spirited and free, leaping boundaries, and it may be no surprise that Amazonian languages can be as matted and dense with metaphor as the forest is tangly with vegetation. The Amazon seems a place of boundless allusion, this unfenced wild, where meaning is twined within meaning; words couple and double, knotted together. The wind twists a leaf's meaning and rain reflects the sheer fertility of language romping from sky to forest and back again. As metaphoric meaning is tucked behind revealed meaning, so the vivid green and wild language of allusion sings on the far side of the obvious, as mind is behind face.

The anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff wrote breathtaking studies of the layered and allusive languages and thoughtways of the Amazonian people of Colombia, describing how they merge meanings into richly suggestive textures of thought, as association, that wild bindweed of language, makes one thing cling to another. "To be shining" or "to be resplendent" in the Tukano language is, for example, a metaphor for sexual arousal and erection. It takes five pages for him even to begin to describe the elegant and profound associations, through allusion and symbolism, of just one tree, to show how the "bow wood tree," or jacaranda, represents maleness, dominance, aggression and procreative energy. It also suggests a "package" and "thunder," "pollination" and the "semen spurt." So many concepts are held in one tree, says Reichel-Dolmatoff, that it suggests "dimensions of mind hardly suspected." Language reveals depth on depth of enfolded intimacy—softly erotic—between people and nature. He writes of the *uacú* seed, which can refer to sex, because that seed is reminiscent of a deer hoof; the deer hoof leaves a scent trail, the deer smells like the *uacú* seed and like a woman's cunt, while the V-shaped imprint of the deer hoof is like the shape of a woman's legs or the imprint of her buttocks in sand.

Reichel-Dolmatoff meticulously details one word root, *ahp*, which is the basis of words associated with hallucinogenic drugs, sex and creativity in the Desana language. *Ahpi* is coca, and *gahpi* is *Banisteriopsis caapi*, the narcotic vine used for ayahuasca. *Ahp* is the root of several words referring to sexual anatomy, including *ahpiri*, breast, womb; *ahpiru*, nipple; *ahpirito*, testicles; *yahpi*, vulva and *gahki*, penis. *Ahpiri*, meanwhile, means to create, and *ahpari* means to be essential. To me all these suggest wildness; the wild-mindedness of hallucinogens, the wildness of sex, the unboundedness necessary to creativity, and the essentialness of them all.

In the Congolese forests there are similarly dense textures and clusters of meanings in the Kikongo language and in Malaysia, traditionally, people going to get camphor from the forests had to propitiate the spirits of the forest by using a special allusive language called *bassa kapor*, camphor language; obsolete dialects mixed with Malayan words twisted from their original meaning. Language in forests flourishes in complexity and diversity and allusive meaning.

Green is around you, green above you, green below you in the Amazon; and in at least one Amazonian language, green is not a colour term—as if green, being everywhere, is the one colour not described; rather it is the norm from which others diverge. Reichel-Dolmatoff writes of the Desana language that "*Yahsári* … applied to a pale green … is not a colour term; the stem is *gah, goh,* 'to germinate, to sprout,' related to *gohséri*, 'to shine.' The term is used in shamanic language when referring to the colour of young coca leaves."

Intriguingly, if you look up *green* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, you find something wonderfully similar. *Green* is from an Old Teutonic root *grô,* the same root for *grow* and *grass*. The rainforest is profligate with its greenness: the colour of wildness, which grins and gurns, green the fire in the eyes, green the vivid shoot, green the light pouring through leaves, green the verb here; to grow is to green.

In the English language, colours are separate from one another; the words *white, yellow, red, green, blue* and *brown* are distinct terms which do not merge into one another. In the Desana language, Reichel-Dolmatoff shows, colour terms melt into one another in a spectrum where one word gently hints at both the previous term and the subsequent term, just as colours themselves softly shift from one to another, yellow turning into orange into red. In this, the Desana language faithfully and subtly follows the truth of nature.

Thus: *bo'ré gohseró* means yellow-bright, for example sun rays;
bo'ré yahsáro means yellow-greenish;
yahsári-da means greenish-blue—for example, an aspect of moonlight; and
bo'ré yahsá diabiríro means yellow-greenish-strengthened-with-red.

For indigenous peoples of the Vaupés River, nature is bursting with significance: shamans, concerned with the symbolic value of the forest's creatures, could be irritated if others only saw the physical or economic aspects of animals rather than their value as carriers of image and meaning. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphor, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind." The wild vision sees that nature, by relation and by association, is a metaphor for our truths, the slanted, hidden, enfolded truths of the spirit, and—as I was to discover dramatically—an emblem for our transformings.

One thing has struck me in virtually every indigenous community I've ever visited: when people are having a conversation in their own language and intermittently dip into the dominant language (Spanish in the Amazon, English in Australia or the Canadian Arctic, Thai among the indigenous

Today the Amazon is full of mute inglorious Clares whose silenced words would sing the songlines of a stolen world if they could. For them, their lands had been lit with meaning, glowing with signs and messages, imbued with symbolic thought and without land, they say, they *are* not. Over three hundred people from the Guarani-Kaiowá people in Brazil committed suicide between 1986 and 1999. "Without land, the Indian becomes sad and begins to lose his language. He starts to speak with the borrowed language of the white man. He loses the memory of his people. Without lands … he starts to die," said Severino, president of Aty-Guasú, the traditional assembly of the Guarani.

The world's forests have not only been stolen, they have been badly misrepresented, portrayed as thickets dense with unmeaning, a glum dumbness mute as doom. Joseph Conrad did all jungles a terrible disfavour by his insistence on their inarticulacy, because he lacked the skills and experience to hear them and wanted them for a hollow echo to his story. He describes forests—"the wilderness without a sound"—with the shadow words, the negative prefixes *in-, im-, un-, op-:* "oppressive," "the extremity of an impotent despair," "the silent wilderness … invincible," "an empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest."

The desire to tame what was wild—so strong in the days of empire—included a desire to tame the wildness of all languages, *even* the languages of empire. Philologist Otto Jespersen, in 1905, used land images to contrast French and English. French, he said, was like the formal, regulated gardens of Louis XIV, in contrast to the wild and open commons of the English *langscape*, "laid out seemingly without any definite plan, and in which you are allowed to walk everywhere according to your own fancy without having to fear a stern keeper inforcing rigorous regulations."

One reason for the massive project of the *Oxford English Dictionary* was a hatred of the wilderness of the English

language. Wailed a pamphleteer, “We have neither Grammar nor Dictionary, neither Chart nor Compass, to guide us through the wide sea of Words.” It was an attempt to fix the language, to fence it, to delineate it and establish its limits. The result was the opposite. The decades of work, the proliferation of page upon page, book upon book, edition upon edition, was glorious proof that language was unfixable and nomadic, wildly profuse and forever free.

Meanwhile, back in the Amazon, my perception could not have been more different from Conrad’s: to me the forests seemed a riot of language in irrepressible gusto, life growling, flowering, leafing, hooting, wriggling and budding, flickering in a forest fiesta of verdant and noisy verbs. Far from Conrad’s silence, it is a musical place, the tickety chopping sound of leaves in a breeze, the Messiaenic birdsong in the canopies. Even in dead leaves or the carcass of a bird killed by a jaguar, life speaks out its stories, liana tangled, turquoise and elastic, the parrots that mimic a waterfall or a raindrop in a pool and would mimic the sunrise itself if they could; the tumescent and stretchy growths on trees; nests of tiny glistening worms, or thick snakes on a cold slink. Suddenly, bolt upright with curiosity, a monkey glances down at you, its eyes wide and its paws tapping a tattoo on the branches; the forest is chattering with language, a whole universe laughing with life.

GREEN SONGLINES

One evening at the end of our river journey, Chinita and I went to meet the local healer, or *curandero*, to drink ayahuasca. At dusk we were led down a steep path of thin, gnarly tree roots away from the village to a place apart—a small shelter by the river, with a sloping palm-leaf roof and a log to lean your toes against. The whole front was completely open onto the river and while we waited for the *curandero* we watched bats flutter and moths fly, carelessly thrilled by the full moon. The *curandero* was a small walleyed man in wonky boxer shorts, with a plastic Pepsi bottle of ayahuasca. The moment he arrived, he rubbed my arm and I loved his touch. It was warm, honest and healing. He spoke no Spanish so he talked to me via Chinita about depression, nodding and understanding. You are woundable, he said, succinctly.

He was too scared to call himself an *ayahuasquero* and wouldn't sing the *icaros*, for fear. He had good reason. When missionaries first came to his lands, they brought new sicknesses to the people which the shamans did not know how to cure. This severely undermined the status of the shamans. The racism of the Europeans added to the effect—the Collins Spanish dictionary shamefully translates *curandero* as "quack." But most devastatingly of all, ten to fifteen years previously, missionaries in this area had persuaded the Aguaruna to think their shamans were harming them so the Aguaruna killed their own wisest men. The missionaries, brutal and proud of their ignorance, murdered this gentle, deep knowledge and, bawling out their fatuous hymns, strangled the shamans' ethereal songs to silence.

I met many shamans in the Amazon, very different in their lives and temperaments, but there is a certain expression they share, something I saw in all their eyes, something long-sighted and intense: they were magnets to dreams. If you were a dream, it would be their sleep you'd swim towards, their minds

you'd yearn to be dreamt in. Some Amazonian people call their shamans *soñadores*—dreamers—because they use their dreams to tell the future, to foresee hunting, to prophesy rain, and they aid people by the interpretation of dream language. Shamans have an immediate rapport with wildness, with wild mind in all its forms. They look as if they see the skeleton through the skin, the motive behind the gift, the pattern through the chaos, the death behind life, the life behind death, the invisible world behind the visible one. "Desana shamans say that, in order to be able to live well in the visible world, one must look at it through insights gained in the invisible world," writes Reichel-Dolmatoff.

They live on the edge, between the village and the forest, in the twilight borders between worlds, between the living and the dead, between the song-lines and the plastic Pepsi bottle, between sickness and health, between appearance and reality, between dreams and waking, between metaphor and matter. They are messengers, relating, telling, revealing and interpreting; they are travellers, moving between worlds. They are beyonders.

And they are the singers of the songlines of the Amazon. In the jungles, the drum. Shamans' songs, the *icaros*, are an extraordinary, wild music. Ethereal, quiet almost to inaudibility, they are sometimes whistled, sometimes voiced, and sometimes they sound like panpipes from miles away, music half-heard from a source unknown, where melody is more like scent, a sweet resin in the air from an unseen tree. The songs are wakeningly strange and dreamingly familiar. It is an Ariel enchantment, these "airs" of music, soft as smoke, curling and rising through the air and dissolving into it. A shaman in trance often draws on a reefer of pure tobacco and whistles out the smoke so you can almost see the shape of the melody in the smoke he breathes. The word *icaro* seems to be a loan word from the Quichua (a Quechua dialect) verb *ikaray*, "to blow smoke in order to heal."

one plant's relationship to other plants and not only differentiates one plant from another but distinguishes between the uses of, for example, stem or leaf or root of the same plant. There is practical wisdom here but also psychological wisdom: you find your way and learn how to live unlost, not *through* the wild forest but *within* it. The songlines harmonize people with environment. There is no divide. Mankind is a full-singing part, not discordant but as necessary—and as beautiful—as a violin to an orchestra.

For the Yanesha people of eastern Peru, the songs are the result of an individual quest often involving hardship, fasting, sexual abstinence, vigil and drugs, done in order to obtain the revelation of a song. Anthropologist Hugh Brody writes of the Dunne-za people, of northeast British Columbia, "Powerful dreamers are the Dunne-za equivalent of shamans. … An elder once told me that those dreamers function rather like tape-recorders: they record a dream-song as they sleep, and find that they can play it back in the daytime." They are songlines, for through them the dreamers find a path to reach an animal they want to hunt. Brody writes, "The most powerful of Dunne-za dreamers … reported that they had found routes to heaven. This was a shamanic response to missionary ideas: if there was a trail to be discovered, the dreamer must find it."

Drinking ayahuasca can seem like being in a wilderness all of its own: while you are entranced you can feel bewildered and scared, as if you were lost in the forest and could see no path. But, shamans say, the *icaros* will guide you, the songs are the path, the songlines of the soul's journey. They can seem horizontal—a pathway through a mental state, a melodic map of mindedness so the psyche need not be lost. But they can also seem vertical—as if someone threw you a vine, a well-twisted rope, to climb upward, a lifeline, a vital liana for the mind to cling to, strong, green and true.

When I first went to Peru, I had lost my way, lost my path. Ayahuasca was the first lifeline thrown to me. Ayahuasca is

made from a vine and is known by many metaphoric names, including the "vine of life," but metaphors themselves are known in at least one indigenous language as "twisted language," like a twisted vine, or a rope well twisted to be stronger—metaphor itself is a rope by which the mind can swing from one thought to another. The second lifeline thrown to me was the songs themselves. "Hold on to the *icaros*," Victor had said, and after a while I understood how you could focus on them, clutching them in your mind. Juan sang with compelling passion, as if he drew up all his kindness and strength and made it into good solid rope: if you are really lost, it is only love that can find you.

The *icaros* that Juan sang were of his locale, the particular stream, particular hills and particular plants he knew. In singing them, he made his land quite literally en-chanted. The Kuna people of Panama similarly have songs that describe real places in the jungle, and they also have "curing chants," which contain their most secret and most profound knowledge. But the younger generation are no longer learning the songs. They have little knowledge of the forests, so the chants are almost meaningless. And without the songs, the land in turn has little meaning.

Songlines offer meaning to wild places. Wastelands, by contrast, are places where there are no songlines, devastated places unpathed with song, unen-chanted, the wastelands of missionary activity silencing earth wisdom, the devastated land whose meaning is destroyed by logging and mining. Mind, though, courses through wild places in those who, like the shamans, sing up the world and realize it in song.

“IF YOU GO TO THE RIVER MOUTH …”

“If you go to the river mouth you will become the owner of machetes but if you go to the headwaters, you will become the owner of feather crowns.”

Rain fell softly in the night, precious and simple. In the morning, Chinita and I bathed in the stream, swam to a small waterfall, then walked back to the village where the boatman had packed up the boat and was ready to leave. So we journeyed on, following a different river’s course, both of us shining with post-ayahuasca serenity. There was a sudden squawk and we all looked up, surprised. None of us knew we still had a chicken in the canoe. We passed rapids and whirlpools. At certain times of the year the water here was high and dangerous: seven people had drowned here six months before. The boatman read the river, working out a route that was deep enough for the motor, but not over rocks or rapids. The chicken, its feet tied together, looked as if it was almost dead from the heat and we periodically dangled it in the water to keep it alive. As we went, a strong gusting wind began whipping up squalls of rain.

After weeks of green in the forests, and seeing nothing larger than the tiny hamlets along the riverbanks, I was unprepared for our next port of call. It was a small town. When we arrived, we were told that the wind had just overturned a small *peque peque* and an old man, too drunk to swim, had drowned. Boats were revving, churning up the water, leaving to go to find his body.

Mestizos with donkeys sat drinking beer in the afternoon. A big YAMAHA sign gleamed red over a shack. The place was awash with coke, both brown and white. There was an atmosphere of underground hysteria and pickpocketing. Piles of rubbish slid down the bank towards the river: rotten, slimy

bags, old clothes, toilet paper, Pepsi bottles and beer crates, the remnants of a hard party in the toilets. A young woman with thick makeup played cardsharp games at a little table on the pavement. A man set out a hoopla stall and scowled when someone won. The whole town seemed to lurch, smoky, drunk and stoned.

There were proposals amongst the Aguaruna people to go and kill the narco traffickers, but while the traffickers would have guns, the Aguaruna would have little more than bows and arrows. We stayed with Aguaruna people in the slum part of town. They welcomed us warmly but it was a miserable place even for a night, let alone for life. A dead, half-plucked chicken lay on the floor and a live one scrabbled for nothing under the bed. The squat toilet was slippery underfoot and faeces were perched on the rim. The filthy tarpaulin that was wrapped around the toilet was so ripped that there was little privacy. A young woman followed me into the toilet out of curiosity, and I couldn't make her leave. Please go away, I said. She smiled. Go away. *Please*. She didn't. She was odd—maybe a little retarded. I suddenly wanted to scream in her face but I managed not to. My period was in full flood, I'd been in a canoe for hours and I had to change my tampon and my knickers, right now, without slipping on the foul floor. So I did. She watched. I hated her.

Filthy streams of water from one shack washed down onto the shack below. These people were, literally, living in a sewer. In the evening there was a competition to find the "prettiest" girl in town, and the hall was packed with sweaty, beery men. In this part of town, all domestic lighting was either ON or OFF. On, whether you like it or not, at sunset, and off at 11 P.M. I went to bed as early as I could, but I couldn't sleep; cheap pop music blasted into the night and a cockroach walked territorially across my bed and I imagined it in my mouth at midnight.

The headwaters of the rivers of the Amazon are often

UP, HEATHENS ALL

City walls were built as a physical boundary for the inhabitants, to protect them from the vile hordes outside, but they were also a kind of moral boundary, dividing the city dwellers from the devilish chaos of nature beyond, which was, quite literally, uncivilized. (*Civilized* comes from *civis*, a town dweller.)

Lúcio Costa, the architect of the city of Brasilia, wrote that the founding of a city "is a deliberate act of possession, a gesture in the colonial tradition of the pioneers, of taming the wilderness." The Manhattan grid, developed in 1811, segmenting and linearly dividing the land, was an amazing act of arrogance, notes historian Theodore Steinberg, in *Slide Mountain:* "Through the plotting of its streets and blocks, it announces that the subjugation, if not obliteration, of nature is its ambition."

The city, for the ancient Greeks, was the site of public life and its straight streets were the place of historic deeds in linear time: the stage of men, not women. Women were more associated with the cyclical time of wild nature, unfenced by linear history, in the unruly wilds.

To the Greeks, the city was a way of *thinking* and represented rationality. The city-state was associated with (male) reason and contrasted with the (female) irrationality of the wilderness. The city, with its plumb lines and right angles, represented the straight lines of logic, not the winding ways of intuitive, emotional thought. In Plato's *Republic*, the city was the place for the lyre and harp, instruments of Apollo, god of rationality. By contrast, pipes, instruments of Dionysus, god of the intuitive and nonrational, were not allowed in the city, and could be played only by shepherds and only in the country. The cityscape was ruled, in the lines of its building, and it was

also ruled in order while the wilderness without was unruly—in both senses. Unruly corkscrewing wiggling tangles of vines and creepers, inhabited by the villains of the piece.

The city represents law and order (the word *police* derives from Greek *polis*, "town"), while the "villains" dwell in the lawless wild nature outside. The word *villain* (a Middle English variant of *villein*, "peasant") once meant a rustic, and the root of the word is in villa—originally the word was merely a simple description of where someone dwelled. The word gradually shifted, coming to mean criminal.

The ideal of the city was partly founded on St. Augustine's *City of God*, and Christianity has long preferred the city to nature: cities were the home of bishops, the whole of Brasilia was laid out in the shape of the Christian cross, and Christianity used cities as a demonstration of its triumph over nature. Wild nature was associated with downright evil, and words originally denoting merely living in the country (heath dwelling, or living in a *pagus*, or small village) were turned into the derogatory terms *heathen* and *pagan*.

In the Amazon, these ancient battles are still played out. Missionaries try to keep people from living in the forests and force them to live in built settlements, in towns with a mission centre, a church and a school, partly because the missionaries can exercise greater control in that situation, but also because of the deep affinities they perceive between the forest, the heathenry and nature-based spirituality.

There was, of course, an abyss between the ideal of the city and its actuality. For in the same way as there is a conservation of energy, by which total energy remains constant though it may shift from place to place, just so, there is what I'd call a conservation of wildness, so wildness, pent-up, blocked, bricked-over, fenced-in, built-on, suppressed too much, will erupt in the volcanic lawless havoc of urban wildernesses: knob rot, syringes and puke.

Shakespeare's London had its piss-seedy Southwark, which had London's City fathers in apoplectic rage, describing the "eavell practizes of incontinencye in greate innes, havinge chambers and secrete places adjoyninge to their open stages and gallyries, inveglynge and alleurygne of maides … the publishinge of unchaste uncomelye and unshamefaste speeches and doynges … utteringe of popular bayse and sedycious matters, and manie other Corruptions of youthe and other enormyties." (Sounds fun. I'm allured already.)

The idea of "civilization," too, has long been opposed to wilderness. "The principal task of civilization is to defend us against nature," wrote Sigmund Freud. Today, it is nature that needs defending against civilization.

The word *civilization* was coined surprisingly late. Boswell quarrelled with Johnson over it, for the latter didn't want to include it in his dictionary. From its inception it's been a conceited and dishonest term. The connotations of civilization include moral decency and it suggests that nature in general and wilderness in particular lack that quality. *Urbanidad* in Spanish means politeness, inextricably linking what is urban with good behaviour or courtesy. The word *courtesy* itself, from the court, at the heart of the city, expresses a similar idea and to be courteous is to be at the very least civil, of course, and we're back to *civis*.

Civilization has also connoted culture and the fine arts, and its use suggests that people of the land are culturally inferior. The word is frequently used by dominant societies to pretend that only their kind of civilization is worthy of the name. In the 1987 edition of *American History: A Survey*, a standard textbook for high school students, the arrival of the Europeans in the Americas "is the story of the creation of a civilization where none existed"—one of the most false and bigoted sentences I've ever read. In 1975, a Kain-gang woman of South America said, "Today, my people see their land invaded, their forests destroyed, their animals exterminated and their hearts

lacerated by this brutal weapon that is civilization."

Lieutenant W. L. Herndon of the U.S. Navy, in a report to Congress on the Amazon in 1854, said, "Civilization must advance, though it tread on the neck of the savage, or even trample him out of existence." Andrew Johnson, in his message to Congress in 1867, said, "If the savage resists, civilization, with the ten commandments in one hand and the sword in the other, demands his immediate extermination." Quite which of the ten commandments encourages genocide is slightly hard to see.

The word *savage*—used so often to insult people of the land—comes from *silvaticus* (of woods or trees) from *silva*, a wood. In the Amazon, the forest is called *la selva*, while *salvaje*, the Spanish word literally meaning "person of the forests," is used to mean a savage and is a frequent term of abuse. (A word history remarkably similar to those of *pagan, heathen* and *villain*.)

In the Western tradition, not only *civilization* but *culture* too is frequently used as an opposite to nature—wild lands are uncultivated and the people of the land are supposedly uncultured. Denis Cosgrove, professor of human geography, writes, "Both classical and biblical traditions placed the city at the highest point in a hierarchy of imaginative environments built upon wilderness." Culture was decreed to be the opposite of nature and found in the city.

Interestingly, though, the roots of the word *culture* are inextricably tied to nature, through the idea of cultivation. Norwegian geographer Kenneth Robert Olwig, in *Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic*, writes, "In its original, classical sense nature and culture were not polar opposites, quite the contrary. Culture was, if anything, the worship of nature." Culture comes from *cultus*, and *cultus* stems from *colere. Cultus* carries meanings including "cultivation," "tending," "care," "respectful treatment," and *colere*, "to cultivate," also means to

dwell in a place, to honour and to worship. So the pagans, heathens, villains and savages were originally the most cultured of all.

Historian Polybius, a native of Arcadia, described how various meanings of culture merged: pastoral life in Arcadia involved cyclical "cultic" rites, involving nature and the arts. Culture was entwined in nature for the Arcadians. And that is exactly how Amazonian people live, where culture is woven with nature's vivacity and nature is intricate with culture's meanings.

The forests have been tended (cultivated) for millennia by Amazonian people. ("The wild is not the opposite of the cultivated," says philosopher and physicist Vandana Shiva. "It is the opposite of the captivated.") Nature and culture may be distinct; a house and the garden are domestic spaces, and have a different quality from the wild forests, but it is not an opposition. Further, one can be "at home" not only in a house but in the natural world outside. For nature and culture find trysting places in the forests, interweaving and reflexive in a lovely gyre of mutuality. Swedish ethnographer Kaj Århem writes, "Among Amerindians of the Amazon, the notion of 'nature' is contiguous with that of 'society'," and he notes that "the same can be said of many, if not most, indigenous peoples of the world." Sometimes, writes Århem, even animals "are attributed with 'culture'—habits, rituals, songs, and dances of their own."

For forest people, nature is defended by culture: many rules concerning hunting and the nonexploitative use of resources—blunt ecological truths—are encoded in the myths and magic, tales and enchantments that make up a society's culture. Shamans and thinkers of the forest know that the mind learns best this way. Myths, comments Århem, are "extremely efficient" for the purpose as they are "at once ecologically informed, emotionally charged and morally binding." If you scrape off the magic, then the raw facts and laws are harder to

SELF-WILLED LAND

For me, the cities and towns of the Amazon were problematic. In one town, Maldonado, the atmosphere seemed fetid, unhealthy as a fly trap, people caught in a purple neon twist of poisoned sugar. It was a place where people ended up: thus far and no farther, a sink rather than a summit. The one road stopped there. There were flights to Cuzco, which most people couldn't afford. Or else there was Brazil. On foot.

It was as if wildness congealed here and turned to madness. There was too much alcohol, too much dope. People came and went mad, talking for days of William Blake, as one demented young man did to me. The most obviously insane person in town stood in the middle of the streets, amiably lunatic, directing the traffic. No one ever paid any attention, as he stood like a crazy conductor of a blind orchestra. In the stagnancy of the place, he chose—with that symbolic appropriateness of the sanely mad—to direct motion.

I left for Cuzco because I was joining some Harakmbut men there to trek through their forests. But when I arrived in Cuzco, I was suddenly ill. I'd barely been there two hours, and had many jobs to do, when I found myself faint and dizzy. I got a taxi to my hotel and crawled into bed and blanked out with the nauseous headache of altitude sickness. I felt too ill to move just four feet across the room to dig out my painkillers from my rucksack. After about six hours, I did manage that and about two hours later I got out of my room, staggered in to the hotel owner and asked her to bring me water and bananas. She brought them with steaming cups of *mate de coca*, the coca tea that is used to treat altitude sickness. I was in a strange delirium for hours. Sick in Cuzco, the hours crawling around the rim of the day like dying flies, I heard those hours drone.

The next day I had to go to the airport to meet the

Harakmbut men. If I failed to show up, I had no way of contacting them and I would miss out on what promised to be an astonishing trek. I managed to pack and get to the airport, but once there, I nearly collapsed in a policeman's arms. He was kind, found me water, shade and a place to sit. I was shaking and my head felt cracked with pain. Someone gave me coca, someone else gave me unidentified local medicine, someone else found me water, and I took everything. In spite of the heat, my body was freezing cold though my head was on fire. I met the Harakmbut guys and we drove all day up to a high pass over the altiplano. The light and the motion were almost unbearable and I remember almost nothing about that day except that a woman in a café along the way rubbed my face with flower water and fed me banana and papaya like a child and I had to ask for help to go to the toilet.

The moment we reached the forests I felt better. Mainly it was simply being at a lower altitude, but also being out of the cities and back in the forests made me feel happy and well. The guides were wanting to set up an ecotourism project here, called "Wanamei," and this trek was a practice trek. We would be trekking for days, walking by day and camping in small clearings at night and there was nowhere on earth I would rather have been.

The forest is never still. Wild vitality streams through it and all of life is on the shimmer, curling in the air, twisting up the liana, swimming in the rivers. Firefly and dragonfly take the plunge, leaping into the morning of life and gone by evening. A leakless, waterproof hyacinth leaf juggles a raindrop around its rim. Tiny insects sting, bite and itch. It is a world of contrasts; thunder and gossamer; the giant and the dwarf. A thousand-year tree, heavily buttressed like a well-anchored grudge, a moth with a wingspan of a foot, a butterfly seven inches across and a dwarf frog barely a centimetre long.

A light moth pretends to be a rotting leaf on moss, a moss-moth, a pun in sunlight. A rotten palm branch cradles fresh

growth—death cradling new life in the palm of its hand. And on the branch an insect pretends to be a twig. There is a fecund, compulsive all-at-once-ness here, life thriving, twisting its way up to the sun, the green shoot poking through the decaying leaf. Everywhere is the signature of restless life; roots ripple into earth, vines stream from trees, leaves glimmer with green. The Amazon has many seasons, but it doesn't have a marked "spring" and "fall." Here, those two seasons are not separate times of the year but are verbs that take place concurrently, to spring and to fall. A sapling springs up and a mossy log falls, nudging another inch nearer earth. A glittering jewel of fluorescent green fungus is so new, sprung up brilliant overnight, while the forest itself is so old. Often what strikes me is the forest's sheer intensity of *now*. At twilight, the momentness is critical—cicadas zing up the volume, there is an increase of energy, of electricity, almost, at the zestful changeover between the day players and the night players. Now is all. Now the rain and new growth, now the hatching mosquitoes, now the ant and jaguar, now too the rotting snakeskin and dank woody stem, smelling of mushroom.

It takes vigilance to avoid being bitten or stung. I walked with my long-legged trousers tucked into socks, my long-sleeved shirt buttoned high. Given any opportunity, ants would start marching a column up my leg, crawling in awful army regularity: march, bite, march, bite. When we stopped to eat, flies would give us no reprieve. They swarmed together or needled us individually; they hovered in front of our eyes, their horrible persistence dementing. In the evenings, the flies would disappear and, to the minute, the mosquitoes would start up. (Mark Twain once noted the torture of mosquitoes inside his tent at night. Finally, he said, he could bear it no more and opened the tent flap, got them all in, and went and slept outside.) Writing notes was hard. We walked from first light until dark, going at a cracking pace, and when we stopped it wasn't for long. I would scribble the odd word in my notebook as I walked, trying not to trip. In the evening, the guides tied

candles to the trees with shreds of plant tendrils and as they ate and slept, I would write my notes in almost complete darkness, for the light of a torch would attract a thousand moths and other insects. A guide saw my difficulty and caught a firefly for me, gently looping a thin thread around its body and tying it to the tip of my pen so it glowed its gentle green light on my notebook.

It had been a little hard for the leaders to persuade other local people to come on this trip because it was a journey through dense forest; paths once used were overgrown now (*cerrado*, closed, is the term they use) and it was almost impossible to see them. Much of the way, Hector, one of the guides, walked at the front with a machete, carving the way through, striking down saplings, slashing back thick vegetation, down a route he could not see but which he knew was right. Local people didn't want to stay a moment longer than necessary in the parts of the forest they considered wild. They were afraid of this area because it was unfamiliar, because they feared bad spirits and because it was an area where the wildest animals lived. Jaguars were there. How many? *Bastante*. Enough, plenty.

"*Terra viridis incognita*"—the green unknown land—was the way Europeans first saw this forest wilderness. American wilderness author Roderick Frazier Nash writes of the etymology of the word *wilderness* from the prefix *wild* and the Old English *dēor* (animal)—thus *wild- dēor- ness* meant the place of wild beasts. There is an echo in the Amazon as people speak of *monte real*—primary forest where people go to hunt or, indeed, where people are scared to go because they fear the wild beasts.

But what of the *wild* part of the word *wilderness*? This is to me the most interesting. Nash writes, "In the early Teutonic and Norse languages, from which the English word in large part developed, the root seems to have been 'will' with a descriptive meaning of self-willed, willful, or uncontrollable.

From ‘willed’ came the adjective ‘wild’ used to convey the idea of being lost, unruly, disordered, or confused.” And so, you could say, a wilderness is a self-willed land—easily my favourite definition. What is wild is not tilled. Self-willed land does what it likes, untilled, untold, while tilled land is told what to do. In Nguni languages (including Zulu and Xhosa) the word *hlane* means wilderness, according to environmental historian Malcolm Draper, who then points out that the “hl” sound relates the idea of wilderness to both laughing (*hleka* means laugh) and also to madness, *hlanya*.

The forest drinks rain, drinks sunlight, drinks sound. One ubiquitous sound is the bird that sounds like an untuned radio, a kind of high-frequency wolf whistle. The guides’ hearing was far better than mine and often they would say, “Hush, listen; do you hear that?” A river, perhaps, whose sound in the distance they were using as a direction finder. I listened and heard whirrings, scrabblings and gnawings but no river sound at all, and they laughed and teased me for my deafness. When all the guides could clearly hear a *peque peque* in the distance, all I could hear was them saying, “Be quiet, sshh, listen.” Some sounds were unmissable—the frogs’ tromboning honk, one particularly loud at midnight as if it wanted something really badly. (I think it was sex.) Sometimes as we walked, we heard the mischievous monkeys giggling far above us. The guides saw a small monkey in the trees at one point, solitary and yeeping. They whistled to it and it came down in response but the moment it saw us, it stopped. Another time, a guide made a particular call, somewhere between a hoot and a chirrup, and a spider monkey replied. Once, the guides took me to see a whole monkey circus in the trees, bouncing, bum waggling, using the branches like a trapeze, rattling the treetops.

Plants in the rainforest have an audacious cleverness. Some can deliberately create the smell of rotting flesh to attract flies. The *Marantaceae* grow on the forest floor and have dark purple undersides to their leaves so they collect light on the topside but do not pass it through to plants below, rather every leaf

BEWITCHED, BEBOTHERED AND BEWILDERED

Being lost in an English woodland, the one-night bewitching of a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, suggests a frisson of fear, but the be-wildering of being lost in the Amazon is terrifying. If you are lost here, you could die. The paths themselves are uncertain: we often crossed rivers on the infamous and ubiquitous *puentos podridos*, the rotten bridges that would collapse at a step. In some places, a "bridge" was actually a log several feet underwater, which you had to find with your toes and balance across. Wading chest-high through rivers I would always ask one of the guides to take my notebooks for me. At several points the guides would make an impromptu bridge by hacking down a small tree, felling it over the river.

It was wise to follow the guides exactly, even going the same way around a tree in the path, for there were always things they noticed and you didn't, and you could find yourself with a mouthful of poisonous spider. The guides told me of one foreigner walking near here—not with them—who had gone for a swim without asking his guides' advice. They found him later, an arm here, a leg there. The pool he'd chosen for his dip was a caiman's pool. One night, we were near another caiman's pool and saw it from a distance. None of its body was visible, only its eyes, gleaming red rectangles reflecting in the light of our torches.

"*Pise donde yo he pisado*"—step where I have stepped—said one of the guides, Matteo, at one point, and he meant it precisely, for one step and a couple of footfalls wrong and you can lose the path. Forest people routinely snap twigs off plants as they go, leaving a tiny signage along the path for the person behind, or for themselves. If, for example, a hunter leaves the path to chase an animal, he should snap leaves off as he runs, to find his way back.

The trail we were on was a traditional hunting trail, but one unused for years. It was very much Hector's path. He walked first, leaving the campsite at dawn. Proud of his knowledge of the trail, he had kept the path open in his mind alone until he macheted his way through now. He used the position of the sun for direction for several days and then heard a river that he wanted to reach. He walked with his machete in his right hand, his bows and arrows and cooking pot in his left, and on his back a small rice sack tied up with forest rope. All the guides used machetes, not only to cut through paths but also as an extra leg, sticking it into a log for balance, or like a walking stick to climb a muddy bank. Hector's sense of direction was so perfectly judged that on part of the journey—a three-day walk in dense jungle, with no compass other than the sun, with (to me) no way of mapping a route at all, no way of seeing farther than twenty feet ahead, no hill, no land contour, with streams that may change their courses from season to season—he brought us to a river where we would wait for a boatman whom they'd asked to come there. After all the days and miles, we hit the river about a hundred yards from the meeting point.

A path in the forest can seem so visible, so inevitable when you're walking along it, but once you've stepped off it, you know it for what it is: a fragile skein too thin to see unless you're looking right down on it. Once you are off the path, it does not seem inevitable. Rather it seems extraordinarily lucky and briefly precious. On the instant of stepping off the path, a curtain of green confusion falls. A bare little patch of earth catches your sight. Is that the path? It goes nowhere. The path may be three feet away but be as invisible as if it were three miles away. What is completely revealed and what is completely hidden are so close, depending on angles of sight just a few degrees different. (If you do get lost, stop. Mark your position, light a fire if you can. Move in circles around it, trying to find the path.)

Where the path was most thickly overgrown, we would wait for Hector to swipe several times with his machete for every