

EarthSpeak Magazine

An aerial photograph of a rugged coastline. The top half of the image shows the deep blue ocean with white, frothy waves crashing against a dark, rocky shore. The rocks are jagged and dark, with some greenish-brown patches. The bottom half of the image is dominated by the dark, textured surface of the rocks, which appear to be part of a cliffside or a steep bank overlooking the sea.

Issue 8

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EarthSpeak Magazine
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On the California Coast by Rachael Bahre

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Allison Cummings

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January, and did the natives find that odd? If kudzu could eat my carport in a season, how long before it smothered Richmond? Why was the dirt so red, when Jefferson wrote in Notes on the State of Virginia that it was rich and black? On a hike on the Appalachian Trail one day, I passed through a section of sickly trees, their upper limbs dead and their species alien. The forest seemed unnaturally quiet: a few birds chirped tentatively some distance away. Footsteps crunched the dead leaves and a heartbeat pounded in my jugular. I turned and ran back down the trail.

We're all imprinted and shaped by places. We all know places that feel like home and those that do not. Children born beside the arid rock of western Colorado might feel moldy and confined by dense Eastern forests, and children of the Northeastern forest might feel like trespassers on the set of The Searchers out west. Transplants might experience regional displacement as a mild confusion that absolves them of knowing about their surroundings, like being a perpetual tourist, new on the job. For about two decades, I was a perennial transplant, moving around the country for school and work. In each place, the trees, terrain, and plants were strangers, unknown to me by name or habit, and they seemed to warn, *go home*.

For years, I dismissed these promptings, thinking we modern Americans belong not to a place, but rather to movement itself, an idea of the open road. I had never heard of terrapsychology or ecopsychology, biophilia or topophilia, or even *genius loci*, the spirit of a place. If you, too, have just tuned in, there are volumes devoted to this frequency. In Earth in Mind, David Orr helpfully defines all these terms and argues strenuously that we ignore our ties to earth's places at our own mental and environmental peril. Quoting Simone Weil, he insists that feeling rooted in a particular place is "the most important and least recognized need of the human soul." Roots can be put down anywhere, suggest Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry, as long as one digs in deep; the philia follows.

Returning to New England after twenty years, the dust and my stomach finally settled. I learned that home is where you know the neighbors: the smells, looks, names, and interwoven habits of local plants, trees, insects and animals, as well as the people across the street. And I learned that memory travels on scent and taste. Long before knowing the name for *Viburnum Carlesii* (Koreanspice Viburnum), I knew its clove and cinnamon perfume in May. Home was honeysuckle droplets on my tongue, pine sap on my hands, the cake batter inside dogwood berries, elderberries, fireflies that we fashioned into cruel rings, jewelweed for poison ivy welts, Queen Anne's lace beside dusty dirt roads, a grove of lilacs, spidery forts built from wet, rotting logs, a turtle who dragged herself to the same sandy spot each year and deposited eggs, the stone walls of old farms latticing the rolling hills, and a necklace of reservoirs for New York City's water. That was northern Westchester, circa 1970.

I've been calling one region home because the Northeast differs distinctly from other regions. But I'm conflating southern New York, where I began, and southern New Hampshire, where I ended up. While they have similar hills, lakes, and forests, now that the climate has changed, New Hampshire more closely resembles the New York of forty years ago than New York resembles its old self. Summer temperatures in New Hampshire are about the same as they were in New York thirty years ago—about five days in the 90's, with most days in the 70's and low 80's, whereas Cornell's Climate office reports an average of about twenty-five days in the 90's in southern New York now. Winters here are still much snowier and longer than New York's were even three decades ago, though they're warming up, too. Scientists say New Hampshire will resemble Virginia's climate by 2100. If trees and plants migrate north by about 12 miles a year, New Hampshire should become New Virginia closer to 2060, and magnolia and holly trees may replace hemlock and ash, the latter decimated by non-native insects like the adelgid and ash borer, who were formerly held off by our low winter temperatures.

As I've blindly migrated like a seed on the wind to a spot much like my original habitat, gardening zones have drifted north with me. A revised, much-needed, and perhaps controversial new USDA map of plant hardiness zones is in the works, but hasn't yet been released. Last revised in 1990, reflecting temperatures from 1974-1986, it's the map that divides the country into zones (1-11), guiding growers in what will survive the local winters and summers. In the 1970s, Westchester was in zone 5, but now it's 6 or 6b, under the spreading umbrella of New York City's "heat island." Southern New Hampshire is now zone 5b. Cold-loving plants like lilac and rhubarb are healthier up here, don't mold or bolt so fast, but more southern plants, like butterfly bush, now survive here, too. In cultivating my own garden, I decided to hedge my bets. I planted a peach tree and some Fraser fir trees, natives of the Carolinas. If the warming must come, I want organic peaches and fragrant evergreens in my snowless backyard. On the other hand, I also planted hemlocks, playing Noah with vigilance and horticultural oil until that pest's natural predator makes it north.

Maybe we are more plant than we know, adapted to thrive in certain conditions and not others, just as plant cultivars survive in certain bioregions or across a few hardiness zones. On a blog called *Rewild*, a person identified as "ofthewood" queried "What climate/ bioregion is your body adapted to?" People responded with various genealogies, attributing their climactic comfort zones to ancestries in other lands: those with Italian or southern ancestry craved heat, turning their heliotropic faces to the sun; those with Scandinavian forebears preferred cool and snow, and so on. Of course, many others are daisies—highly adaptive, ready to sprout on any roadside. But maybe some are more desert lily or Balsam fir, with strict requirements for heat or cold, water or drought, understory or wide savannah. Maybe my visceral fear in the desert, on the plains, in the Southern Appalachians was a cellular imperative: *go home or die*; you cannot thrive here. Since some of our ancestors emigrated to places with climates similar to their homelands', it's hard to determine whether our bodies are drawn to certain bioregions by genetic predisposition or childhood familiarity. Watching my son wilt and burn in heat, but

run ecstatic and short-sleeved in 55 degree drizzle, I wonder if we should just head back to the Hebrides. Like plants, we all have centuries of ancestors who adapted to certain conditions: perhaps such traits persist in our cells.

Many Americans speak fondly of home, but don't really notice much about where they live or what else lives there, or when the brave new seasons come and go, what blooms first and last—even if they've never left. And certainly many do not want to go home again, having never loved their first climate or hometown, associating that place with boredom or violence, sorrow or other discontents. And millions of people cannot or should not go home again—refugees of war, toxic pollution, natural disaster, and various upheavals beyond their control. For all of these people, the idea of biophilia must seem hollow or hippie-dippy. No doubt they've formed attachments to things other than place, and hear no wind roaring through a gaping hole in their lives. Yet if Simone Weil, E.O. Wilson, and various ecopsychologists are right, the sense of *soliphilia*, of belonging to a place and of it belonging to us, as children attach to places and parents, is fundamental to our mental health. So even if we can't or don't wish to go home again, tending a love of some place is probably good for the soul and the planet.

If in our lives we “circle-sail” as Thoreau called his journeys, roving out from a regional base-camp and back, we might have better knowledge of the area and a reassuring familiarity with the seasons, plants, trees, animals, birds, and insects, not to mention a manageable number of friends that we sometimes actually see. Where is your watershed? Where are the swimming holes around you? We might know that when the Shadblow Service-berry blooms white, and our ancestors could bury their winter dead in the thawing ground and the shad ran in the rivers, we can divide clumps of iris or aster or plant snap peas. I was lightly rooted to a region by instinct, aesthetics, and a few common species' names. It took leaving, growing up, and returning to know the terrain and the spirit of this place.

EarthSpeak Magazine

Dust to dust. A patch of earth is our first and last home, the ground where we first touch down, learn the ratio of light to land to sky, and the bed where our bones or ashes are laid to rest. Though we occupy the body, the mind, our careers and work-places, it is the home that outlasts us. There is a creature comfort in knowing a particular place as home, in being in it, in imagining and tending to its life beyond our own. May my family plant blueberry bushes on my grave.

Gus Palmer Jr.

Gus Palmer Jr. is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Oklahoma. His special area of research is in linguistic anthropology. He is a fluent speaker of his native Kiowa language and has published one book, Telling Stories the Kiowa Way (2003, University of Arizona Press).

Effigy Mounds 2: The Speech of Stones

*for Jeff and Lauren Palmer
Coralville, Iowa, June, 2011*

Who knows what circles
this sky, this river of shadows
to embrace some unknown or
unknowable presence only these
rocky shorelines remember,
keen to our coming?
What trees have followed us
up these rocky slopes, this
moist path laden with the memory
of a people from a foreign land or
time?

Time weighs heaviest here.
The air, moist and fragrant
everywhere, is hard to breathe.
The upstream river ends abruptly
in a tangle of logs and roots.
Someone has laid out these mounds
and waited for the flood to remove
them but it hasn't as yet.

Who knows while meditating here
what would come easily to pause
and remember what miracle took
place or what would build these bear
and bird mounds and then leave to
puzzle others who might call?
Lying quietly under canopies of hickory
and white ash, we listen for voices. In
these woods you can only hear your
own breathing and watch your breath
beside the trees and the inscrutable
presence no one can question.

Someone should come here often
to meditate, to pray, or to remember.
Someone should not speak but listen
for the barely audible sounds beneath
this cogent ground. Are they the waters
for thirsty spirits who pine for mounds?
Or is it the mound builders themselves
who move, timeless, unknown, and
unperturbed, toward the cities, the Gulf
stream, and beyond?

George Korolog

When not writing on planes, trains, hotels, bars and on the backs of napkins at restaurants worldwide, George Korolog works as a Senior Vice President of a Fortune 500 technology company in San Jose, California. When not traveling around the world, he is an active member of The Stanford Writers Studio at Stanford University. His work has been widely published in online and print magazines such as *Rattle*, *Riverbabble*, *The Monarch Review*, *Poets&Artists Magazine*, *Contemporary Haibun*, *Willows Wept Review*, *The Right Eyed Deer* and *The Stone Highway Review* among others. He loves the outdoors, was an avid climber for 20 years and has a Masters Degree in Psychology. A website of his poetry, www.redwoodpoetry.com will be online in November.

Erosion as the Ground of Being

the world chafes,
churns into fine grain,
pushes itself
through time where
all things gather at oceans
edge to merge. Eternal
dervish of sand and foam,
two lovers in the moonlight
waiting on the sunrise
seraphim that spreads angel wings
across the detritus,
once great mountains
returning even now
into the waters,
the lip of instance and
forever,
everlasting kiss
drafting from the unfathomable
heart of depth.
I balance myself on the
dunes and watch great cities
returning home on the changing
tide,
the rolling
sound of laughter.

Stephanie Kraft

Stephanie Kraft is a journalist who has written on environmental subjects for more than thirty years, and a translator of Polish fiction. She has published poetry in *The Lyric* and *Christian Century*. She and her husband live in Amherst, Massachusetts and spend two weeks each year in Nova Scotia.

Morning on Cape Breton

Waves leap on granite as birch twigs snap
between the teeth of the moose.
His spice-brown body follows
the baroque cartoon of his face
through nebulae of white-tipped branches.

He is the eye in a storm of majesties:
majesty of the plunge to the sea
from the summit where he ranges, his hooves
stirring the nymphs' flesh of wild blueberry leaves.
Majesty of wordlessness, the quiet of sunlight
on whales playing in the cove below
and the brooding of the crimson pitcher plant
digesting insects in the bog.

Somewhere among the lean brown trails we met him,
where the noontime forest smelled
like baskets of basil freshly cut.
His antlers were tilted away from the sea,
balancing eternities of which we know nothing.

We want his dawns in our veins, the dawns
when he nibbles the water lily's roots,
knowing time as a change in the salty wind,
the reddening of the berries on the mountain ash.
We drink his noon like wine and track him
toward our own true bodies, the lost riches of instinct
without which we huddle in deaf valleys
before fires that do not warm.

Arlene L. Mandell

Arlene L. Mandell is a retired English professor from NJ who now lives in Santa Rosa, CA. Her work has appeared in more than 350 literary journals and 17 anthologies.

Taming the Jasmine

Reaching out from the trellis, star-flowered vines brush against me, releasing clouds of fragrance. This humid morning I take up my shears. Each cut emits a teardrop of sticky white, and I remember

a silver-haired uncle who wouldn't permit me to pick flowers in his Brooklyn backyard, who tugged one of my pigtails to demonstrate how it hurt them.

As I sweep the severed bits, the cuts have already stopped bleeding. A wayward tendril touches my cheek.

John C. Mannone

John C. Mannone has been nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize in Poetry and once for the Rhysling Poetry Award. He has over 200 poems and short fiction published in both literary and speculative fiction journals such as *The Pedestal*, *Glass*, *Lucid Rhythms*, *Prime Mincer*, *Mobius*, *Apollo's Lyre*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Aethlon*, *Wordgathering*, *The Linnets*, *Wings*, *Paper Crow* and many others. He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and *Silver Blade*. When not writing, he teaches college physics in east Tennessee and serves as a NASA/JPL Solar System Ambassador. Visit The Art of Poetry: <http://jcmannone.wordpress.com>.

Contemplative Trees

Their trunks folded over boulders, as if in yoga. Arms limped forward in prayer; leaves shed as dry tears. Were they the sages of wilderness or were they fools to preserve our soft existence? Willfully they drank hot air, filtered the greenhouse gas so we could breathe. Now they are drunk. Slumped in static, pointy fingers skirting clouds, the contemplative trees wait for mercy from the heavens—lightning bolts to cauterize wounds, to carbonize their dry bark that's long since been stripped.

Sacred Dark

When it's really dark, I can see
the sky-on-fire light of sunset,
the orange glow of a harvest moon,
Orion stepping over granite mountains,
pine trees laden with moonlit snow
and the Milky Way glittering night.

When it's really dark, I can see
the star of Bethlehem shine
through the ages. I can feel the light
of the world.

Adrienne Ross Scanlan

Adrienne Ross Scanlan's essays have been published in *Adventum Magazine*, *Pilgrimage*, *Fourth River*, *Tikkun*, *Under the Sun, you are here*, *Cezanne's Carrot*, the anthology An Intricate Weave: Women Write on Girls and Girlhood, the American Nature Writing anthology series (1996, 1997, and 2000 editions), and more than 40 other print or online publications. She received a 1996 Seattle Arts Commission literary award and a 2001 Artist Trust Literature Fellowship. "In Praise of Weeds (Sort of)" is part of a collection of essays about discovering home and restoring nature in the urban wild.

In Praise of Weeds (Sort of)

A Sara's Orange-tip butterfly flutters above one of T-107's tangled mounds of Himalayan Blackberry. Nearby is a mixed stand of trees where I crawl belly down across wood bark, brittle brown leaves, and scattered purple plums shriveling where the August sun has slipped between tree limbs. Even here I find thorny spines of Himalayan Blackberry to snip. Weeding is like plugging one's finger in the dike between native species and invasive ones. Pull out your finger; in rushes exuberant life to take root in a new home.

I used to love yanking Himalayan Blackberry from the earth, tearing away the deep-rooted tenacity common to unwanted creatures. Himalayan Blackberry is an invasive weed as abundant in the Pacific Northwest as the rain. I'll admit the anthropomorphism and say it's as non-native to Puget Sound as I am. As an ex-New Yorker transplanted to Seattle, it's not lost on me that one weed is ripping out another to make a home for native species. But is the Himalayan Blackberry an ecological criminal to be ripped out willy-nilly? Or are weeds like Himalayan Blackberry part of home regardless of our diligent weeding?

I usually weed at a habitat restoration project organized by a local environmental group. Today's weeding is at T-107, a "pocket park" nestled between Seattle's Duwamish River and West Marginal Way SW's car traffic. Once home to the Duwamish Indians, and later to Scandinavian and other immigrants, the Duwamish is a five-mile long Superfund site hosting barges, factories, Port of Seattle docks, and small "pocket parks" of reclaimed habitat. At T-107, wooden fences are entwined with a verdant wall of Himalayan Blackberry. Not far below flows the Duwamish River with its white and blue tug boats, and wood pylons where bald eagles and great blue herons perch. T-107 used to be the site of a brick factory. Planted, weeded, re-planted and re-weeded, T-107's foot trails meander amid alder stands and hip-high seedlings of Western red cedar, Douglas Fir, and other Pacific Northwest conifers. Nestled under these young

trees are Himalayan Blackberry stems thin as pencils and low to the ground. I identify the weed by its thorns and characteristic five-leaf sets and snip it with my hand shears just as it emerges from shadowed ground.

I've brought my volunteer's passion for uprooting Himalayan Blackberry to restoration sites along the Snoqualmie River, the Mercer Slough, Hamm Creek, and too many other Seattle or King County habitats to recall. Unlike T-107 with its Himalayan Blackberry seedlings, by the time I showed up at those other sites, the Himalayan Blackberry would be taller than I am. I would wear workmen's leather gloves so stiff I could hardly grasp the pruning shears. I would sever a cane only to have a botanical chaos of vines and thorns jerk up like a tightly stretched tent snapping a pole. Canes longer than my arms, my legs, my body would clutch me. Thick maroon thorns would cut through muddy jeans and flannel shirts to rip crimson streaks into my skin.

And so, as I am doing at T-107, I would cut as close to the ground as I could get. The Himalayan Blackberry would grow back. I would return to cut it. The Himalayan Blackberry would grow back. I would return and cut again. The Himalayan Blackberry would grow back weaker but still alive and growing. I would return and cut and admire the weed's persistence, its tenacity to take root, its fierceness to live.

I'm ambivalent about weeds. I am one.

###

But even though I identify with weeds, it's not always clear to me just what is a weed. Definitions vary, often contradict, and can get as tangled as what grows in an abandoned lot. From an agricultural perspective, a weed is a plant that causes economic harm. From an ecological perspective, weeds are plants (or other species) that thrive where humans have disturbed the landscape. Webster's 3rd New International Dictionary's many

definitions of weed include "...an obnoxious growth, thing or person...one of wild or rank growth..." or my favorites, "...sudden illness or release..." and "...an attack of madness..." One person's weed is another person's pretty flower. The easiest way through the thicket is to say a weed is a plant (or fish, animal or any other critter) that shows up in a place where we don't want it and won't go away. Poison or pull them all you want, weeds come back, supposedly out of place but asserting their grip over the landscape. If anything, all our picking, plucking, poisoning and other eradication efforts can act as a form of natural selection, promoting hardier, more genetically diverse weeds that are better able to thrive alongside us.

For most people, "weed" doesn't take into account whether a plant is native to an area or a non-native (introduced) species. But it's a distinction that matters to anyone engaged in environmental restoration. Native plants typically refer to species that came to a region by wind, wave or other natural means that didn't involve humans. Once in a place, natives reproduce and thrive without human involvement. This is different from what happens with non-native species, whereby humans intentionally or accidentally take plants or other species out of their natural region and bring them into a new place.

America is a nation of immigrants, but when it comes to plants most of us don't know the natives from the newcomers. Potatoes came from South America. Apples and pears were introduced from Eurasia. We can thank Luther Burbank for bringing the Himalayan Blackberry to the United States in 1865. (Honeybees, which are critical to crop and wild plant propagation, came from England, with subsequent stock coming from Europe, the Near East and Africa.) But it doesn't matter whether they came because we wanted them or they arrived as stowaways in our cargo. These and many other plants have become part of the world we know as home. Most non-native or introduced species (estimates are as high as 90%) behave much like their human immigrant counterparts. They find an unfilled niche, settle in alongside the natives, and add to the local biodiversity without harming it.

Not so invasive plants. Invasive plants are a leading driver of native plant extinction. Invasives are a special group of non-natives that harm human health, the environment, or the economy. Himalayan Blackberry has all the classic characteristics of an invasive. It reproduces quickly (8,300 to 15,500 seeds per square yard easily dispersed by foraging birds and mammals, or by “daughter” canes that can grow 23 feet in a season). Himalayan Blackberry has no serious predators or pathogens in its new Pacific Northwest home. It thrives in human-induced disruption. Tear down a forest for suburban roads, shopping malls or mega-churches, and Himalayan Blackberry moves in, taking root in gated communities as easily as alongside rivers, streams, wetlands or forests. Seattle underwent waves of logging a century or so ago and while maples, alders and other deciduous trees grew back, native conifers like Western red cedar or Douglas Fir that should have returned through botanical succession never really took root in part because of competition from invasive species like the Himalayan Blackberry.

Today, the Himalayan Blackberry on Seattle’s public lands could top 900 football fields and that’s not counting what’s in back yards or anywhere else in its path. After clearing even a small thicket at restoration projects, I’ve found fertile soil barren of salmonberry, thimbleberry, Oregon grape, and the many other native plants that once thrived here. I’ve found stunted, pencil-thin seedlings of cedar, fir and other native trees the Himalayan Blackberry had swarmed, its vines climbing over and choking the native plants as it grasped sunlight, rain, nutrients. The native plants die out. The Himalayan Blackberry survives.

So for a weed like Himalayan Blackberry to be considered invasive, it has to go beyond being unwanted. It must take over the landscape and block out other species, rather like an itinerant preacher prophesizing the world to come and leaving his bastard children behind. Not all weeds do this, and neither do all introduced species. But weeds do tend to be called generalist species. David Quammen’s elegiac “Planet of Weeds” describes how, in the biological sense, “weeds” can refer beyond plants to

include mammals, birds, fish or other species that are “...scrappers, generalists, opportunists...” that is, able to travel far, survive using a wide range of foods and terrains, thrive in disturbed ecosystems, reproduce fast, and once in a place, dig in hard. Think of rats. Think of starlings. Think of us. Humans aren’t simply the most destructive invasive species on the planet. We are, as Quammen says, “...the consummate weed.”

###

Here at T-107, the tangled relationship between weeds and home is on my mind as I rip a hank of Himalayan Blackberry off a stack of cut wood. Uncovered are black bugs, dirt, and stones juxtaposed with shadows cast by the summer sunlight. A brown and grey moth flutters down to the newly exposed habitat. I blink my eyes, and it appears to be just another leaf amid the scattered brown leaves.

For most of my years in Seattle, I didn’t think weeding at T-107 or other sites required careful thought. Weeding seemed an uncontestable good intention: take out the Himalayan Blackberry and other invasives; plant Nootka rose or other native species, and in doing so provide sorely needed habitat — a home — for resident or migratory birds and other wildlife; restore T-107 to approximate what the Duwamish was like when it was a healthy, wild river. Over the next 24 years, Seattle and Puget Sound’s population is estimated to increase by more than 2 million people, largely immigrants like me who come to enjoy it’s once pristine beaches, trails and nearby national parks. Our arrival only increases the economic incentives to turn habitat into the urban or suburban development which helps push already over-exploited salmon runs and other local beleaguered species closer to extinction. Over my years in Seattle, planting trees, monitoring salmon runs, weeding invasives and other restoration volunteering evolved as a way of minimizing my impact while showing gratitude towards my new home.

For years, good intentions (along with leather gloves and hand shears) were all I needed to yank Himalayan Blackberry anywhere I chanced upon it. But good intentions require scrutiny. Writers such as Michael Pollan and Steven J. Gould have rightly noted how the ecological issues surrounding natives and non-natives can become co-opted by “anti-native” political or social agendas, with the nadir being Nazi Germany’s efforts to “cleanse” so-called “unwholesome alien influences” in the form of plants such as *impatiens parviflora*, a small woodland flower. Knowing this gives me pause when, closer to home, I encounter a zeal extending to outright hatred of weeds, invasives, or just plain non-native species.

The ecological jargon surrounding non-natives is xenophobic, filled with aliens, exotics, non-indigenous, foreign or introduced species that make it sound as if crazed hordes are storming the city gates. “The invaders must be stopped!” screamed one memorable email about a weeding. “Know Your Enemy...” shrieked an otherwise informative web site about invasive species. A joint university / local government website on “the top ten most unwanted pests” has a fact sheet designed like a law enforcement “Wanted” poster complete with Himalayan Blackberry’s crimes (trespass on private property, overrunning desired plants), accomplices (birds which eat the berries and pass seeds through their digestive system, taking the Himalayan Blackberry to new locations), and steps for dealing with this “intense criminal” (send in the SWAT team, a.k.a. weeders like me) since “there’s no killing this monster.” An invasive species field guide edited by respected ecologists says of Himalayan Blackberry and the equally invasive Evergreen Blackberry: “The delicious fruit creates... the reluctance to treat these two species as vicious invaders.”

I’ve seen the converse, too, with native species described as more natural, better fitted to a place and having a right to it, yet fragile and displaced, made refugees in their own home by a motley mix of weeds, aliens and invasives. Critics such as John Tallmadge speak of an assumed “...cherished concept of Edenic wilderness...”, a purity of nature that existed before we

blundered onto the scene which underlies the cultural value ascribed to native species.

On a personal level, I'd have to say that tenacity counts. Maybe the Himalayan Blackberry has earned its place if only because it's so hard to get rid of it. More than a few restoration volunteers I've spoken to voice my concerns: why penalize the Himalayan Blackberry for being hardy and able to tolerate new environments? Native species, in contrast, tend to be wedded to a place, tightly co-evolved to other native species, and vulnerable to sustained, human-driven environmental assaults like paving wetlands to put in parking lots. While native plants are critical to a functioning ecosystem, I tend to agree with Stephen Jay Gould that natives are: "...only those species that first happened to gain and keep a footing..." and not necessarily the species best suited to a place through all times or conditions, nor necessarily superior to newcomer species. Once in place, newcomers and natives interact and influence each other, each change leading to another. Even if it were possible to remove all non-natives from a landscape, the result won't necessarily be the return of a pre-invasion ecosystem.

I think part of the hostility towards weeds and invasives is due to human nature. Traveling humans are the main way that plants and animals migrate to new places, whether it's rats lurking in trade ships or snakes coiled in food shipments. Every forest cut down for suburban housing or shoreline developed for trade destroys habitat for natives and opens the landscape to weeds and invasives. Combine habitat destruction with a fast, global transport system, and Quammen's planet of weeds looms where there will never be a shortage of Himalayan Blackberry. Especially since research on climate change is showing that weeds thrive in the hotter, carbon dioxide-enriched environments that are becoming our planet's future. But it's hard to build the political clout and economic punch needed to preserve land for wildlife, or plan urban and suburban areas for sustainability. It's even hard to change personal behavior enough to keep indoors that beloved invasive species, the pet cat, an all-too-local preda-

tor that's decimating bird populations. It's a lot easier to yank a plant we don't like.

###

Two hours into weeding T-107, and hypocrisy is stinging along with the thorn scratches on my arms. I can't ignore any longer how inequitable (if not ridiculous) it is that we human weeds go hither and yon, bringing weeds, aliens and invasives with us, vilifying the newcomers we've brought and ripping them out in the name of restoring habitat for the natives. But I have a personal issue to wrestle with as I snip thorny spines of Himalayan Blackberry, smelling the fragrance of verdant life with each cut. I'm ambivalent about weeds because it took a weed to help me make a home.

Every place has its own chauvinisms, and the greater Seattle / Puget Sound region is no exception. Even after 20 years, I'm still told that I'm "so New York" in my speech, attitudes, and expectations. But to me (and borrowing from Ernest Hemingway), home is a moveable feast. My life has had many homes — jobs, bioregions, politics, writing and now a husband and child. With the exception of the last three, all have been shed like a snake's skin left in the dust, the remains of what was once close to the heart but now outgrown.

I've not traveled as far or rooted as deeply as the Himalayan Blackberry, but I believe I can speak as a weed when I say that home is not a geographic place or the creatures in it. Home is your attitude towards the place you're in. Home is where you're rooted through exploration and engagement. Learning a home requires you to look sharply at a place (something that a region's long-timers may forget to do) and grow a weed's capacity to dig in and remain where you don't originally belong.

Like many, I'm "plant blind". I don't bother to see plants other than as a blur of green, wind shifting leaves unless I make an

effort to notice. Volunteering at invasive removals forced me to learn my new home by exploring what is growing here. At T-107, I learn to recognize common tansy and its long stalks ending in feather-like fronds and a crown of yellow-gold button flowers. I realize that I have been seeing (and ignoring) common tansy in my backyard all summer long. I can never remember the field marks for Pacific Silver Fir, a native tree species, but even in winter, without its purple-black berries to pop in my mouth, I can identify the Himalayan Blackberry. It's a botanical landmark that reminds me I am in this park, weeding along this river, living in this city and not a former home.

But Himalayan Blackberry destroys a home as it creates one. Before finishing the morning's weeding at T-107, I yank and snip at a round hill of two invasives, bindweed and thistle. What's slowly revealed is a thicket of snowberry and red-osier dogwood, two native plants. Curling at the thicket's edges, waiting its chance is Himalayan Blackberry. Regardless of my respect for it, the more abundant the Himalayan Blackberry, the fewer other plants there are alongside it. As plant variety shrinks, so does the local biodiversity, with fewer and a less diverse range of birds and small mammals able to find the food, water, shelter or other ecological services they gain from a diverse variety of plants. On a more personal level, the less there is for me to learn and explore, and the smaller my home becomes.

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Weeding is like the proverbial women's work: it's never done. By mid-day, I and five other volunteers say our goodbyes alongside 16 thirty-gallon Hefty bags filled with bindweed, thistle and Himalayan Blackberry. A train rumbles. A belted kingfisher rattles a call. I smell the Duwamish's briny tang, watch cargo boats ply towards the Port of Seattle, and reach a bittersweet epiphany: maybe what I'm restoring isn't native plants but the human obligation to be engaged with the place where I live.

I'll never get rid of the Himalayan Blackberry. I'm not even sure I want to. Maybe the best I can do — maybe all I want — is to keep a balance between native and newcomer. Give the Himalayan Blackberry sun, soil, wind and birds to disperse its seeds, and it will outlast me. And through choice and tenacity, and a lot of weeding, so will the native plants

Ken Sieben

Since 1988, one hundred fifteen of Ken Sieben's stories have appeared in various literary magazines and anthologies, including *Pig Iron*, *Thema*, *Skylark*, *Sensations*, and *EarthSpeak*. His first novel, Joanie M, was published in 2007. His second, Idyll of the Kings, will appear as an e-book later this summer.

Senior Moments

I knew it was a mistake the first morning into the tour. Almost everybody wanted to ride in Ramondo's van. The first thirteen to board filled every seat, while I had only seven in mine, and two of them clearly felt cheated.

The drive from Cancun City to Chichén Itzá was almost six hours, including a two-hour visit to the Morelos Botanical Garden, where Ramondo pointed out eleven different bird species, then a stop for lunch. On the second leg of the trip, I explained to my group what they could expect to see, the known history, the theories about why the Mayan culture collapsed so suddenly after more than thirty-five hundred years, where Chichén Itzá fit into the Mesoamerican experience.

The oldest of this group of SeniorTourists—Freda—is eighty! She's been taking three or four trips like this during each of the past fourteen years and has more than six thousand species sightings on her life-list. Her day-pack is dotted with patches from more than fifty countries she has visited. From the way she spoke at our introductory meeting the first night, I came away with the idea that she's a fanatic. A lot of birders are. Of the 372 known species in the Yucatan Peninsula, Freda has seen all but twelve. Ramondo will be in deep shit if he can't find them. At least she won't be able to blame me.

After dinner the second night is when I usually lecture on Mayan architecture, religion, and astronomy, because I want the Seniors to anticipate what to expect the next day. It's a more detailed and formal presentation than the one I made in the van, and I wanted the entire group, not just my seven, to have a chance to digest the information. There are sixteen restored or partially restored structures spread over twelve square miles, a great deal to take in during a single morning. I like to stress the long history of the site as a center of agriculture dating to at least 2500 B.C., then a rising regional capital, center of worship, and home to the royalty and aristocracy. The peak came around 950 A.D.

Abandonment, following either a military defeat, a peasants' revolt, or a severe drought, came three centuries later.

The main pyramid, El Castillo, was designed so that during the vernal and autumnal equinoxes the carved feathered serpents, to whom it was dedicated, appear to be shimmering up and down the great steps. When the farmers in fields around the city saw these phenomena, they knew it was time to plant or harvest. But because of the decision by SeniorTourists, Inc., to combine birding with archeological exploration, I wouldn't be able to do this.

Vicente, be reasonable. This decision came from Headquarters. There's nothing you can do about it. From now on, you'll be the tour guide and Ramondo will be your assistant. You'll lead the ruins explorations and he'll lead the morning and evening birdwalks.

So I'm supposed to climb pyramids in the afternoon heat?

Cut your tours an hour or two shorter so you can finish by lunchtime. Let the Seniors take afternoon siestas in the air-conditioned hotels.

A lecture on birding in the Yucatan by the leading ornithologist of the area was scheduled for that evening, and I was to give my lecture on-site in the morning. Now I know my facts well enough to speak extemporaneously as we walk around, but because of the complexity and breadth of information, it's better if the Seniors have a chance to take notes beforehand. In the field they're all juggling cameras and binoculars and water bottles, making it too awkward to write things down. Therefore, what I expected to happen was that the facts would, as Americans say, go in one ear and out the other.

Ramondo had scheduled the next morning's birdwalk for six with a return for breakfast at seven-thirty. I was tired and, to be honest, still pissed off at the new arrangement, so I stayed in bed. When I entered the dining room at seven-thirty, only four

members of the group were there. One couple, Freddy and Shelley Wilkes from Minneapolis—I had to squint to make out their nametags—had overslept and missed the birdwalk. Tom Tucker and Joan Martin from Waterwitch, New Jersey, had gone with Ramondo but returned to the hotel when they realized what time it was. I took an immediate liking to them for being responsible and considerate.

We were supposed to board the vans at eight-thirty for a fifteen-minute ride to the ruins. Ramondo and the fifteen birders did not show up until eight-twenty. Thrilled at having spotted seventeen species, they had simply lost track of the time, Ramondo explained. Bennett Hearn, a widower from San Francisco, followed me into the men's room to explain that he had told Ramondo several times they were behind schedule.

So we were almost an hour late getting to Chichén Itzá. By then, it was crowded with tourists and the sun was hot as hell. There wasn't even a breeze. It didn't take long to confirm my fear. Freddy, Shelley, Tom, Joan, and Bennett paid strict attention and asked thoughtful questions, but I knew the minds of the others were wandering when I saw their eyes searching the sky.

Near the end of the morning's visit, I was describing one of my favorite places, a post-classical building called El Caracol. It had apparently been used for astronomical observations but was still under intense study by archeologists and not yet open to the public. Four years earlier, I had spent the summer as a research assistant and learned of the theories about complex natural lighting seen through various external and internal apertures that lined up only during particular astronomical events. To contemporary scientists it was one of the most important study sites, and I was quite proud of my first-hand knowledge. Just as I was starting to explain the significance, Ramondo whipped his binoculars into position and began focusing on something in a distant tree, then reached for the massive identification book he carried in his vest pocket. By then all the birders wanted to know what it was, so he told them—a Red-lored Parrot, a lifetime first for him. Freda confirmed the sighting and gave Ramondo a kiss.

Ramondo is an expert birder with a degree in ornithology.

My grandfather was blind, and he taught me how to identify birds by their calls. He would listen, then make me listen, then finally point to where he knew the bird was. I could identify more than a hundred species by the time I was ten. My birding groups always spot more birds than any other groups. We counted sixty-seven on my last trip and seventy-four on the one before that.

Ramondo found a hundred and thirty-two on his first tour. He's a natural, and he'll be a big help to you.

###

So that night I devised a plan. On the second morning, I accompanied Ramondo and all twenty SeniorTourists on the birdwalk. I pulled rank by insisting we try the trail across the street, arguing that the group had explored the woods behind the hotel the day before and that I had found a dozen rare species on my last birding trip. He couldn't object to that, so off we went. Freda heard and then spotted a pair of Melodious Blackbirds before we had walked a hundred yards, putting everyone in an expectant mood. We continued walking, pausing whenever anyone heard or saw a new bird. Led by Ramondo, we spotted a Social Flycatcher, two Tropical Kingbirds, a Kiskadee, a Keel-billed Toucan, a Ferruginous Pigmy-Owl, a Lineated Woodpecker, and a Cinnamon Hummingbird within twenty minutes. I had to admit that he was good.

When we came to a fence with a keep-out sign and an unlocked gate, Ramondo hesitated. I opened the gate and led the way through. Soon we came to a clearing with two tents and a long workbench beneath a tarp. I saw no bicycles, so I assumed the guards had pedaled into town for breakfast. I was pretty sure they wouldn't be too upset if they returned before we had left. Anyway, it would take less than a half hour to explore the ruins.

Tom from New Jersey was right behind me and he was the first to see what was left of an ancient small stone house. The roof, of course, was gone, but the walls were still mostly intact, as were the lintels above the openings. “I thought Chichén Itzá was a fifteen-minute ride from the hotel,” he said.

“I’ll explain,” I answered, stopping and motioning the group to gather round. “This site is known as Chichén Itzá anexo. It was apparently a village occupied by the skilled stonecutters who built the temples and pyramids we saw yesterday in the city. It’s not open to the public yet, but I figured you might want to check it out.”

“Are we breaking the law?” Tom asked. I gathered he was a stickler for details. This world needs more people like him.

I smiled and answered, “Just don’t mention it to anyone, okay? In the summers, there’s one half-time archeologist working on-site with several interns. They’re trying to interpretate the artifacts as they catalog them. One of my nieces was fortunate enough to secure an internship last year. That’s how I know of it. I also know the guards.”

Most of the group laughed and nodded their heads.

“This place in front of us,” I continued, “is a typical worker’s house. The remains of more than a dozen have been found so far. This one is in the best condition and will probably be re-built some day—if they ever find the money. We’ll take a quick walk around the village. I’ll tell you which buildings are safe to enter. Let’s try to stick together.”

It worked for maybe ten minutes, then Ramondo grabbed his binoculars and pointed to a group of Olivaceous Woodcreepers darting in and out of a pine tree. I started to walk ahead, followed by my five disciples and the other couple riding in my van, Eliot and Amelia Jacobs from Albuquerque. “We’ve been on several birding expeditions with SeniorTours,” Eliot told us. “But

this is the first time we've had a chance to explore ancient ruins at the same time."

"What a great idea!" Amelia added.

Right!

###

Planned as a break from our main activities, the trip to Mérida was pleasant. We stopped at Izamal, site of an ancient Mayan city with only three unrestored pyramids remaining, that was re-settled by the Spanish colonists during the 1500s. I decided the group needed a break after the long ride, so I pointed out the local market and, across the street, the Franciscan Monastery and told them to be back in the vans in an hour. The founder of the monastery, Fray Diego de la Landra, I pointed out, was the man who ordered all the sacred and historical Mayan texts burned as works of the devil. This action delayed the opportunity for translation for three centuries until the stone *stelae* with the same information were found at Copán in Honduras. I kept Ramondo with me to discuss lecture protocol and to give the Seniors a chance to be on their own. We could keep our eyes on them without breathing down their necks. Some would amuse themselves with local crafts and food. Others, I hoped, would explore the monastery and consider the historical significance of what I had told them.

Next, we drove to a colonial hacienda a few miles away for lunch, followed by a lecture on colonial history, the plantation system, and the immensely profitable sisal industry based on a feudal economy. As soon as I finished answering questions, Ramondo pulled out his binoculars and, before we had boarded the vans, pointed out a dozen as yet unseen species. The birders were thrilled. Even my archeologists spotted two or three of them.

When we arrived at Mérida, we still had time for a tour of the few remaining colonial streets in a largely-nineteenth-century city and

a visit to the Cathedral of Saint Ildelfonso, oldest in the Americas. Unfortunately for the archeological record of Mayan civilization, it was constructed with stones taken from the ancient temple, leaving a pile of rubble that can never be restored without destroying the cathedral.

Back at the hotel we had an outstanding dinner followed by a performance of very skilled traditional Mayan dancers who balanced trays of beer bottles on their heads while moving their bodies non-stop. Then Ramondo talked about the next day's planned boat trip on the rio Celestun in search of flamingoes—the birding highlight of the trip. The archeological highlight would come at our final destination—Palenque. I was looking forward to a good night's sleep in my own private room, courtesy of the hotel management—my first night not having to listen to a bird-by-bird account of Ramondo's ornithological accomplishments.

I did, in fact, sleep very well, but the morning brought a new problem. Ramondo did not appear for breakfast. I called his room and got no answer. I persuaded the manager to let me in—he knows that SeniorTours would switch hotels on my recommendation—and it was clear the room had not been occupied. Where in hell was he?

Birders tend to go off by themselves. Ramondo's eyes will be in the trees and he won't even notice if he loses someone. He's not a responsible person.

He can learn from you. We all know you've never lost a tourist or a piece of luggage in thirty-two years.

Ramondo's not even Mayan. He's from Tijuana.

Fifteen minutes before our scheduled departure time, Ramondo called me on his cell phone. He had overslept and was sorry. He was in a taxi on the way to the boat dock and promised to be on time. *Where* had he overslept, I demanded. In the house of a girl friend in a village near Celestun. That was a clear violation of company policy; guides are to be with Seniors at all times.

But the previous day I had violated not only company policy, but federal law. Ramondo had me by the *cojones*, and he knew it.

As the vans pulled into the parking lot, we all spotted Ramondo waiting for us at the dock. I was the only person who did not cheer for him. He had crossed a line and he would regret it. So, it turned out, would I.

When I saw that the boats had twelve seats, I immediately invited the drivers to join us, so that each boat would carry a guide, a driver, and ten Seniors—and a skipper. That was another violation, since drivers are to remain with their vehicles to secure Seniors' personal items, but the Dockmaster was a long-time friend and I knew he would keep his eyes open.

The boat trip was beyond even my expectations. The sky was sunny and clear, and the salty-smelling air warm with a slight breeze, even when we weren't moving. We hugged the south shore, Ramondo's boat in the lead, stopping whenever he or Freda or one of the others spotted a bird. We saw Great Blue Herons, Little Blue Herons, White Ibis, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Black-crowned Herons, Yellow-crowned Herons, White Pelicans, Neotropic Cormorants, and several other species that I missed. This river was truly a birders' paradise.

Then we saw what appeared to be long pink sandbars in the distance. Within a mile the Seniors recognized them as flamingoes. There must have been close to a thousand, feeding, bobbing their heads, spreading their long wings, dancing, flying off in groups, then wheeling back to land in the same place. Ramondo explained how flamingoes are equipped with a filtering system that enables them to suck algae from the surface water by swishing their beaks from side to side. They can filter up to twenty beakfuls per second. I've been on this river at least fifty times, yet I am always impressed with the sight. A mature Greater Flamingo is almost as tall as I am.

Returning on the other side of the river, we spotted gulls, terns, and ducks of various species as well as more herons, egrets,

and ibis. Half-way back, Ramondo surprised me by heading for a rickety, narrow wooden dock emerging from a mangrove swamp on the north shore. I usually skipped this part because I could never find any birds. We could always hear hundreds of jungle creatures, but the thick trees and vines kept them concealed from normal human eyes.

I was impressed with how lithely each of the aging SeniorTourists managed to climb out of the boats and along the dock to shore. There we followed a narrow boardwalk a few hundred yards into the swamp. Maybe I shouldn't worry about them so much. After all, Tom was a retired gym teacher and Joan, his lady friend, once sailed through a hurricane with her late husband. I was getting to know the Seniors pretty well by then, especially the seven who rode in my van. They were decent people, the kind who made me love my job.

I was also impressed with Ramondo for quickly finding a Roseate Spoonbill on a branch less than fifteen feet away. But it was impossible for twenty-three other people in single file to see what he could see. He tried, though. He stepped off into the mud and invited the Seniors to stand next to him, one-by-one, to see it. Most of us were successful.

We then proceeded slowly and quietly to the end of the boardwalk, spotting a number of other species we had already seen, then turned around to come back. Near the first sighting, Ramondo stopped and raised his hand to silence us. Word quickly came back to me that he had located a female Green-backed Heron in a nest—another first for him, for Freda, and, of course, for all the rest of us.

###

Heading south during the next two days, we visited Mayapán, Ticul, and Uxmal, and Ramondo found birds at every site. His list exceeded a hundred already, and we still had four days remaining. I was pleased that he followed my directive to keep

his hands off his binoculars until my site lectures were finished. After, the Seniors could either follow Ramondo on their quest for new species or come with me for a close-up look at the ruins.

At Mayapán, six of my seven climbed the pyramid. Tom and Eliot were the first to try, waving when they got to the top. They made it look easy. Actually, climbing up is easy—and relatively safe. If you fall, you don't have far to go. Your hands will grab a step above you. The hard part is the descent. There's nothing to grab. The safest way is to sit with both hands on the step and lower yourself one at a time. But that way doesn't look very dignified. Freddy and Bennett soon followed Tom and Eliot, probably because most men, especially Seniors, I think, cannot permit themselves to be out-performed by other men. The women have more sense—usually.

But as soon as the second pair was half way up, Shelly said to the other two women, "Let's give it a try. I know I'm in better shape than Freddy. He's five years older."

"Okay," Amelia answered. "I'm game. What about you, Joan?"

Joan smiled and shook her head. "Hey, I'm pretty good at tennis, walking, and swimming, but I don't like heights, so I'll stay here and take your pictures."

Off the two women went. They had no trouble making the long climb—eighty-two steps, if I remember correctly. These SeniorTourists are pretty athletic. I guess, as long as you stay active, growing old can't be so bad. But I still worry about them. One misstep is all it takes.

But they all made it down. Tom led the way, slowly and deliberately, and the other five followed. They also climbed the pyramids at Ticul and Uxmal while Joan stayed with me, taking pictures and talking—mostly about Tom, her neighbor for more than twenty years. She and Tom's late wife had been close friends. Joan had been a widow for six years, Tom, for three. They were taking their first joint vacation to see if they might be

able to live a compatible life together. I thought it was very romantic.

###

The schedule called for us to leave for Becán, approximately four hundred kilometers from Uxmal, after breakfast and arrive by noon. We would spend an hour there, have lunch, and drive another ten kilometers to Calakmul. Calakmul is located within the largest biosphere reserve in Mexico. Except for shorebirds, probably every Yucatán species can be found within the reserve. The plan was to spend the afternoon birding and explore the ruins of the ancient city the following day.

But, during breakfast, Ramondo proposed a change, which he had already discussed with his thirteen birders at Uxmal. Since we were headed for the middle of the Yucatán Peninsula, they agreed to give up an hour's worth of inland birding in return for an extra hour on the Gulf coast. They wanted another chance to see several salt-water species we had not seen on rio Celestun. My seven archeologists thought it was a good idea, so I reluctantly gave my approval. Experience told me to stick to a planned schedule, but I could understand their reasoning.

Within that extra hour, we saw an Anhinga, a Magnificent Frigatebird, a Double-crested Cormorant, a Pied-billed Grebe, a Fulvous Whistling-Duck, a Black-bellied Whistling Duck, and a Purple Gallinule. Freda's Yucatán list was complete! Ramondo's idea had made everybody happy.

But the happiness didn't last long. Once we turned inland, we faced long highway-widening delays. For more than a hundred kilometers, we had to stop repeatedly for construction vehicles and work our way slowly over temporary gravel roadways. By noon we were only half way to our destination. By one o'clock, we were hungry. By two, my group started to complain. I called Ramondo on the cell phone and asked if he knew of any restaurants up ahead. He didn't. We kept driving till we got to a gas

station where we made a rest-room stop. The manager told me of a place just a few kilometers up the road. We finally ate our lunch at 2:45 and arrived at *Becán* at four.

I let Ramondo lead the group off right away. But Freda stayed behind with me. “Once I’ve checked a bird off on my list,” she declared, “I don’t care about seeing it again. I’ve decided to spend the rest of the trip learning about the ancient Mayans and climbing pyramids.”

The pyramid at Becán is much too steep for even an ancient Mayan to climb. It was built on a platform that’s twenty steps above the ground. Joan looked hesitant as the others started walking up, but when Freda began to climb, I guess Joan decided she, too, could make it that far. I followed three steps behind her and she was fine.

###

The next morning’s visit to Calakmul was a tragic disaster which I did not see coming until it was too late. And I, not Ramondo, was to blame. The plan was to take a leisurely half-mile walk from the Visitors’ Center to the partially-restored city looking for birds, then to eat our box lunches from the hotel. After lunch, I would give my lecture. Then, as had become our custom, those who wanted to explore the ruins would follow me, while those who wanted to look for more birds would follow Ramondo.

But Ramondo seemed to be inspired. He saw birds in every tree—vultures, turkeys, parrots, goatsuckers, motmots, flycatchers, jays, warblers, gnatcatchers, orioles, woodpeckers, woodcreepers, tanagers. He even spotted a jaguar running through the woods near the trail. Never in my life had I seen a person able to spot and instantly identify so many different species in so short a period of time. The experienced birders were delighted; the beginners, confused. But he was patient and helpful, standing behind every doubtful Senior, pointing, identifying tree and branch, calling, whistling, chirping, charming both

birds and people. The only one who seemed bored was Freda. After an hour had passed and we had advanced less than half our distance, I announced the time and said I would walk on ahead. Nobody followed.

When I arrived at the ruins, I felt tired, hungry, depressed—and old. In two more years I would be eligible to go on a SeniorTour. Things were changing faster than I could keep up. Perhaps it was time to retire from tour-guiding. I had been offered a desk job and ought to consider it. Nine-to-five, Monday-through-Friday, sleep in my own bed every night. My wife would like that, I knew. I sat down on a wooden picnic bench in the shade of a gnarled old Banyan tree and ate my sandwich and banana, drank my fruit juice, longed for a Margarita or at least a cold beer.

I stretched out on the bench and tried to imagine how I could shorten my lecture. Calakmul was originally settled around 400 B.C. By 700 A.D. there were 50,000 residents. It was enclosed by a wall, apparently to keep out intruders. The central city where the aristocracy lived was further set off by canals. What is understood to be another observatory, known as Structure VI, was constructed to face east, across the central plaza from Structure IV, which is a long north-to-south platform on which sit three small pyramids. From the main entrance to Structure VI, at the summer solstice the sun will be seen rising directly above the northernmost pyramid; at the autumnal and vernal equinoxes, above the center; and at the winter solstice, above the southernmost pyramid. Contemporary urban planners could learn a great deal from my ancestors.

I must have fallen asleep because when I opened my eyes, I saw Freda nearing the top of the great pyramid. She had ridden in my van that morning and heard me tell the group that Guatemala could be seen from the top less than forty miles to the south. She shouldn't have been climbing alone!

But she wasn't, I saw in a moment. Tom was following and trying to catch up. He was just that kind of responsible guy.

Then I saw Eliot, Fred, Bennett, Shelley, and Amelia behind Tom. I quickly rose from the bench and started after them, just as Joan began to climb. She couldn't be out-performed by an eighty-year-old woman! I knew she was in trouble because of her fear of heights. I should have been there to talk her out of trying. Now I would have to rescue her.

By the time I started to make my way up the ninety-one steps, Freda had reached the top and turned around to watch the rest of us. She sat on the platform and waved. Tom was about ten or fifteen steps behind. Joan was at least a dozen steps ahead of me, and the others were half way up. When Tom reached the top, he turned and sat down next to Freda. But when he saw Joan climbing the steps, he stood and tried to wave her back, shouting, "Stop, Joan! Don't go any farther. Sit down and wait for me."

She must have been too frightened to hear him because she kept climbing. Tom shouted again, to no avail. Then he began to walk down, taking the steps much too quickly. Freda stood up and followed him but could not match his pace. Suddenly, she twisted her ankle, fell, and screamed. I saw Tom turn around, apparently assess the situation, brace himself, and succeed in stopping her fall. But in doing so he lost his balance and stumbled, then began rolling down the steps. I knew what was happening but was helpless to stop it. Tom bounced and rolled, one step at a time, hands and feet trying to grab hold of rounded, fourteen-centuries-worn stone. He passed the group of five, passed Joan, passed me, not stopping until his twisted, broken, bloodied body reached the ground where it lay in a crumpled heap. I ran down the steps as fast as I could, not caring if I fell. Tom Tucker was dead. My ancient gods had forsaken me.

About EarthSpeak

EarthSpeak is an online literary journal that hopes to open up a small but honest space where writers of various persuasions can pursue a dialogue concerning one of the most crucial issues of our times, namely the fitful relationship between humanity and the natural world.

EarthSpeak is interested in essays, stories and poems that explore a wide gamut of different issues and experiences as they pertain to nature and our own place within it. Submission deadlines follow a seasonal rhythm, further information for which can be found on the website's submissions page.

All submissions and inquiries may be sent to:

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