

VIEWS OF THE EMPTY WORLD

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BEAUTY IS THE BEGINNING OF TERROR, RILKE WROTE IN HIS *Duino Elegies*, and for the first time, on my way to Los Cedros Cloud Forest Reserve, I understood. The reserve is only sixty kilometers from Quito as the quetzal flies, but it is a hero's journey. A three hour bus ride from Quito, where school children crammed the aisles and sat three to a seat, took me to the mountain village of Chontal north of the capital. There, I took a truck half an hour up a bumpy dirt track, where, at the second bridge that spanned the surging Magdalena River, a guide met me with a pair of mules.

I could do this, I told myself, despite never riding a mule and not being on a horse in more than five years. The soft-spoken guide loaded up my backpack and the food I brought onto one mule and me onto the other. It appeared we were going to continue up the dirt track – it would be easy. For the first five minutes, it was easy, with bucolic views of alpine meadows looming above us. Then we took a sharp turn onto the narrow mule track. Immediately, after a steep climb up the first ridge, the track became precipitous. As we rounded the hillside, the valley suddenly yawned wide: below, a perishing doom in the seething Magdalena River while ahead, a spectacular backbone of mountains rose in the distance, together an anxious and fleeting glimpse through the doors of perception, ever-so-briefly cleansed while I white-knuckled the horn of the saddle and tried not to look down. It was a beauty I was almost

unable to bear – I could have cried from both the fear and the momentary ecstasy of the expansive view.

That section of the trail lasted only a few harrowing seconds – just a couple of mule steps – but I felt like I'd crossed a threshold of experience that showed, if nothing else, I was truly off the beaten path. Soon we passed into the cedars the reserve was named after and I never again got such an auspicious view. Now the biggest challenge was navigating mud holes a foot deep. I praised my mule for his stubborn surefootedness. On the infrequent flat sections, as if bored from picking his way so carefully, he would break into a canter, but I would quickly rein him in. Nerves still afire, slow and steady was going to win this race.

We arrived at Los Cedros after two hours, or half a lifetime. It was the beginning of a zen-like existence in the cloud forest. The allure to come here was a long list of natural wonders only a few which were advertized in advance: remote, primary rainforest with half a dozen hiking trails; mountain streams with water clean enough to drink; private swimming holes and waterfalls; and a diverse assortment of living creatures like night moths, glass frogs, wild cats and the endangered brown-headed spider monkey.

In the 1980's, Josef DeCoux came down from the US and bought the land to protect it and do his part to halt deforestation in the tropics. Today, Los Cedros Biological Reserve comprises

17,000 acres of wet tropical forest and cloud forest. It is a buffer for the enormous 450,000 acre Cotocachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve to the north and together the two are part of the Choco Phytogeographical Zone, one of Earth's most biologically diverse habitats.

I came to see this unique ecosystem for myself and its seclusion allowed an easy routine. After getting up early, I would eat breakfast and go on a three to five hour guided hike in the morning, have lunch, then take to the hammock for reading time and a siesta in the afternoon. This was followed by conversation with Josef, the volunteers and guides over dinner, evening games of ping pong or chess and an early night. My room was in its own cloud forest chalet and had a writing table that was surrounded by windows and a view of trees that seemed to be always in blossom. Apart from the hour or two of company over dinner in the evening, I could have been a monk on a solitary nature retreat.

As in the Amazon basin, where I began my trip, silence permeated the cloud forest. Clouds crept gingerly over the treetops, birds and insects chattered. All gave the impression that little happened here. You could listen to the sound of your own breathing, your heartbeat, the distant stirring of water running down a landscape devoid of human interference. Let nature come to you, Josef told me, as I went off to find the cascada one afternoon. Here I imagined I could share the thirty foot waterfall and its pure downstream runoff with any of dozens of small mammals, or preferably, one of the wild cats.

For three days I walked the trails, faintly hoping to see one of the five elusive species of felines: the jaguarundi, oncilla, margay, puma or jaguar. Sly by nature, only the jaguarundi is active in the daytime, the others are nocturnal. In my short visit, it would have been highly unlikely to spot one of these stealthy creatures on my hikes, though my hopes were temporarily raised when the guide pointed out some paw prints on the trail and said only, "Puma." It was enough to fire my imagination that they lurked nearby, watching safely out of harm's way. In his poem, "Mountain Lion," D.H. Lawrence writes, "And I think in this empty world there was room for me and a mountain lion." I saw the trails as solid lines that meandered over the mountain ridges and crisscrossed by the dotted lines of the solitary puma, who slinked along from branch to branch or crept through the understory before timing its perfect leap.

No puma came to lap from the stream while I swam in the pool of the cascada. Nor a jaguarundi, or any of the other cats. I had the entire scene to myself. If not for the tree frogs, I'd wonder if the world here was indeed empty.

In the late afternoons, as the sun drifted behind the mountains and left behind a glowing twilight, the tree frogs began calling to one another. From near and far, they emitted a high and slow electronic bleating that reverberated back and forth over the ridge and sounded more like an eerie alarm for a nuclear holocaust or even to warn of the global decline of amphibians rather than "male frog seeks female." To walk on the

trails at this time was to be immersed in a rich sonic landscape as if the trees themselves were pulsing, and to lie in a hammock then, one had to sit up and look around to make sure it was the frogs and not something more forbidding that was the cause of the alarm.

Los Cedros was established as an ecological reserve in response to the alarm of deforestation, an alarm that continues to sound. On my last day of hiking I saw the brown-headed spider monkey, a critically endangered primate numbering less than two hundred and fifty individuals, whose habitat is being destroyed by logging and who is also being hunted for bushmeat. As they swing from tree to tree, bending branches and rustling leaves, monkeys make a lot of racket and are easily seen and heard from far away. While walking along the side of the Quebrado des Monos, the Valley of the Monkeys, I heard the familiar branch-swishing of a troop passing through the canopy. They moved quickly, a group of three or four, and were soon out of range before the guide and I could find a gap in the trees to get a good look at them. Then we saw the straggler, high among the branches, dangling from his prehensile tail, grabbing at fruit. We watched his antics in binoculars.

I often thought about the tree of life, its myriad branches and sub-branches. Biologists have catalogued 1.8 million species and don't know if they are almost done or just beginning. Hominids and new world monkeys, such as the brown-headed spider monkey, share an ancestor who lived in the trees thirty-five million years ago and we still share more than 90 percent of our DNA with these little-known primates.

Curious to see who was standing out from the green of the shaggy bromeliads and

epiphytes, the monkey looked at us and went back to his business. We were the ones trying to make sense of the rare encounter. A moment later, the monkey stood between a pair of branches, tried to make itself look tall and looked right at us, perhaps to scare us off. We stayed. Eventually, it tired of us and swung away to rejoin its troop. I fear this is the metaphor for our future. We stayed and the animals left us to our devices, our stubbornness, our environmental impoverishment.

The mule trip down was quicker and less harrowing than the way up. This time the precipice was less daunting, as the view the other direction was muted. The guide unpacked my backpack and waited with me for the truck to pick me up at the second bridge. Within minutes, a pack of mules clopped down the dirt track from the direction of Los Cedros, each carrying four freshly cut pieces of lumber, probably cedar. A couple of sullen-looking men followed on motorcycles and an older cowboy with his ten year old daughter. Already a few dozen slabs of lumber were stacked on the hillside beyond the bridge. Here was the forest being dragged out, illegally, one tree at a time. Yesterday's threats have not gone away. The men busied themselves with unpacking the beautiful amber wood from the mules. We exchanged no greetings. They had work to do.