The Island: Taquile / Lake Titicaca

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The Island  
Taquile Island, Lake Titicaca

I knew that in that field I could listen to all sounds, all music.
John Berger, "Field"

How do you write about an island? Do you begin with its dark, terraced mass rising from the ocean lake 4000 meters above its sister seas? Or do you start with the counter shot, with the view from the island's rocky highpoint down over the tilled terraces to the sun setting above the lake's vast reed beds and the jagged blue lines of Peru's distant peaks?

Do you write about it as a clean unlit place well beyond the jumbled lights of Puno, the filth of Puno Bay, and the acrid clouds from the cement plant?

Do you describe it as an ordered agrarian space of stacked corn, heaped potatoes, red quinoa erect among green beans?

Do you focus on the twisting, interminable lines and mazes, the shoulder-high fences of stacked rocks gleaned from the fields over centuries?

Is absence the key to the island rising a thousand feet above the deep blue vastness of Lake Titicaca: the relentless lack of oxygen?

Is it twelve-year-old Celso's once yellow sweater framing what is already a man's face?
Do you unlock the island's secrets by looking into a courtyard defined by adobe walls slotted with brightly painted doors, a sheltered rectangular space in which the inhabitants have stretched a narrow loom, piled twisted potatoes on a mat, and tumbled three empty plastic five-gallon water containers into a corner?

Any of these, and none of them, would serve the purpose. So I'll begin, arbitrarily, a matter of personal preference, with bare feet: strong, patient, nimble, stumbling, dusty brown feet, careful and sure, fragile and cunning, chapped, calloused, abused intermediaries on the steep, exacting, uneven, unending sandstone paths.

30 April

The language is no longer mine. I'm an intruder from the most powerful country in the hemisphere. I don't get the jokes. I may be the joke. Only my overweaning pride lets me still believe I can come here for two weeks and help someone.

Children dance and sing for the tourists as we climb the terraces to an open-air temple near the Urubamba River. I try to hand a couple of them a handful of US change. They refuse it. No value.

3 May

Quillabamba, a tiny station on the rail line to Machu Picchu, nearly impassable up to three years ago because of forays of the Sendero Luminoso, the Shining Path

A young woman carrying a slippery child slides under a fence and runs on bare feet to meet the train. She vies with several children to grab apples and drumsticks and bread we throw from the windows. I’m deeply embarrassed by the scene, by my part in the scene, by the obscene disparity in wealth in our hemisphere.

Machu Picchu
A city of large stones cut and moved and fit together in intricate and certain patterns, anchored by stones and stairs cut out of and into the immovable stone of the mountain. Once this was a wild and natural place, formed only by time and air and water and fire. Then the Incas imposed on the dramatic landscape their own structure, new forms, determined, defined, delimited by each hammer blow, each abrasion, each added fitted stone. For centuries now there have existed fixed paths, stairs, rooms, ritual spaces. It is a split city: the upper half for nobles and priests, the lower for the masses. To move in directions other than those hewn in stone is next to impossible. The effect of the ruined city on me, this afternoon, is constricting; but if those Incan architects hadn't built their walls here, I would never have stood between these phallic peaks and deep-cut valleys, between the cloudy sky and the rushing Urubamba, between the *altiplano* and the jungle, that have changed, today, the way I see things, the way I envision human endeavor.

4 May
On the plaza in Cuzco
   Sam and I sit on a park bench. A kid comes up selling paintings, kitsch, we've seen a thousand of these in a few hours.
   Where are you from? he asks in English. Germany, France, United States, Switzerland?
   We're from Germany, I say, and speak German.
   He replies in German, extolling his paintings.
   I try him in French. He answers. We're really from the U.S., Sam says.
   Your capitol is Washington, D.C., he says. Your president is Bill Clinton. His wife is Hillary Clinton.
   Do you learn languages in school? I ask.
   I don't have money to matriculate, he says, so I don't go to school. Won't you take a painting? I need the money. My grandfather paints them.
   Sure he does, Sam says, just like all the others we
have seen. What's his name?

The boy says a name. It matches the signature on the back of the watercolor.

I'll sell you one of these for 5 Soles, a special price for you.

We burst into laughter, nod our heads wisely, and raise our eyebrows.

A big smile breaks onto his face too. Now we are co-conspirators.

I buy a painting. Sam laughs at me.

Next door to our hotel a military base. Young men carrying rifles stand guard at the entrance. From within, the sound of someone trying to play a bugle. *Uno, dos, tres*, chant breathless recruits, *uno, dos, tres*. Two blocks from the military post, in front of a station of the Police National, loom the imponderable wheeled masses of two enormous armored cars, ancient politically opportunistic creatures crowned by phallic water cannons, battered bruised skins thick with boils inflicted during decades spent protecting the fluctuating status quo against rock-throwing citizens.

Sam, Nancy, and I are sitting in a cafe eating pastries. A roughly dressed middle-aged man comes in and asks the owner a question. She tells him to get lost. He wanders over to our table and, standing erect, says something. *No comprendo*, I say. He picks up Nancy's bottle of coke, lifts it to his lips, and drinks the whole thing. *Gracias*, he says, and stalks out of the cafe.

5 May

Four-hour boat ride from Puno to Taquile Island. Once we are well out on the lake, the boat's captain, Alejandro Flores, shows us a book about culture on the *altiplano* that has a photo of him and a whole page on which he gives his philosophy of culture and its transmission. He has been to Washington, D. C., he tells us, a guest of the Smithsonian. Besides the skill we
observe with the boat and its balky engine, he is a weaver, musician, and dancer.

6 May, standing in the windshadow of a rock wall watching the sunrise on the northeastern side of Taquile Island

I'm staying in a dirt-floored, tin-roofed adobe room with a bed built into each end. The door leads into a little courtyard. Eucalyptus leaves, Sam says, will get rid of the fleas. They don't. I slept poorly, and dreamt a lot. The most vivid dream took place in an auto dealer's where I was trying to get a receipt. The woman at the counter asked me some question, was distracted, asked it again, didn't listen to my answer, asked again. Damn, I said, can't you listen? Pay attention! Have you ever won a car in our contest? she asked. That's beside the point, I shouted, give me my receipt. Have you ever won a car? she asked sweetly. No, dammit, give . . . We have a winner! We have a winner! she shouted. You have just won a new car. People gathered all around and arrangements, lots of them, were made for me to drive away in my new black car.

Shortly after noon

After breakfast we trooped down to the pier, 950 uneven steps at between 13,000 and 14,000 feet altitude, to carry up load after load of some sort of long hardwood 2X2's and aluminum window frames. Not much oxygen available to supply those big thigh and buttock muscles.

Evening, 32 of us waiting for a group dinner at a tiny restaurant run by a man named Faustino. The stars are brilliant, especially the river of stars that is the Milky Way. The Southern Cross, which I have never seen before, slants across the bright torrent. As darkness fell I sat exhausted on the two-foot-high threshold of my room and blew bubbles with Celso, one of my host's children.

7 May, Sunday, and mercifully no work.

I sit on a beach with Cindy, Sam, Kathy, Louise,
and two little girls. We wash our hair in the lake and then sit on rocks and watch the girls build houses out of wet sand and reeds.

A woman brings her four- or five-year-old boy, a small herd of sheep, and a bundle of clothes down the slanting rock to the beach. Sam watches the scrambling sheep. Land maggots, he says. The boy whistles and plays on the rocks. The woman washes the clothes, beats them on the rocks, then lays them to dry on the sun-facing sides.

Kathy draws the girls while they play in the sand. Sam and I go to sleep. When I wake up Kathy has done a watercolor of one of the girls, an exciting play of browns and blacks. The girls are crowded around her, eyes sparkling, mouths working, touching her brushes, laughing when she gives them little pictures she has drawn of them.

Cindy tells us that one of them has six toes on each foot, and we take note with circumspect interest.

In the growing darkness, out of the cold wind that has come up, I'm sitting in a restaurant on the town square, drinking a warming cup of matte de coca, talking with Sam about the overgrazed, overworked island. Unwashed windows overlook the vast lake and snow-covered Bolivian mountains. A single weak light burns at one end of the room, powered by a car battery charged by a solar cell. A radio plays Sheryl Crow's "Are You Strong enough To Be My Man?"

Under a red-and-white Peruvian flag and a colorful Taquile flag flying on adjacent flagpoles, eight men and three women descend the stairs of the community center dressed in ceremonial costumes. The men wear dark felt hats over colorful knit hats, bright white shirts, black pants over white pants visible at the cuffs, black-and-white vests, black coats, a wide white woven strip of cloth across one shoulder, a broad red woven belt, short brass-bound staffs of their office as governors of the island held
across their chests by double woven leather straps, and tennis shoes. The women wear the ubiquitous dark cloth over their heads, red sweaters, black skirts over skirts of brighter colors, and are barefoot.

In 1580 a Spaniard, Pedro Gonzáles de Taquila, was awarded the island by Charles V, king of Spain. As late as the 1930's the island and its native inhabitants were owned by various landlords from Puno. The Taquileans began, at that time, to buy back their land, a process complete by 1970.

In the paved square three boys chase a girl a little bigger than they are. They come up behind her, push her, and then try to evade her when she snaps her black head covering as a whip. When they get in a good push they beat their breasts with clenched fists. I pull out a piece of candy and give it to her. The boys come up and ask for one. No, I say, and beat my chest. They are dumbfounded.

8 May

A sun-drenched breakfast in the courtyard of a little restaurant. The woman wouldn't take my 5,000,000 Sole (5 new Soles) bill because it didn't have flowers in the right spot. Five years ago, Gary says, the rate of inflation was 7500% per year. In Germany, that kind of inflation helped fuel the Nazi rise to power.

I'm impressed (as I have been before) by Gary's command of the facts, facts gathered with intense energy and focus. He just finished a law degree while engaged in full-time research and award-winning teaching. And he recently turned down a prestigious position at the University of Colorado out of a sense of commitment to the graduate program in public policy he has recently begun at BYU.

We gather at the school. A Taquileno blows a
referee's whistle to summon people from across the island to work on the two new rooms.

Early afternoon, exhausted by three trips up the hill carrying floorboards -- heavy Amazonian hardwood. Two cokes (who carried them up the hill?), a liter and a half of orange drink, a powerbar (hauled up the killer steps in my dufflebag), and five bread rolls later I feel like I could maybe do one more trip. Halfway down the trail I pull off and sit on a huge stone.

Sheep bleat.
Humming. Bees.
Birdwings.

A woman in a red dress carries a bulky load on her back as she walks along a row of eucalyptus trees far below.
The lake smooth in large patches. Elsewhere slightly ruffled.
A bird call.

One of the Taquile community's blue-and-white boats arrives quietly from somewhere.
A slight breeze.
Steady sun.

Thumps -- people coming down the stairs. No, it's a small bunch of sheep, herded along the trail by a young man, a load of cornstalks on his back and a radio in one hand tuned to a news program.

More bird sound.
The boat leaves, its wake an arrow toward Puno.
A little girl herds a few sheep across a terrace below.

Bright clothing drying on a rooftop.

7 p.m. In Faustino's restaurant. Close, stuffy, claustrophobic with the sound and smell of a kerosene lantern and thirty closely packed bodies. Gary comes in late. He's bundled up in several layers of clothing, including a tan parka. Its hood is pulled up over a stocking cap.

Who has diarrhea? Cindy asks for a show of
All day we worked like piss ants hauling wood up from the pier. Five trips up and down was all I could muster. Fifteen boards. A tiny pile after an enormous effort. At five the head man blew his whistle and we stood there while a couple of men gave speeches in Cacao thanking us for our work and praising the community effort (at least that's what I think they were saying). Then the children came out of the school and stood in lines, the boys in black and white, the girls in colorful dresses and their head scarves. The teacher, with whistle and cap and an American flag on the front and a satin soccer-uniform shirt, stood and gave a speech. then Percy, the school president, gave a speech, then someone else, and finally the children were set free. In the meantime the schoolyard had fallen into shade and I was left shivering in the thin air in my sweatsoaked clothing. Gary too, it appears.

9 May

A dream this morning. We had built a fine new house on top of a sandy hill. We went away for a while. When we returned we found six or eight other new houses built there, huge, elegant, monstrous edifices surrounded by elaborate toys for the children of the families, including a full sized monorail that circled the hill. While I dreamed this I found myself periodically in the adobe room on Taquile with children playing in the courtyard. Whichever place I was I found it next to impossible to find my way back to the other place, to even imagine or picture the other place.

Breakfast: panqueques con miel and two cokes. Eight of us gathered around the sunny table moaning about stiff legs and backs and headaches and the altitude and diarrhea and tapeworms in the outhouses. Or, in two cases, about the absence of outhouses altogether.

One of my best moments yesterday: after dinner, after stumbling down the dark stairs, I climbed up along
the edge of the field to the outhouse and there, under a bright half moon and the sweeping Milky Way, I crouched and relieved myself physically and psychologically. It was quiet, I was full and warmed and rested, and the natural beauty of the night sky carried me away.

In the courtyard, about to enter my room, I saw the flicker of a black-and-white tv through my hosts' window. A car battery. Later, candlelight from the same window.

1300 people on the island, and they are tightly intermarried. They don't marry people from other places, Percy says, because other people don't know how to weave.

Percy is the elected president of the school, a dignified, handsome, intelligent man who fulfills an crucial function in this community. He is, I find out, 45 years old, exactly my age. The comparison makes me wonder about my own worth to my community.

This morning we'll bring the last of the wood from the pier. Not a single vehicle of any sort on the island. Anything that came from somewhere else -- tin roofs, wood other than eucalyptus, car batteries, solar panels, television antennae, fresh fruit, tennis shoes, school books -- was carried on someone's back up 950 steps and then over the island's rough stone paths.

Sam reads passages from Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Crossing*:

In the country they'd quit lay the bones of a sister and the bones of his maternal grandmother. The new country was rich and wild.

[The indian] looked into the eyes of the boy. The boy into his. Eyes so dark they seemed all pupil. Eyes in which the sun was setting.
In which the child stood beside the sun.
He had not known that you could see yourself in others' eyes nor see therein such things as suns. He stood twinned in those dark wells with hair so pale, so thin and strange, the selfsame child.

He finished his supper and went to bed. Boyd was already asleep. He lay awake a long time thinking about the wolf. He tried to see the world the wolf saw. He tried to think about it running in the mountains at night. He wondered if the wolf were so unknowable as the old man said. He wondered at the world it smelled or what it tasted. He wondered had the living blood with which it slaked its throat a different taste to the thick iron tincture of his own. Or to the blood of God. In the morning he was out before daylight saddling the horse in the cold dark of the barn. He rode out the gate before his father was even up and he never saw him again. . . .

He was in no way prepared for what he beheld.

Lunch break. Two cokes and a tortilla Taquilena -- fried potatoes, tomatoes, onions. Nothing left on the pier! We started hauling water in galvanized buckets from a megalithic tomb-like well a mile across the main fold of the island. Dumped it in dirt loosened by ingenious double-handled footplows. Mud to slap into crevices in the rock walls. Trip after trip. 25 gringas and gringos with buckets. Nearly as many black-shawled, barefooted women carrying on their backs pottery jugs stoppered with leaves or 5-gallon plastic containers wrapped in black woven blankets with double red pinstripes, the ends pulled over both shoulders and held by a knot between the collarbones. The English speakers sang favorite songs:
"Where Have All the Flowers Gone," "Come On Baby Light My Fire," "I'm in Love with a Big Blue Frog," "She Makes Love Just Like a Woman," "Show Me the Way to the Next Whiskey Bar," "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Brown-eyed Girl," "Rocky Raccoon." Gary is the star. He knows lyrics and tunes to hundreds of songs: "Her name was Magill and she called herself Lil / But everyone knew her as Nancy."

While their bare feet move like seeing-eye dogs among the rocks, the women who share our water-carrying duty spin wool onto dancing drop spindles.

And to the end that these Indians should rid themselves of the hatred they have conceived against Spaniards, that they should dress in clothing prescribed by law, and that they would adopt our Spanish customs and speak the Castilian language, schools shall be more vigorously encouraged than heretofore, with the most stern and just punishment for those who do not use them, after a due period of time for their enlightenment . . .

1781: Cuzco (from Eduardo Galeano's Memory of Fire: Faces and Masks)

The Indians, tough as esparto grass, keep hoping their day will come. By Velasco's decree the Cacao language now has the same rights as Spanish, and is equally official, though no official cares. The Academy of the Cacao Language gets a subsidy from the state -- the equivalent of six dollars and seventy-five cents a year.

1975: Lima (from Galeano's Memory of Fire: Century of the
Work continues on the school. We mix mud and slap it onto the walls, break rocks with sledgehammers and steel bars, and with the smaller rocks level the floor. Someone makes a joke about Alabama convicts.

Four teenaged schoolboys -- white shirts, black pants and vests, red stocking caps with white tails and colorful tassels -- walk slowly past, conversing. Each of them busies his hands knitting a red-and-white hat on four needles.

One of the governors passes out coca leaves to the workers. Each has a woven pouch to put the leaves in. The schoolboys carry leaves in the tails of their hats.

Coca is an Andean product, whose domestication and use date back four thousand to six thousand years. Cocaine is a European invention of 130 years ago. Both products stimulate the cultural values of their respective societies: Coca enhances community, sociability, and the communal spirit. Cocaine is the maximum expression of so-called "Western" individualism; it isolates the individual, not only from other people but from all reality.

From "The Sacred Coca Leaf Lives: 500 Years of Indigenous and Popular Resistance," a tract circulated in Cuzco in October, 1992, the Columbus quincentenary, during a demonstration against "five hundred years of European
From somewhere up the hill from the school a train of women brings blanketloads of small rocks for the floor. Their bare feet are hesitant and sure on the rock trails, toes lifted high, knees bent slightly with each step. What has attracted my attention is the odd, efficient glide this produces.

It's after five. I'm chilled again and return to my room. In the courtyard fifteen-year-old Pauline kneels like a woman on a blanket, her bare feet peeking out behind her, and weaves a wide red belt with white stripes. Behind her is a big pot of peeled and cut up potatoes. She is listening to a radio, to a maddeningly repetitive song I have heard in past weeks from my children's rooms: "In your head, in your head, in your head, in your head, in your head." A light brown chicken with a red comb wanders into the courtyard. Three kinds of handmade picks or hoes or shovels lie on the dirt floor. In sidles a black-and-white hen. Pauline stands up from her weaving. She smiles at me like a shy and curious girl.

11 May

In the field outside the house where I am staying are what look like the materials for a new house: carefully piled lines of big adobe bricks, tin roofing, several 4X4 eucalyptus poles, and some long thin sticks.

I join Sam in the bright courtyard of the Socta Suyo restaurant. He reads The Crossing and I John Berger's About Looking. He stops, looks up, scratches two-weeks' growth of whiskers, clears his throat, and reads a passage aloud:

In the end he dusted flour from the bowl on the sideboard over the wooden table and wrote his thanks in that and went out and
got his horse and let it afoot down the zaguán and out through the portal. He mounted up and rode out down the little dusty street nodding to those he passed on his way. riding like a young squire for all his rags. Carrying in his belly the gift of the meal he'd received which both sustained him and laid claim upon him. For the sharing of bread is not such a simple thing nor is its acknowledgement.

I reciprocate:

Remember what it was like to be sung to sleep. If you are fortunate, the memory will be more recent than childhood. The repeated lines of words and music are like paths. These paths are circular and the rings they make are linked together like those of a chain. You walk along these paths and are led by them in circles which lead from one to the other, further and further away. The field upon which you walk and upon which the chain is laid is the song.

The field that you are standing before appears to have the same proportions as your own life.

Last night, in the light of the nearly full moon, about twenty of us walked across the island and most of the way down now familiar steps to the pier. The lake shimmered below, delicately contained by mountains black and low on every horizon. From a lone, large house, the only one evident on this side of the island, lights and the rhythmic, repetitive music of flutes and drum welcomed us. We had been invited to a rutuchiy, a ceremonial first haircutting, and to an attendant demonstration of dance and music. Tim, who has coordinated several projects on the island, was to be the compadre.
We sat on adobe benches built against the walls of the courtyard, covered for the occasion by folded blankets, and listened to several speeches in Spanish and Cacao welcoming us as *comadres* and *compadres* and reminding us of the responsibilities for the child's welfare we were taking on. Then, one by one, we approached the table in the center of the courtyard, selected three perfect coca leaves from a pile on a cloth, and inserted them, glossy side up, into a bowl of quinoa grain. The bowl of white kernels was prickly with green leaves when the child's mother brought the year-old child out and sat with him on a chair next to the table. In the same order as before, we stepped into the center of the courtyard, placed coins or a bill on a plate, took up a pair of scissors, cut off a lock of the baby's as yet uncut hair, and placed the hair among the quinoa and coca leaves. The little boy, seeing albino strangers approach him with scissors in hand, jerked away and screamed in protest. His mother, armed for the possibility, handed him a bag of animal crackers, and while the ceremony continued, he stuffed his fat cheeks. The damage finally done, we all stood and exchanged hugs and felicitations.

While we ate bowls of potato-and-barley soup, a bucket of water was sprinkled on the dirt floor to keep down the dust. Between rooms a flurry of men and women in bright costumes. Then, to the music of flutes and drums, the first dance. Three fierce, feathered, brightly-clothed men with long poles, small white flags at their tips. Three women with similar white cloths. The women whipped the cloths around their waists as they whirled suddenly in small circles, their small bare feet quick and sturdy, their multiple skirts wheeling around them. The men leaned out at 45° angles, supported by poles planted at opposite angles toward the center, and pounded out a strong, intoxicating step, one foot forward for two steps, then back, the other forward for a repeated step and then back.

The long, energetic dance ended and we applauded. After a long costume change a larger circle of brightly
plumed men and women danced into the courtyard to the sound of pan flutes all the men carried. This quick, demanding, exhausting dance, oxygen loss at 13,000 feet multiplied by the air blown into flutes of three registers, went on interminably, the music of two bars and the steps to match repeated hypnotically until finally some signal ended the dance and we again applauded the dancers' grace and energy and stamina.

A third dance followed, two couples in a kind of square dance. Varying the basic pattern of double partners, they formed various groupings of three -- two men and woman, two women and man -- capturing each other, being captured. They smiled and laughed and for the first time on the island, as they danced, we saw men and women relating with each other on exactly and exacting equal footing. More applause, and then, without warning, we were invited by partners onto the dance floor and were ourselves whirling around, gasping in the thin air, to the music of pan pipes, straight flutes, ukelele, mandolin, guitar, and snare and bass drums. Finally, hours or minutes later, handshakes all around and the magical return trip up the hill under the moonlight.

I slept like a log.

A woman dancing and dancing becomes pregnant. What is it? A spindle.

Taquile Riddle

This morning I look at the feet of the women I pass and imagine them circling deftly under their full skirts in interminable dances.

*quinoa* a goosefoot (*Chenopodium quinoa*) native to the Andes and cultivated for its edible seeds. [American Spanish *quínoa*, from Quechua *kinua*, *kinoa.*]

Quarrying sandstone this morning from the schoolyard. Men from the island break it off in big slabs
with steel bars, chisels, and hammers. Then we beat it into smaller chunks with a sledgehammer three of us share. Our first flat blows shake us more than the sandstone. The hammer's owner, fearing for the health of the handle, shows us how to strike, with the edge of the hammer's face, blows in a line near the edge of the rock. Slowly we gain the skill and work steadily, even at 14,000 feet, all morning. The rest of the group, a line of hungry ants, carries the broken rock into the two rooms to further level the floor.

For lunch today we all gather in the schoolyard where two long cloths are spread out in an "L" and heaped with boiled corn on the cob, broad beans, oca, potatoes, and chuño -- black rolls of freeze-dried potatoes stamped into submission by bare feet. Black-shawled women bring us bowls of barley and potato soup they have been cooking over open fires all morning. And Faustino has carried cases of cokes from his restaurant.

All the workers -- gringos and islanders -- join in the feast, along with four or five teachers from the school. There are speeches, several in guttural Cacao. We formally hand over the tools and school supplies we have brought with us. And then go back to work.

I'm sitting near the top of the west side of the island watching the sun set, released, finally, from penal labor with a sledgehammer. The lake is a swiftly changing shimmering white toward the sun and black-blue to the east. Children's laughter rises from far below. A golden fire burns at the borders of the clouds. A swallow, recognizable only by the quick chirp it deposits, dives along the curve of the island so close to my head that it feels and sounds like a bullet.

I'm tired. Again.

The sound of nimble, running bare feet. A woman hurries down the trail leaning forward to balance a bulky blanket pack stuffed with cornstalks or broadbeans.

The sun is long gone. It's cold. I write in bright
moonlight.

On the trail below men and women labor up from the well with water for the evening and morning.

Carrying buckets of water halfway across the island, carrying rocks and dirt in the schoolyard for hour after hour, the repeated excruciating trips up and down to the pier -- the simple, repeated labor, on reflection, has a zen-like quality.

I make my way down to Faustino's restaurant where we gather, an hour still till dinner, to listen to Sue talk about native-American mythology. She's a big, beautiful woman, a dear friend, her burning blue eyes witnesses to much pain. She tells her stories with an odd combination of childlike innocence and broad intellectual context.

She talks about lost mythologies, about native self-definition by consent and descent, the latter a return to the stories of ancestors, the former a new creation. She tells about a young native American at the University of Michigan, bereft of cultural context, who walked out into a frozen field and took off his clothes and lay down and died. She describes a book about a prophet from Cuzco who says that the Incas have been waiting in hiding, purifying themselves, and that they will return and lead us into light.

I study two calendars on the adobe walls: one celebrates ubiquitous capitalism -- "Siempre Coca Cola," the other the smiling bespectacled Japanese-Peruvian "Presidente de la Republico del Peru, Ingeniero Alberto Fujimori," who came to Taquile during the election. I think of the German legend of Barbarossa, lying wait in a cave with his armies until it's time to awaken and save Germany. What makes me dislike what attracts Sue so strongly?

She's telling another story and I catch a random phrase: "In his day cotton grew in colors." A suddenly image that delights. She tells the story with fervor and consummate skill.

There are two posters on the wall, one of a
Mediterranean village, a harbor, and some yachts, the other of an open bible between flowers and bread rolls. On the tables are real flowers, wild flowers, in glass mugs.

Sue continues her story. The kerosene lantern burns, sucking the oxygen from the room.

We eat a quiet dinner of fish and fried potatoes and walk to our rooms in the moonlight and fall immediately into deep sleep. Those of us, at least, who do not have to fight altitude sickness all night, breaking repeatedly out of air-hungry nightmares into panting, sucking consciousness.

12 May

I woke up, just before dawn, to the sounds, it seemed to me, of refrigerators and stoves being shoved across a concrete floor. I opened my eyes to see the perpetrators. Darkness. It was, it turned out, the tin roof being pulled off the adjoining house. My hosts are putting up a second floor, and they say it will take two days.

I climb to a high point to watch the sun rise. Sam is there too, tormented by cacophonous snoring in the room above what has begun to call "the snore chamber." I tell him about last-night's dive-bombing swallow. A flock of what look like swallows swerves toward us. Their breasts, as they fly over, catch the sun and flash iridescent green. They are the parakeets we have heard about, the gorgeous birds islanders think bring bad luck. They kill them.

I describe the sound of the tin roof coming off and the new story my hosts are building with the adobe bricks that have been baking in the sun.

In Mexico, Sam says, they are discouraging building with adobe because it depletes the topsoil. In dry climates it can take 10,000 years to make an inch of topsoil. This island, like much of the world, is losing topsoil at phenomenal speed. Look at the clumps of grass around us. See how they are raised a couple of inches
above the dry patches between. That much topsoil has been lost during the life of that grass. And notice how the sheep haven't eaten those clumps. It's a kind of sword grass that has taken over where overgrazing has destroyed the other ground cover. Taquile is a beautiful island in desperate condition after centuries of overuse. It wouldn't have looked like this five hundred years ago. And there has been a drastic change in the trees here as well. The eucalyptus is very nearly the only tree on the island, imported into the Americas from Australia. They grow quickly. They flourish at this altitude. They smell good. They make good poles. But they're not good for lumber and they are full of oils that harm the fertility of the soil.

After breakfast I went back to my room where work was proceeding on the second story of the family's main room. Thick eucalyptus poles had been laid across the old walls and the next layer of adobes was being added. Celso and his brother Thomas were taking turns with a wheelbarrow carrying two bricks at a time across difficult terrain, up little board bridges, across bumpy grass, over little ditches on planks only four inches wide. On the way back they carried their little brother in the wheelbarrow. He smiled the whole time, although he had to hold on for dear life at the drops from one level to another, and routinely came unstuck from the wheelbarrow anyway. They are tough little boys, ten and eleven years old, and they would have moved the hundreds of heavy bricks over the course of the day; but things were slow at the school so John, with whom I share the room, and I started helping and were later joined by several of the other students. It took us about an hour, after which José, our host, offered us handfuls of coca leaves, which I accepted in my hat. Near the end of our work, climbing up a steep ditch, I slipped and fell, smashing my middle finger between the adobe brick and a stick. Now I'm at the clinic waiting on a bench in the front hall to see Cindy, La Doctora.

On the counter next to my head is a 3-D poster
demonstrating various birth-control methods.

----- more on the clinic -----

Cindy looked at my finger with her fingers and eyes, taped it to the adjoining finger, said it ought to be x-rayed, and finally supposed that unless the joints were effected it would be fine. What more could one ask of a doctor?


At the school the rock walls have been mudded over, the floors leveled, and this afternoon big sheets of plastic were stretched on a frame under the trusses as a ceiling. Most of us spent the afternoon carrying more water to make the plaster that will cover the mud. At the low point between the well and the school is a pasture on which cut grass has been spread in patches. On that grass are small, wizened, drying, fragrant potatoes, on the way to becoming chuño.

Against a wall two girls practice volleyball with a USC basketball.

After work I climb high up the west end of the island to watch the sunset again. On the way up I pass two young women, one barefooted, the other in sandals, treading on a pile of squishy potatoes. Tonight there is a sundog to the right of the sun. A brisk cold wind up here. To the south a big bank of clouds catches the last
sunlight on its highest pillows. The moon, a fiercely white disk, rises from the snowcapped Bolivian mountains. In dark patterns on the slate-colored lake, the wind blows the water away from the western shore of the island.

The last two images of the evening:
-- a little girl dancing in dark silhouette against the western sky
-- an aged, bent woman easing a heavy bundle down the stone path, her bare feet wise and cautious.

-----Cindy's talk about her medical work -----

All adults here exposed to TB.
All symptoms could also come from overwork.
The story of the woman with the IUD who now thinks her organs are rotting (if it doesn't breach confidentiality)
95-year-old woman, and the convergence of developed and non-developed, gringa and Peruvian, educated and non-educated in the finality of death.

13 May
Up soon after dawn, sitting on a wall on a hill, watching a young woman come up the trail with a baby on her back, barefoot on the rocks, and, I'm happy to hear, breathing hard. It's not just me. Following her, several hundred feet behind, a three- or four-year-old boy in blue sweater and red stocking cap: *typico Taquileño*. I feel bad for even thinking the cliché. I have sworn not to use the word "tranquil" to describe the island.

Roosters crow. Birds chatter. A sheep baa's. Pairs of birds chase one another over and down the rough terrain.

A girl in a red sweater leaves a house, walks along the edge of a field, and pulls a few leaves off a young eucalyptus. Breakfast tea?
Almost no breeze, the sun warm on my black
jacket.

The sound of children playing.

A little girl passes me with a pack full of cornstalks. I say good morning and offer her some cookies. She hesitates, looks back up the trail, steps over, extends a hand dirty from the morning's work, takes the cookies, and hightails it. A minute later her mother, carrying a larger pack, treads more heavily past. She doesn't return my greeting.

A small dove alights on the rock next to me.

A man walks across the patch of broad beans just below. He carries a hand sickle. He responds to my good morning with a smile and a wave. He walks through two larger broadbean patches and then begins to cut beans, leaving their roots in the ground with clean sweeps of the sickle.

All the houses on the island are brown, either from the brown sandstone or the brown adobe. the thatched roofs are also brown tending to black. the tin roofs gleam bright in sunlight and are especially, eerily white under the moon. The doors are alive with color, sky blue, like the doors of the school, or geometric patterns of red, white, and yellow.

A flea moving in the hairs of my legs as I woke up.

The man with the sickle returns with a full pack of broadbeans.

I read John Berger's essay "Field." In the opening paragraph he apostrophizes the field as his lover, or as the shelf on which she keeps the "invisible and intangible jars of her pleasure.

A young man passes me, walkman speakers in his ears.

The sound of radio news wafts up the hill from the village center.

My fingernails have grown, and have grown dirty during my days here. I clean them, then chew them off. I leave a tiny pile on the sandstone rock I've been sitting on for hours, like my droppings in the outhouse, a contribution to the island's topsoil.
A little girl in a green skirt is having a hell of a time getting her pack of corn stalks down the hill. She stops repeatedly to adjust them. She drops them. She fixes her carrying cloth again. Half of them fall out. She drops the whole bundle in disgust and trots, unburdened, down the path to where she can call down into a courtyard. Minutes later her red-sweatered mother, adjusting the black cloth on her head, comes slowly up the path. She helps the girl repack half the load, sends her down the hill, picks up the other half of the stalks and follows her home.

A fat slow sandstone-colored little long-tailed lizard drags itself onto a sunny rock next to me. I have taken off my jacket in deference to the direct sunlight and the sill air. Without warning a stiff breeze chills me back into the jacket. The lizard disappears. The wind passes rapidly and I sit again in still air while the small stand of eucalyptus trees that gave up leaves for tea flares up in a standing whirlwind, trees and bushes on every side still quiet. White twists of eucalyptus bark rise and twirl in the swirling wind and the trees give and wave and bend and sough until the sucking wind moves on.

A whistle from the school. time to go to work. It has been a lovely morning.

I am the first one to arrive. I watch the man with the whistle stand at the rock fence overlooking the valley. He slides coca leaves into a pocket of his mouth, cleans his tongue between moist lips, swallows, and blows the whistle again.

Late afternoon, down at the rocky lakeshore. I wash my hair and feet and am just ready to lay back on a flat rock and enjoy the sun and rhythmic splashing of the sun when I hear a sound from the rock above me. It is a little boy, maybe six or seven, wearing sandals, shorts, a green sweater, and a red-and-white stocking cap. He says his name is Faustino, and he comes down to share the rock. He has a piece of styrofoam that he begins, rather
irritatingly, to rob against the rock. It comes off in little pieces, all over everything, into the air and the water. After he has it the size he wants he chips some out of the middle with a fingernail, pulls out a string, and threads it through a hole he makes with the point of my pen. Now the whole thing begins to make sense, and I am regret my irritability. He finds a rock that fits in the hole and floats it on the water. He looks over to see my reaction. I smile and try to express my admiration.

He sets the boat aside and picks up John Berger's *About Looking* I have brought with me. He flips through, looking at the pictures. He laughs heartily at Grandville's nineteenth-century engraving of vulture, crocodile, boar, rat, and fish dressed up like humans and sharing dinner at a table. He studies two photos by August Sander -- three young German men in suits, hats, and walking canes, and five German musicians in suits -- then holds them up to compare with my face. The photos of war don't interest him, but he stops and looks at Millet's painting of a woman feeding chickens and geese in front of a farm house. What a beautiful house, he exclaims.

He comes over and looks into my notebook. I show him a couple of tortured drawings I have made. He points at some seagulls and asks me to draw them. I hold out the book and pen and ask him to write his name. He starts with the "F," can write the "a" when I say it. After that he copies the rest of the letters after I write them. He chews some chicklets I give and hangs over every word I write. His two front top teeth are missing, widening his smile.

14 May

Sunday morning. A long breakfast in the courtyard of the Socta Suyo. Cindy tells us about the book she has written about her great aunt: an early love affair broken off by her family, a year of depression ("I took to bed"), nursing school, medical school, Japanese POW camp in the Philippines, and so on.

We talk about various kinds of sexually transmitted
diseases, then about the kinds of food we most miss.

Sam and Gary and I walk to the southeastern tip of the island where there is a beautiful, curving, protected beach. We lie on the sand and read and sleep and talk for slow hours. I walk gingerly on my tender bare feet to the very tip of the island and then around the end, skipping from boulder to boulder. I am planning to wash my hair, but when I look up can't see the others I pull off my pants and slip down into a pool between mossy boulders. The waves pound against my chest, the shock of the cold water makes me gasp. I duck my head under, shampoo, wash off the soap, and slide onto the sunny rock like a dripping seal. Like a gleaming albino seal. Pasty, lard-white skin shining under the bright sun at 13,000 feet. The lake, the boulders, a slight breeze, and my naked body under the sun. The enjoyment is complex and subtle: freedom from constriction, soft air wafting around parts of my body unused to it, an undisturbed, unencumbered oneness with nature, the sensuousness of skin and sun and air, the thrill and satisfaction of risk. The biggest risk, I decide when my mind begins to assert control once more, is of sunburn.

On the way back along the backbone of the island, Sunday afternoon:

Round skirts flattened into two-dimensional red, yellow, green, and black hoops, drying on rocks;

_Alberto con Julia_, written in chalk on a rock by the trail;

Adults playing volleyball near the school, three men and three women, festively dressed, laughing, skilled -- anything but the clichéd beasts of burden constructed by my self-serving, uninformed pity.

The town square, about seven p.m.

Drawn here by flute and drum music, I found a parade of people carrying corn stalks chased by dancers in
masks. The pursued find haven in the church, from whose open doors streams bright light. The dancers approach the church with quick dipping steps but swerve at the last moment, as if blown away by the streaming light or a fierce wind. Gradually, several hundred people gather in the square and form long lines on either side of the masked dancers. Women and children sit in a double row in the front, men stand three-deep behind. The women's heads are covered by their black shawls, their faces are half covered, and only scattered dull swatches of red skirts and sweaters flash bright in the sea of black.

The masked dancers, Sue says, are called *machos*, and are hunting for bad children to eat.

I watch them move to the music, driven, it seems, by the repeating rhythms, to approach the church, only to be forced away. When the music stops, as it does now and then, the *machos* leave off their rapid steps and gather in a muttering, growling group. With the masks' grotesque eyes they survey the lines of people on either side and when a baby cries make a beeline to the spot where their gestures and howls provoke more crying. Adolescent boys stand behind the lines and occasionally lob cherry bombs over the heads of onlookers into the knots of *machos*. In response to the explosions the masked dancers fall to the ground with exaggerated fright. Or, they skip and dip around the end of the line almost swifter than the eye can follow and with their short bullwhips viciously whip whatever boys they catch. Once three of the *machos* drag a young woman from the line of sitting women and pull her fighting form across the stones of the square until she falls and limps back to the safety of the crowd.

In the shadows of the night, even with the full moon and the light from the church, the scene is eerie, unsettling, uncanny. I am a gringo. My white face rises a foot above the crowd. Like the younger, frightened children, I have no context, no sense for how far the violence is allowed to go. I am an outsider, the Other, and as such I identify with the threatened children, the
woman singled out of the crowd, the whipped boys, and whoever else sits or stands in the crowd full of the knowledge that they deviate in one way or another from the norm.

The *machos* make the crowd laugh with their slapstick antics. Several are dressed like gringos in exaggerated cowboy hats, beards, sport coats, and briefcases. They are turning historical tables, their ritual threats reflecting their own continued status as despised and oppressed Other.

I leave shortly after nine, tired of the slow pace and repetition. With me, into my dreams, I carry the image of the line of women cloaked in black and the memory of the fear I felt.

15 May, Monday

Today is the festival of San Isidro Labrador, the patron saint of agriculture. I'm back in the town square, sitting against the wall of the community store, soaking up the sun and talking with Faustino, who has come over to sit with me. He speaks no English. I speak no Spanish. And still we talk about the warmth of the sun, about the *machos*, about Celso, who wanders by and accepts a piece of bread with jam from my provisional breakfast, about our departure tomorrow for Puno, Juliaca, Lima, Miami, Dallas, and Salt Lake City, about the three languages Faustino speaks -- Quechua, Spanish, and Ayamara, and about the fiesta that will take place in the next hours: masks, dancers, bulls, a priest, and other things I don't quite catch.

Yesterday there were lines of people with heavy packs coming up from the pier, carrying all the food and drinks that will be consumed today.

At ten several of us walk to Alejandro Flores' house for a wedding breakfast. There are eight of the island's governors and six accompanying women, all fourteen dressed to kill. Two of the governors hang their
hats and staffs on the wall next to a bouquet of hanging dry grass in what feels like a ritual act. The eight men sit in a row on a bench along one wall. The women sit on the ground facing them. Five animated men sitting against another wall play festive flutes and drums. Long black-and-white checkered cloths are spread in front of the guests and then loaded with the now familiar beans and corn and potatoes and oca and chuño. And again there are big bowls of potato and barley soup. The twist here, however, is that the guests fill hats and big cloths with as much food as they can carry and within fifteen minutes there isn’t a morsel left in sight. As we finish eating Alejandro Flores comes through the gate of the compound with freshly washed hair, carrying a bottle of Head and Shoulders shampoo.

Noon, back at the square, again the music of flutes and drums.

Two wedding processions, each with two wedding parties, the brides obvious in so many skirts that the top one spreads out perpendicular to their bodies. The processions are led led by pairs of young bulls and six costumed and masked men, several recognizable as *machos* from the night before: one carries a plow, one a bundle of cornstalks, one is dressed like a woman, one wears a cowboy hat and trenchcoat, and carries a briefcase and twisted cane, one has a rodent mask, and the sixth an elephant mask. During the long hour the wedding parties are in the church the clowns attach the plows to the yokes of bulls, made even more uneasy than they already were by frequent explosions from bottle rockets.

Finally the people reemerge from the church, solemnly following an altar topped by two porcelain bulls and a doll-sized San Isidro. The priest, wearing white Rebock tennis shoes under his white surplice, follows the altar to the four corners of the square and blesses them with holy water. Then he disappears from the scene, probably on the 2:30 boat back to Puno.

The governors and male members of the weddings
take seats on long benches before a table. The women sit on the ground facing them. Two buckets and a full cloth are placed ceremoniously on the table. The square resounds with the sound of a bass drum. There are drinks all around from the distilled liquid in the bucket and from the cloth coca leaves are distributed.

Two of the clowns, a man and a "woman," dance awkward, suggestively.

Sue says that one of the men we have had dealings with tried to get fixed up with one of the students. He's married, I say. That's the way men are, she says. There are fewer than ten good men in the world, and several of those are dead. And some of the live ones are fooling you, I add.

The two "women" clowns pretend to throw rocks from their adjoining fields into the other's field.

All the tricksters move from one corner of the square to the next, blessing each parodically with beer.

The bulls pull the plows, the clowns "plow the square, and the "women" plant potatoes. Later, after further plowings, they sow flowers, then rocks, then sawdust.

The festival moves slowly, subtly, imperceptibly through the afternoon. At the table the drinking has grown serious, and both distilled spirits and beer are distributed around the square. In the square's center the clowns twist the caps off brown bottles, shake up the beer, and hold the spurting bottle in their crotches while parading around.

The sun nears the northwestern top of the island.

A male clown pretends to dig a footplow into the ground. A "female" clown reaches down for it. The male lifts it quickly and raises her skirts.

It's after five when I finally leave the square, where the tricksters are still playing their games and the wedding parties still drinking. My face is sunburned and the slow pace of things finally was boring to me.

Near the top of the island, waiting for the sunset, I
find Sam. Big doings over at your place, I say. Yeah, they killed ten land maggots for the wedding dinner. My best day on the island!

There is an interaction between poverty, overpopulation, and environmental decay that appears to have no self-correcting features. Really poor families certainly think of children as a provision against old age and as a form of investment, which is one reason why boys are so valued; but children may be even more important as an immediate source of labor. . . . Such families are caught in a bind: their productivity is very low so they need all the hands they can muster. If all families have many children, the environment is destroyed, so more children are needed to gather fuel and fodder, to graze animals, and so on. since fertility only diminishes when human beings are very close to starving to death, the prospect of this downward spiral curing itself is not good.

Alan Ryan, discussing Partha Dasgupta's *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution*

The priest saw that there is no man who is elect because there is no man who is not. *The Crossing*