A TLAPALIZQUIXOCHITL TREE

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This writing was done in correlation with my thesis show, *The Void, the Coach and the Future.*
“In 1503 he heard of a small, rare tlalizquixochitl tree, belonging to Malinal, the Mixtec king of Tlachquiauhco. In a land already famous for its fruit trees, the king had imported this tree at great cost for its blossoms, which were of exquisite fragrance and incomparable beauty. Motecuhzoma was determined to have it, even though Tenochtitlan's cold climate was unsuited for such a tropical plant. Nothing of such beauty could exist without his possessing it. Motecuhzoma demanded it of Malinal, who refused. That triggered a Mexica attack, Malinal and many of his people died defending their city, which was annexed to the empire along with all its subject towns. The tree was uprooted and died.”
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I.

CHURCH IN THE JUNGLE (Fig 1)

Two years before the start of the American Civil War and the same year as the death of Alexander Von Humboldt, Frederic Edwin Church unveiled a painting called *The Heart of the Andes*. The shifts in scale make it unreal, a collage of an imaginary place built with perfect elements from actual locations. Viewers confronted with more than fifty square feet of canvas, too much to behold at once, used opera glasses to scan the panorama for smaller scenes. Two figures, dwarfed by clouds melting into mountains, kneel before a cross. Further behind them in the distance there is a mission, and further behind the mission, smoke rises from the foothills. This smoke presents the possibility of an indigenous group holding out, or fortunate enough to be uncontacted. Beyond the foothills lie the Andes. The deepest point in the painting is a volcano called Chimborazo, which is impossibly snow capped at the equator. Exposing earth and undercutting the roots of a massive unnamed tree is an unnamed river, flowing from the high ground. One can imagine the painter overwhelmed with the infinite diversity he attempted to capture.

The work was so ambitious, it required two extensive trips to South America. Retracing Humboldt’s journey, Church responded to his distant mentor’s suggestion that only an artist could “seize on the total impression of the tropical zone.” It is likely that for Church, Humboldt's descriptions of South America called to mind something as miraculous as the Garden of Eden, a landscape unchanged since Genesis.

During his second visit to the rain forests of Ecuador and Peru in the summer of 1857, Church was afflicted with an unknown illness in route to Cotopaxi. Through the course of the mysterious infection, it appears Church experienced near fatal fevers, seizures, and delusional visions. For three weeks the great painter refused rations or any other sustenance prepared by his porters. Instead he lived only from honey found in the jungle and to quench his thirst, water gathered from shallow depressions in enormous leaves. After the first four days of the illness, his sleep pattern, although unusual, became extremely regular. Church noted in his journal: “I woke to regain full cognition and clarity only during the twilight periods of dawn and dusk. This afforded me little more

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2 In 1852 the German naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt completed *Cosmos : A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, an extensive scientific portrait of everything known in the natural world. The goal of the work, according to Humboldt, “is to comprehend the phenomena of physical objects in their general connection, and to represent nature as one great whole, moved and animated by internal forces.” (I:IV) In 1799 Humboldt climbed Ecuador’s Chimborazo to a height of 19,300 feet. Although he did not reach the 20,577 foot peak, he held the record of highest altitude reached by a human for the next thirty years.

3 Cotopaxi is one of the largest active volcanos in the world and can be seen from Ecuador’s capital city. It was the subject of many paintings by Church.

4 Several species of stingless honey bees thrive in the jungles of Peru and have been used for their medicinal properties for centuries. This is, without question, that this honey kept Church alive during his illness.
than one half hour in the morning and evening respectively, in which I attempted to sketch and write in vain.” During the midday and midnight hours, Church’s travel companion, Louis Remy Mignot, observed him in a sonambulatory state. Worried he would disappear into the jungle, Mignot followed Church, who wandered miles away from the camp without a map or compass, in search of wild honey. Somehow, he managed to find his way back through the impenetrable growth, returning to his hammock just before twilight. This cycle repeated regularly for the next two weeks, but Church apparently recovered quickly and the party continued on to Cotopaxi.

Upon his arrival in Quito Church reviewed his sketches and journals, discarding all material from June second through the twenty-third. He was horrified by his “abnormal behavior... due to the overpowering grandeur of the South American geography.” References to this lost material appeared in an obscure newspaper called the Baltimore Post late in 1861. A review of *The Heart of the Andes* also mentions a collection of “apocalyptic images” along with “diary entries recalling pagan behavior in the uncharted forest of Ecuador.” Although the validity of this material is questionable, it is no coincidence that Church’s most striking works after 1857 perfectly capture the subtle qualities of twilight. The bizarre sleep patterns during the mysterious illness effectively heightened his perception to changes in atmospheric color and light.

5 Louis Remy Mignot, a landscape painter and native of South Carolina who had a short but prolific career during the 1850’s, accompanied Church on his second trip to South America.

6 The Baltimore Post was published between 1844 and 1910. Coincidentally, the editor’s brother was one of Churches porters during his illness. Recognizing the value of Church’s discarded writings and sketches, the porter smuggled them back to the United States to sell to his brother in Baltimore.

7 Brown, Alfred. “Church’s Marvelous Painting,” *Baltimore Post*, Dec. 15, 1861
...and they hoped that sunlight was the brightest thing.

(Fig 2)
III.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

i.

The census of 1880 indicates that my ancestors had settled in Tioga County and worked the Blossburg Coalfield. From Tioga County they slowly migrated south, settling again in a section of Williamsport called Newberry, where my father lived with four brothers and a sister. All of the brothers were wrestlers and when the dam across the Susquehanna River was rebuilt, they worked together pouring concrete. Their most arduous matches were against other wrestlers, who like themselves, were the descendants of coal miners.
One of the earliest memories is seeing Halley's Comet with my father, though I do not remember actually seeing the comet. Only vaguely can I recall riding in the back of a car, driving up the side of a mountain in thick darkness. Halley’s last pass was February of 1986, about two months before my third birthday. I have used the comet to predict the end of my life. My time on Earth will evenly bracket the cycle of the comet, which would put my death somewhere during June of 2064, at the age of eighty-one. The second most recalled memory is of my grandfather's deer blind, which, in the past has been referred to as the stilt-house. I distrust the accuracy of this memory because it is so frequently recalled. What I can say with certainty is that the structure was made of wood, reddish in color, and seemed very high above the ground.
With my cousins I’d camp outside the old one room cabin
my grandfather and his sons slept inside of it
there was a story about a straggly man who lived in the abandoned mine up the mountain
he was something imagined or one of our ancestors
at his best
still a refined animal
with some technology we will play the scene over and over
though the exterior of the contraption appears to evolve the rampant fits are bound to remain
recalling the sequence for eons
at some point with frozen gears
the machine and its misunderstood technology will be left as the last reminder of the grizzled creature
This brief description precedes Hemingway’s *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*:

Kilimanjaro is a snow-covered mountain 19,710 feet high and is said to be the highest mountain in Africa. Its western summit is called the Masai “Ngáje Ngái,” the House of God. Close to the western summit there is a dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude.

The leopard is a symbol of faith, like a saint whose body won't decay, it will always be preserved, somewhere. At some point the Catholic Church will have no choice, and the leopard will be canonized for all things, once living, now frozen high above us.
V.
THE LANDSCAPE (Fig 4-7)

Lycoming, Tioga, Sullivan, and Columbia counties are extremely green and blue in the summer and terribly grey and white during the winter. Tioga and Lycoming share their western boarders along an almost vertical line. Tioga is shaped like a square and sits on top of Lycoming. Sullivan is the smallest of the four and is situated to the east of Lycoming and to the north of Columbia, which lies directly southeast of Lycoming. Together the four counties make up 3,323 square miles of Northern Central Pennsylvania.

Flowing through the center of Lycoming County, and through the Port of William, is the Susquehanna River, which was named for the Susquehannock Indians. It is said that in a trade agreement involving a "parcel of English goods," all of this land was given over by Wi-Daugh, chief of the Susquehannock, to William Penn on September 13, 1700. The site where this vast amount of land was traded is marked with a concrete pillar modeled after an ancient Greek column. Near the pillar, in the forest, are a series of sinkholes, ending in a large spring feeding the Antes Creek, which eventually feeds the Susquehanna River.

Williamsport is a town along the Susquehanna in Central Pennsylvania, and was the logging capital of the world during the late 1800’s. As a direct result, all of the forests surrounding the town are secondary growth and riddled with flumes and logging roads beginning but over grown and tapering off, or tapering off at both ends, neither beginning nor ending anywhere. With rough precision, the flumes were constructed out of sandstone and have weathered much better than the roads. They emptied the logs into the boom in the Susquehanna, which was seven miles long and at any time could hold close to a million logs. Countless logs are preserved in mud at the bottom of the river. Those with a certain understanding struggle to resurrect the lost timbers. They are highly prized for their aura.

To the south, in Columbia County, a large coalfield burns underground. Earth collapsed under the feet of a boy, revealing a howling pit. Families died in their sleep from the gases rising through plumbing and floor boards. By 1984, most the town had been relocated, and the homes demolished. Highway 61, which ran directly through Centralia, was rebuilt to avoid the town completely. In the center of the closed stretch of highway is

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“I fell into the subsidence on February 14, 1981. I was twelve. My cousin and me were fining a motorcycle near my grandmother’s, and I saw a little smoke a couple of yards from where were working on the bike. So I went over and brushed away some leaves ‘cause I thought someone had thrown a match and I wanted to make sure there was no fire. And the ground just started to giving way, and I went down to my knees, then to my waist, and just kept going, I grabbed onto some roots and was screaming for my cousin. I couldn’t see him; there was smoke everywhere. I just heard him screaming ‘Put your hand up! Put your hand up!’ I was in over my head when he finally grabbed me. It smelled like sulfur. It was unbearably hot, and it sounded like the wind howling down there.”
an enormous crack billowing smoke. The periphery of the crack is very hot to the touch and in the center is a charred tree. Much further North a geologic oddity stands sentinel on a mountainside in Sullivan County. The strange outcrop has eroded in such a way that a roughly rectangular slab, 3’ x 8’ x 6’, rests precariously on pillar only 18” thick. Ten miles to the north, as the crow flies, a large brown sign reads: “Welcome, Worlds End State Park.” The exact origins of that name have been lost. Even further North and West, Tioga County exists quietly and almost perfectly square, in green and blue or grey and white, depending on the time of year.
VI.
EVERETT ZABLASKY

Something happens to the brain when moving away from problems. The grass is greener, the sky is more grey. There is the possibility of traveling every road in the county on foot. Like Everett Zeblasky, the runner who died young of a heart attack. The grass has no obligations. Screaming hard crossing the border, with a bloody throat, and the taste of copper.
VII.

As the crow flies...
SING OR DIE

Even after the electric headlamp was perfected, some miners preferred to use the more primitive calcium carbide lamp. The most frequently cited reason for keeping the old brass lamp was the diffused quality of yellowish light, impossible to replicate with electricity. No other devise produced the same kind of glow and occasional flicker, with a comforting warmth ⁹ in the black pits where the temperature hovered around fifty degrees fahrenheit. Some instinctual reassurance exists in the presence of fire, just as it does in the company of the canary. Sylvester Thrasher, a miner retired for 26 years, kept a pet canary by his bedside until his death from the black lung.

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⁹ The Palmer Furnace, named for geologist Arthur Palmer, is the emergency use of the carbide lamp’s exhaust gas to keep warm.
At seventeen I became an amateur naturalist and misidentified almost everything. A two hour drive to a shale outcrop might yield a perfectly intact specimen of *Phacops Rana*. Maps were misread, fossil ferns were placed in the wrong drawer. Eventually it was enough to isolate the honest moments. Just put the honest moments in a line or in the same room. The drawers were not even necessary. That year I heard Joni Mitchell for the first time. I wondered about the probability of being her lover in the next life.
Figure 1. *The Heart of the Andes*, Frederic Edwin Church, 1861
Figure 2. Sunlight
Figure 3. The Furtwangler Glacier at the top of Kilimanjaro
Figure 4. The Susquehanna Boom in 1890, Williamsport Pennsylvania
Figure 5. Line leading to a submerged timber
Figure 6. The crack in Highway 61, Centralia Pennsylvania
Figure 7. Ticklish Rock, Sullivan County Pennsylvania
XI.
APPENDIX B: SONGS

*Cortez the Killer*, Neil Young, 1975

He came dancing across the water
With his galleons and guns
Looking for the new world
In the palace in the sun
On the shore lay Montezuma
With his coca leaves and pearls
In his halls he often wondered
With the secrets of the worlds
And his subjects gathered 'round him
Like the leaves around a tree
In their clothes of many colors
For the angry gods to see
And the women all were beautiful
And the men stood straight and strong
They offered life in sacrifice
So that others could go on
Hate was just a legend
And war was never known
The people worked together
And they lifted many stones
They carried them to the flatlands
And they died along the way
But they built up with their bare hands
What we still can't do today
And I know she's living there
And she loves me to this day
I still can't remember when
Or how I lost my way
He came dancing across the water
Cortez, Cortez
What a killer
River, Joni Mitchell, 1971

It’s coming on Christmas
They’re cuttin’ down trees
They’re puttin’ up reindeer
And singing songs of joy and peace
Oh I wish I had a river I could skate away on
It don’t snow here
It stays pretty green
I’m gonna make a lot of money
And I’m gonna quit this crazy scene
I wish I had a river I could skate away on
I wish I had a river so long I could teach my feet to fly
I wish I had a river I could skate away on
I made my baby cry
He tried hard to help
He put me at ease
He love me so naughty made me weak in the knees
Oh I wish I had a river I could skate away on
I’m so hard to handle
I’m selfish and I’m sad
Now I’ve gone and lost the best baby I ever had
Oh I wish I had a river I could skate away on
I wish I had a river so long I would teach my feet to fly
I wish I had a river I could skate away on
I made my baby say goodbye
Avery, Kevin J. *Church’s Great Painting, The Heart of the Andes*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1993


