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WILD

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by
Jay Griffiths

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Wild Earth

Absolute Truancy

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

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

I was looking for the *will* of the wild. I was looking for how that will expressed itself in elemental vitality, in savage grace. Wildness is resolute for life: it cannot be otherwise, for it will

die in captivity. It is elemental: pure freedom, pure passion, pure hunger. It is its own manifesto.

So I began this book with no knowing where it would lead, no idea how hard some of it would be, the days of havoc and the nights of loneliness, because the only thing I had to hold on to was the knife-sharp necessity to trust to the elements my elemental self.

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

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

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

I sketched out my journeys according to four elements of ancient Greece, earth, air, fire and water, but adding ice as if it were an element in its own right, which in a landscape it

is. The only chapter I never planned to write was the last. It forced its way into the book, like a court jester with a dirty laugh and a deadly serious look in his eyes, leaping onto the stage just as Act Five was closing, and offering an answer to the deepest question: the quintessential coupling of wildness with life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of grief or joy were somehow considered unhygienic, passion a nasty germ.

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

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

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

I felt hungry. I've always been hungry. Whatever it is, I want more. When I was a child, it was a ferocious discontent: a feeling that this small and narrow place was not all, not nearly all and not nearly enough. There was a wide and wild world without, visible only through books, and though I could only

see little fizzes of light from it like matches struck a mile away, I felt charged with desire for it.

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

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

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

Water was from a river, not a tap, fruit was from a tree, not a shop, and I felt life stripped, pared to the core. And while there were footpaths, there were no enclosures.

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

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

It is a rage against the cruelties committed for the sake of this bland consumer culture. A rage against the effects of factory farming, so a bird, flying exhausted, without seeds or hedge margins, drops out of the sky, falling dead to a desiccated earth. A rage against out-of-town shopping centres, placed on the last

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

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

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

Drinking Hemlock and Stars

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

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

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

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

Yes, I said.

Why don't you take a few days to think about it? he asked. It would be an expensive flight, a big trip.

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

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

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

The walk to their centre was my first meeting with the Amazon; Amazon stinging, itching and stroking you with velvet; Amazon biting, scratching and softly feathering you; the

whole forest winks at you, rubs your warm thighs and grins. A tree bark smelled of nutmeg; certain plants smelled of rotting flesh; there were flowers sweet as honey and a fungus smelling of old and thoughtful mould. I could smell a fine mist of rain and a sour smell from a plant here, a fetid smell from a pool there, the consoling smell of moss, the zinging smell of sap. I could almost smell the sunlight, heavy and lovely as hops.

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

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

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

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

Ayahuasca (pronounced “eye-er-wass-ka”) is a powerful hallucinogenic drug widely used by shamans throughout South America. It is made from the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, boiled for

twelve or more hours with certain other ingredients added and the bitter, foul-tasting liquid is drunk. It has many names, many properties; vine of visions, vine of souls. *Aya* means, in the Quechua language, spirit or ancestor or dead person, while *huasca* means vine or rope. It is thus sometimes known as the vine of the dead, because shamans say it puts you in touch with the ancestors, and through it they can communicate with the spirit world. (The name is perhaps influenced by the fact that drinking it can make you feel as if you're dying.) It is also known as *la purga*, the purge, for it dramatically courses through the body, often making the drinker vomit furiously. Perhaps the most common term for it, though, is *la medicina*, for it is used as a medical diagnostic tool, and as a curative for physical and psychological problems. Noe Rodriguez Jujuborre, a healer of the Muinane people of Colombia, told me once that under its influence, he sees the diagnosis of an illness, and the image of the plant that will cure it is "imprinted on my mind."

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

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

Juan began to sing an *icaro*—a gentle song, thin as the wind in

the reeds, ethereal, sweet and far away. As he sang, he repeated the word *ayahuasca* like an invocation; its sound onomatopoeic, soft and shimmering, a word of whispers and mystery.

Suddenly I wanted to be outside and I left the hut and went to watch the mists rise from the hot springs. After a while, Victor followed me out, asking if I was *mareada* (seasick). At first I didn't understand what he meant, but a few seconds later I felt a wave of strangeness and dizziness; then the visions began. I knew a little about the typical ayahuasca visions, of snakes, plants, eyes and rivers, but I was entirely unprepared for the visions I had. Garish and cartoonish, they were a kaleidoscope of tourist-shop junk, silly plastic toys, giddily repeating, row on row of fake London street-name plaques, tawdry key rings, cartoon traffic wardens with seaside-postcard bottoms. I felt mocked by the ugliness and stupidity of the city I had left. I've never taken acid, but I know of acid visions, and this seemed to belong in that category; a Xeroxed crazy paving, a zigzagging shopping arcade, jangling with febrile urban banality, the jag of enervation, the blaring buzzing of nothing, in a chivvying, gridlocked triviality.

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

We talk of being "stabbed in the back" by someone, being "needled" or "knifed" by someone's words. We refer to "barbed" remarks. Language is wise to the mind's experience and I had felt, as many people have, that such sharp, thin spikes had been shot straight into my head, where they lodged, creating the infection of depression and nothing I could do

would dislodge them. My mind had been knifed. “An ugly word can be like the scratch of a needle on the lung,” wrote Ibsen in *An Enemy of the People*. It felt now as if Victor were sucking out Ibsen’s needles, saying, as he did so, “They’re gone. Just gone. Away.”

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

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

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

Previously, if I had believed in a soul, it would have seemed implacably bound to one’s body till death. Now, though, *soul loss* is a term I would consider because that night I felt that my soul was found. I felt as if I were in a deep river, drowning, and that in these seasick visions Victor had sent his soul out of himself to come and find mine. I was too weak, too far gone in ayahuasca even to hear the *icaros* that Juan was singing. “Try to

concentrate on the songs, use them like a rope to climb out of a bad place,” said Victor, but I couldn’t. He poured a little water on my head and it was like a benediction. “*Más tranquilo*,” he said, gently. Be calmer. The words were half command, half comfort. They were like water when he spoke them, the quiet drops of water in the syllables of his words like the water on my head.

He held my face in his hands and I could feel his strength passing into me. For a shining moment, I felt as if I saw his soul in the river where I was drowning and he rose to his waist out of the water—so he came to me and in doing so he healed the devastation of my isolation. In finding me, he brought me back, unlonely. Then—*vamoosh*—on the instant the job was done, he was gone.

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

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

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