

the Burning Desert, part II
(or some effects of this latest climate change)

On Thursday, July 14th I wrote in my journal:

MONSOON! Yesterday we got a fair rain, well a shower. It has been raining in scattered pockets here and there, yesterday we got our brief shower. Afterwards K hauled me outside, demanding — do you smell that? Is it sewage, is it gas? —no, I replied, —it's the smell of wet earth, that sweet smell we have been missing for so long that we have forgotten what it is, not dry dust, not choking smoke but the smell of life.

Today: dragons and damsels, skippers, flowers, bindweed mostly, displaying their tenacious weedy productivity, the muddy waters of the trickle that once was the Gallinas River, at least the bottom of the small pond is now covered with water where yesterday the swallows were grubbing in the mud.



skippers on thistle

pjw 7/14/2011

On Friday I wrote:

Today the first St John's flower, that tall, yellow evening primrose that normally blooms on June 26th and signals the start of the swimming season *a los niños*, then a great blue heron interrupted in his gleaning of the diminished river and finally a large, c.3-4 foot snake. What I first saw was a rumpled snake skin stretched out near the path, not the shed outer skin of a molting snake which is translucent, colorless but a whole, seemingly empty skin. —No, he is dead I thought, —perhaps killed by unthinking boys. I poked him, he shifted, out came the flicking, questing tongue. he is alive but lethargic, starving maybe, as he looks empty, every vertebrae showing. I finally convinced him to move slowly off the path and into the weeds.

The snake, *El Cincuateas* as he is called in Sonora, is a gopher or bull snake, *Pituophis catenifer sayi*, a constrictor, an eater mainly of rodents and the first I've seen here by the river. The usual suspect is the Checkered garter snake, *Thamnophis marcianus*, a more aquatic snake who dines on fish and frogs.

On Saturday we went to bed with soft cooling monsoonal air circulating through the house. Coughing gasping eyes smarting, we awoke to smoke! The long awaited monsoons are just teasing us. They have not brought the healing, life giving rains but merely displaced the smoke, temporarily lulling us into a false sense of security. After the usual drill: poofing, windows closed, machines on, K sitting in the recliner to sleep, I return to our bed with Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, from which I read in text #40:

"Sometimes I feel, I'm not sure why, a touch of foretold death... " ...

"All I know is that I feel like a sick man who has been getting steadily worse, until he calmly and without regret extends his feeble hands over the bedspread he has been clutching." ...

"Whenever I see a dead body, death seems to me a departure. The corpse looks to me like a suit that was left behind. Someone went away and didn't need to take the one and only outfit he had worn."

This does not well prepare my mind for sleep, besides my eyes are burning from the smoke, I just need to close them. I do. I drift off...



the snake El Cincuate

pjw 7/14/2011

Disquiet visions churn through my semi-conscience mind, visions of an apocalyptic world of shifting desert sands, red flames and black smoke, of a starving snake resigned to his own death discussing with me the futility of resistance. I toss and turn, exhausted, I eventually sleep, to awake with a new vision of the southwest...

I see a vision of drifting sands covering the desiccated bones of the snake *El Cincuate*, Willy and myself with some of the ubiquitous liquor bottles, plastic crap and a computer mother board thrown in. Fast forward a billion years or so and we see a being of unknown lineage examining the resulting sandstone trying to determine just what happened here.

The snake *El Cincuate* may or may not have been starving I don't care. That was the way I saw it. I do know that we are in severe drought, there is little in the way of new forage for rodents the food of gopher snakes, I have never seen *El Cincuate* here before, I expect that he is mainly of the plains. No matter how closely I observe, how much I read, how hard I try to understand the life around me there is much more that I miss and life remains a dream. I like it that way.



drought for the muskrats's pond pjw 7/19/2011

It has been basically smoke free in the last few days but the larger problem of the drought continues. Today the small pond is gone, I think at least one Muskrat is living under the useless dam as there are tops of cattails sticking out from under it. The large pond is mostly covered with cattails and other grasses, it is a marsh with very little open water.

The city has less than two months of stored water and not sufficient capacity from wells to meet all demands. We all remain hopeful that the monsoon rains will still come to the rescue, what else can we do, well, many pray to San Ignacio and the city bought two week's worth of water from Fish and Game. Even deserts need moisture to maintain life.

Some trees had started to shed some of their leaves in order to conserve water during this severe drought. It seems to have abated after that brief shower on the 13th though I expect it to start again and when leaves are not enough the branches will follow.



still life for a drought

p j wait, 7/14/2011