

# **TABLELAND**

**BY**

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**THE HARPUR PALATE PRIZE  
FOR CREATIVE NONFICTION**

**Schneider**

**96**

"Searching for the lost is a great initial error we all commit."

—D. T. Suzuki

One year ago today I left the United States.

London, Ecuador, and now Cusichaca, a British-run archeological dig in southern Peru. Since being here my understanding of movement and place and "home" has fractured and dissolved into an indecipherable wasteland of multiple definitions and cultures. Each day feels large, a psychological eon not commensurate with the few hours between Andean sunrises, as if I'm stuck in the very non-Western, non-linear Inca concept of time. Like the Mayan Ages, each Inca Age ended in cataclysm, only to start a new cycle, somewhat similar to the 12,000-year *mahayuga* cycle in India, which ends in dissolution, *pralaya*, only to begin anew. Or the Greek cycling of events through time, *anakuklosis*. Each day is an Age of Experience—the digging, learning the landscape, the soil trickling through my fingers—only to repeat itself the next day as I rise to the excavation sites at Patallacta and Pupatuyoc. I'm distended, unattached to any psychic or physical place, which in the temporal plane is the Exile's native soil.

Being an Exile isn't moving away from but toward home. If one has always felt apart from the things that are supposed to make you feel connected; if one has felt like a foreigner in one's own country, unable to participate in the artificial trappings of dictatorial custom that one grows up with—marriage, career, money—imbued with all the glue but none of the stick; if one has consciously decided to be a non-producer in a consumer society; if one's only interest has been the conducting of one's true business, which the poet B. H. Fairchild identifies as "locating truths that do not participate, however indirectly, in the prevailing circus of lies"—then being an exile, being a foreigner, disembarking from the train at Km 88 on the edge of the Urubamba River in Peru is like arriving at a familiar place. I've been borne along, comfortably so, as Supervielle's "mobile exile," which can only be created by distance. If one is defined by

separateness amidst the connotation, often oppressive, of inclusion, then true exile, true separateness—knowing nothing about where you are and being unknown to everyone—is like stepping into one’s shadow that has always been lagging a couple of feet behind.

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Tonight I’ll be staying at 3,076 meters (10,092 feet) above sea level instead of the 2,650 meters (8,692 feet) a.s.l. at base camp, my first shift doing guard duty on the Tableland. Everyone in camp has to take a turn on the Tableland so the dig’s equipment—shovels, picks, buckets, wheelbarrows, trowels, brushes, tape measures, etc.—doesn’t get stolen. It’s 4:30, the sun is going down, and at this altitude the coffee takes forever to boil over an open fire. The wind picks up every afternoon in the Urubamba Valley, more fiercely up here, and the flames whip furiously about under the coffee pot. Verónica, *Wekey Wilka* in Quechua, a 5,750-meter (18,860 ft.) snow-capped peak I’ve come to adore as a real woman—she’s always naked in the distance, sensuous, lithe-legged, with a pronounced pubis and long hair shrouding a bowed head—is sharp and clear in the northeast, though there are passing clouds above me. Peruvian Premier cigarettes to pass the time.

It was a slow Sunday down at camp, and I didn’t get up here until after lunch. Most of the archeologists have gone off for the weekend to Cuzco or Ollantaytambo, and only René, the Dutchman, is down below to guard things.

The wind blows, the *ratama* bushes rustle, a sparrow hawk hovers motionless beyond the Tableland’s rim—100 meters away at eye level—like a stagnant kite over the Cusichaca ravine. Its sharp beak holds steady into the wind, wings stiff, waiting. It dips down and rockets straight into the valley, disappearing beyond the lip of the Tableland.

A cloud moves overhead. It has definition and border, like an entity in an old sci-fi movie, and quickly envelopes the Tableland. In another moment, the land clears. All over the valley these smaller clouds, distinct and independent as blunt rowboats, move south toward Cuzco, and above them, elephantine clouds moving more slowly, like galleons sending their runners ahead. It is familiar beyond weather. The large and the small, the whole and the

pieces fractured out of it scattered to other places.

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Work on a dig is arduous and monotonous—the Age of Tedium. It's hot on the Tableland during the day, there is no shade, and dust creeps into every fold of skin and clothing. My job consists of trowelling off the top two centimeters of hard-packed earth in a 30-foot square plot. If nothing shows up, do it again. Scrape, remove the dirt to be sifted for artifacts and bone fragments, scrape some more. Scrape down to a certain level indicated by Nic, the site supervisor, then stop. I'm cleaning dirt.

At the same time it feels like working a backward loom, unweaving a sweater, unskeining wool, retracting a clew of thread. It feels like, in a way, going home.

These people—the Inca and the Wari they conquered, the Tiwanaku before the Wari, the Chanapata before them and the Chavín before them—are not my ancestors. But if I dig a little deeper, I can imagine they are. I'm re-borning the dead. All the tribes of humanity come from a single tribe, a single group, a single pair of rutting enthusiasts. The deeper I dig, the further I can imagine past the tribes and primates and down through the kingdom Animalia to single cells joining with other cells, all the way back to my pre-sexual-cell ancestor doing its thing somewhere abyssal below my fingers....

I cough up a dust-gob and let it fly.

I find dozens, sometimes hundreds of potsherds during the day, most no bigger than three or four centimeters square. They're dull, post-Inca, archeologically worthless, but when I find one there's a twinge of excitement. I've found something that's been buried for hundreds of years. I touch it, fondle it, look it over, knowing that the last person who handled it was someone who, at this strata, lived very close to the reign of the Incas, perhaps even heard stories from his elders about Huascar Inca, who ruled at the time of Pizarro's arrival, or about his grandfather, Topa Inca, responsible for the greatest expansion of the Empire. These finds are momentary klaxons during the endlessly dull silence of scraping, when I spend most of my time wondering when the next break is going to be and

day-dreaming of home.

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The fire crackles inside the circle of stones and steam finally rises from the coffee pot. The wind has abated, and it's now so quiet I should have heard the woman and girl come up the trail, their feet skiffing over the Tableland's dusty terrain. I don't know they're there until the woman says, *Buenas tardes*, startling me.

The woman is old, maybe 50 or 60, ancient for a campesino. She's thin and sallow of face, most of her teeth are missing, and she wears a dirty, threadbare brown dress. The young girl, dressed similarly to the old woman, has the exotically long, jet-black hair of campesino girls, clear skin, and sharp, distinct eyes—Verónica's younger sister. Both have small shawls covering their heads, like mourners, and neither wears shoes. Two tatterdemalion ghosts appearing out of the *huaranhuay* bushes.

The woman says something in Quechua, which I don't understand. I ask her in Spanish where she lives. *¿Dónde vive?* She points toward the valley below, which is where I presume they're headed.

René told me before I came up that he'd been visited by two girls during his shift (Domingo's daughters; Domingo is the President of Cusichaca Valley), and he had given them something to eat. In a way, at least temporarily, the Tableland is my home, and the woman and the girl have entered it through a very expansive door. They are my guests, and I should offer them something. There's bread in the equipment tent where I'll sleep tonight, but I don't want to give it to them. I wonder if I'll be treating them like beggars, insulting them if I give them food they didn't ask for. Instead, I go to my rucksack and get a new pack of cigarettes. I tamp them down and offer the woman one. The girl wants one, also. She doesn't look more than ten years old. I ask her in Spanish if she smokes. She says yes. I ask the old woman if the girl smokes. She says yes.

I give both of them cigarettes, and I take one, also, which we light off a stick from the fire. In the silence of the small, flat mesa of the Tableland, as we smoke without speaking, it becomes embarrassingly apparent, without

speaking, it becomes embarrassingly apparent, without deeds or surveyors' sticks, whose home this really is. Everything—the valley, the mountains, the mesa, even the Inca ruins crumbling around us—belongs to this old abuela. It's hers by birth and right, by the common familiarity of having been here every day of her life, and she's so nonchalant about her possessions. It occurs to me that maybe I should ask permission to sleep on her floor tonight.

She says something to me, then to the girl, again in Quechua, and they start walking back in the direction from which they came, not down into the valley where the woman said she lived. They're not passing through. Apparently, I was their destination, why, I don't know. I watch them go, the girl leading the woman by the hand. On the next tier up on the Tableland, as they retreat into the mountains, the old woman stops and looks back at me. It is a searing stare, yet benign with some kind of knowledge. The distance between us shrinks to inches, and it feels as if her eyes and mine are stitched through by a taut thread. Then she turns and disappears amongst the dwarf *supaicarco* trees and *tuna* cactus.

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On my first night at Cusichaca I talked with Nic about the dig. Nic is 31, an ex-hippie with a thin black beard and passionate black eyes. He always wears a leather poncho, sandals, and baggy pants, and drinks Pisco Puro rum like it's water, as he was the night of my arrival. One of the first things he said to me was, "With twenty serious archeologists I could finish this site in a month." Instead, he has to contend with flabby, complaining, Earthwatch people, a small group of American volunteers who have come to help out on the dig. He doesn't like Americans. They're pushy. They think they own the world. They're self-indulgent. He had no problem saying this to my American face as he pounded down the rum.

Nic's attitude is prevalent among most of the Brits. Newcomers are not in the "biz," we're not even amateur diggers. Some of the English group have never been on a dig, either. However, they're all here via

the Institute of Archeology in London, which makes them insiders. And they've already been here a month, which makes them veterans. Like the Inca ceremonial sites which ascribe importance to height, the regulars have their tents on the upper level of the camp, above what's called Residential, and the rest of us have ours on the lower. A crude form of land-inspired *jeraquí*.

The Earthwatchers don't consider me a part of their group because I'm not a dues-paying member and I didn't come with them. They know I'm here via London where I've been doing my graduate work (not in archeology), so they assume I have some connection with the Brits. And the Brits don't consider me a part of their group because I'm an American. The Exile's sweet spot.

Nevertheless, I tentatively try to make some inroads into breaching the gulf between the Brits and myself by producing the last of my expensive, duty-free scotch. Since they've arrived the Brits have had nothing to drink but Cusichaca whiskey (the local moonshine), homemade *chicha* beer, and the very cheap Pisco Puro rum. The moonshine could strip varnish off a boat, the Pisco is undrinkable unless mixed with something, and the *chicha*, also called *a'qa*, which is made by chewing corn kernels then spitting them into a vat to ferment, tastes exactly the way it's made.

Some of the Brits have adopted the local custom, practiced since the Inca, of ritual libation, pouring a small quantity of liquid onto the ground before drinking to honor the Inca earth-mother goddess, Pachamama. It's a small nod to indigenous custom, though empty of symbolic content for Westerners. It's a reflex, and after a while most of us indulge in this and other minor rites as adaptations, trying to fit in. But such cultural pandering seems obvious and desperate to me, like we're teenagers anxious to imitate the latest slang. It doesn't make us contiguous, merely mimes.

*Mysterium tremendum*, terrible awe ("awe" from the Greek *achos*, "pain"), is supposed to be the emotion associated with rituals honoring the gods, and that sums up the feeling I have when I see my expensive scotch being poured on the ground.

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Emily, a student from the Institute, recently told me a dream she had about being home. She was sitting at her parents' kitchen table thinking how wonderful it was to be back in familiar surroundings. Then she realized she hadn't said goodbye to everyone before she left the dig. She was sad about this, and wanted to come back.

I've been asking the other diggers about their dreams, and most of them, typically, are also about being home or going home. Displacement. At least in the beginning. Even as everyone settled into and became familiar with Cusichaca, they were still British or Dutch or Australian. They were here, but were more attached, psychically, to the old world than the new.

But as they began to absorb local color and custom and the very thin Andean air into their lungs, a fog of ambiguity started to creep in. Now, their dream landscapes are as often located in the present environment as the one they left. There's still much talk of home—pubs, soccer teams, distant friends—but I also see a lot of happy faces on site, none of which have the hollow-eyed looks of those wishing to be elsewhere. They seem comfortable, their shadows close to their bodies, and some of them have even begun to think of Cusichaca as their home, even though they're 5,000 miles away from familiar environs and are living in tents. And at the edge of the eye, barely detectable, a trace of confusion and bewilderment, as if the bridge the dreaming mind has constructed between here and there is not entirely secure.

The triumphant return of mythology is supposed to have a reward at its end—the success of the hunt, the birth of a child, a reintegration into the autochthonous known. But, as in Emily's dream, many of the diggers' returns are accompanied by sadness, and carry with them a going out again, a return here.

I feel it too, the circling planets of home and here, the confusion about which is which. I've accepted since I arrived that this stay has an expiration date. But I never expected to be as comfortable as I am, or that the idea of home could have a half-life built into it. Home, the idea of home, is supposed to be permanent. It has the psychic gravity of a sun around which wandering rotates. Home is that place of geographic and

metaphysical comfort, the place where you want to be, which, when traveling, is always elsewhere. It's not a flimsy rectangle of tent nylon tucked among some *retama* bushes.

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The day stays late this high up. Just before sunset, as I'm sitting in the La-Z-Boy (a wheelbarrow tipped down on its handles, slouched comfortably in its tub), a horse and rider leisurely ascend from the lower tier of the Tableland. In the distance I can see her long black hair tied in the back. She's wearing a long dress, straddling the horse bareback, shoeless. Then I hear her. She's singing a very soft song, almost to herself, in Quechua, which I don't understand. However, it has a tone of ancient desire and tired haunt, which I do understand. When she gets closer, seeing me, she stops singing but keeps riding. She has an oval face without expression. She's looking upward, toward the mountains, slowly rocking back and forth with the horse's rhythm. When she's within earshot I silently raise my hand. She says, *Hola*, quietly, modestly, and I rejoin with the same. Our eyes meet. When they do, I get the feeling that I know her, though this is impossible. I've never seen her before. And in her black, almost indifferent eyes an intuition of me, also.

I've experienced this moment a thousand times—the brief, off-hand acknowledgment of the recognizable stranger at a coffee shop, in a grocery store, or on the street. But on a small, flat spit of land in the Andes? *Hola. Nice to see you. I think I know you. And I can tell by how you look at me that you feel the same. Perhaps we could stop and talk. Goodbye.*

She plods on through a small field of dry, severed corn stalks, the horse's hooves scraping against the brittle, hollow tubes.

That night, after a very long journey piloting the Space Shuttle (which I eventually crash land), I'm sitting in the dark in someone's suburban backyard. I look up and see a light on in the second floor window of the house. My mother and stepfather are standing in the frame, staring out into the night, awaiting my return.

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The traditional, end-of-the-dig talent show is scheduled for tonight in the marquise (pronounced marquee), a British term for the large, open-sided tent where we eat our meals. Afterward, it's up to the schoolhouse for a fiesta for Estella, our Peruvian cook. It's her birthday. I stick around long enough to hoist an honorary glass of chicha, then go next door to a low building off the schoolhouse where some of the campesinos are making a moldboard for one of their single-blade, horse-drawn plows.

Juan is here, a tall man who smiles broadly and often; Claudio, a stocky, older man with large, round eyes; the barrel-chested, square-faced Don Hustus, a man of respect in the Valley; and Nieves. Nieves had polio as a child, and now walks with a severe limp. He's working the bellows of the forge. Don Hustus holds the steel in the fire with a pair of heavy tongs, and Juan is sitting on a pile of wood, waiting for the steel to come out.

When it does, glowing red, Don Hustus places it on a piece of railroad track about 18 inches long, then Juan takes a sledgehammer and pounds on it. The tip flattens out, slowly fanning into a fish-tailed blade. The moldboard they're fashioning was taken from the undercarriage of an old truck, a trailing arm, I think. The truck piece, Claudio says, drinking Cusichaca moonshine and doing little more than supervising, is strong metal. It's going to make a smooth furrow, he says, and cut the ground deep.

The forge fire is the only light in the small, low-roofed adobe house cluttered with large chunks of firewood and broken plow handles. The heat and light are fierce around the forge, soft and dim to the corners. All the men are drunk, which is not unusual. Drinking is a part of their lives, like coffee to Americans. Work, drink, work—these dark-skinned men, determined at their task in the Peruvian Andes, not that much different than they were centuries ago. I've never seen one of them not get up at dawn. They seem to have no doubt, no contemplation of elsewhere. This is their land, and they work it using the tools they make with knowledge solemnly passed along by firelight and libations.

The men work at a quick but measured pace, an art form, which Don Hustus is in the process of teaching to Juan. Nieves already knows how to forge steel. All of them work seamlessly together, know without knowing. There is no hesitation in their thick forearms and steady faces. I'm pretty sure there are no gods in that trailing arm, and I'm pretty sure they know this, also. Nevertheless, their actions seem sacred. There is no distance between toil and intent—labor that will produce the plow that will till the soil that will grow the crops that will fill their stomachs that will let them live another day to make another moldboard. Each swing of the hammer has meaning. It is centered. It is *attached*, as surely as any gesture can be attached, culturally or historically, to a place, as deeply as a *retama* bush's roots to the soil. If I didn't know better, I'd be envious.

But I do know better. At least know, it's too late for me. There have been too many books read, too many "answers" offered, too many questions asked to fully participate in such contiguous agency. Too much thinking and too many cliffs. It's not ignorance that roots these men to their hearth, it's contentment.

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The traditional leaving of myth usually means departing from home, the place of one's birth, and moving from comfort into disquiet, from the known into the far-off strange.

The far-off strange was this place, Cusichaca. Now it has become the known, and my impending departure feels like moving into the unknown, though I know it very well. I have a warm bed and a woman and the approbation of marriage waiting for me in La Maná, Ecuador, where my wife is in the Peace Corps. I can hear the call—to the emotionally close, the safe, the secure, but which also feels like the far-off strange.

I sit at a table under the marquise and smoke a cigarette. I listen to the idle chatter of after-dig conversations, look at the familiar faces, breathe the thin, Andean air, and feel...in place. That small, Ecuadorean town is my hearth and home, even though it's 3,000 miles from where I was born. It's where I'm supposed to return in a couple of days. And suddenly I don't

know how I'm going to get there.

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On my last shift on the Tableland five local kids are doing their own archeology in the garbage pit, digging through the debris we'll leave behind, looking for anything that's useful—an empty coffee tin, any jar with a lid, a plastic bag—as much of our garbage is to them. One of them finds an unopened tin of sardines. They get very agitated, and the boy who found it has to defend it from the others.

Later, they wander over to where I'm watching them from the La-Z-Boy and ask for *dulces*, sweets, or sweet biscuits. This is the last day the Project is going to be up here, so the food situation is lean. I can't give them anything, not even water. I only have enough sterile water for supper and breakfast coffee. The oldest boy suggests I go up to the canal and get some more, which he can just as easily do, as it's only a hundred meters away and up a few terraces. But if I do this, they'll rob me blind. I've been warned. Everyone's looking for a handout before we leave, everyone's on the take. Finally the boys depart, cursing me in Spanish and calling me *gringo*.

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No one talks during the short walk to the Km 88 train station. Some people are silently weeping as we plod along the tracks for the last time. Waiting for the train, a gloomy pall hangs over everyone as they sit quietly on their rucksacks, their faces already beginning to wear the memories that will one day be filled with either fondness or haunt. Most of us will be staying at the Empirio Hotel in Cuzco tonight, and later there'll be a big piss-up at the Abraxas bar. The dig's gear came in today on the cargo train, and we spent all day off-loading it onto a rented, open-back truck. It took three trips to get everything to the Deposito, where it will stay in storage until next year.

To get to the Deposito we take the back streets through Cuzco, away

away from the tourist traps and through the alleys of indigenous poverty. The first trip goes well, and the half-dozen of us sitting atop the huge mound of tents and tables and boxes are only a curiosity to the Peruvians looking up at us from the street. But on the second trip, as we slowly inch our way through a long, crowded street of vegetable stalls, someone throws a carrot at us. Then a potato. Then more potatoes, which hurt. I get hit in the stomach with a tomato, which makes a large, exploded stain of red juice on my shirt.

If we were on the street, this wouldn't happen. We, white people, Westerners, gringos, are the bread and butter of the tourist economy. The *Guardia Civil* would sweep in and mercilessly "disappear" anyone caught harming a white person on the street. Everyone knows the rules. The government can't afford bad publicity. But on the back streets riding in a rickety truck atop a pile of forty-year-old canvas tents, we're prize targets at the carnival. We're fair game. We walk among them like gods with our money and arrogance and indifference, and the locals can't do anything about it. They know their government kisses the asses of the American and British governments, while they get little in return except orders to toady up. Their stalls might as well be stacked to the tops of their tattered awnings with resentment instead of vegetables.

On the last trip the epithets fly. *iGringo! iNorteamericano!* Then the vegetables. It's a massacre, pelted like tumbled prisoners in the streets of Paris. It feels like a Peruvian version of being tarred and feathered before being sent into exile. The best we can do is pick up whatever lands in the truck and throw it back. We don't have a chance, and when we arrive at the Deposito for the last time we're covered with stains and bruises and defeat.

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At bottom, the psyche is simply world," Jung said. Biology, carbon, ashes and dust sifting up through layers of intelligence, inference systems, and limbic networks, bubbling up like inverse archaeology into the cathedral of the mind to create the allegorical, the metaphorical, the supernatural

interpretations of the world, all in a desperate attempt to make sense. They're meaningless compared to the grief-stricken faces I see at Abraxas.

All night our eyes meet across a hazy, dimly lit bar in Peru—the love and the sorrow, the fleeting joy and the votive sight scorched with humanity. Perhaps not yet consciously, we sense this is the end of a minor Age, our grief the cataclysm that ushers us into the next cycle of our lives. Mythological rationale, also meaningless. In each glance the distance shrinks to inches. The time I've spent with these strangers I know so well, my comrades, compresses to seconds. The memories are already moving forward, chromed by fondness or haunt, forever stitched through with Cusichaca.

At the end of the night the innumerable oaths to write letters, the exchange of addresses, the sincere promises to meet again that will never be kept. Then home.