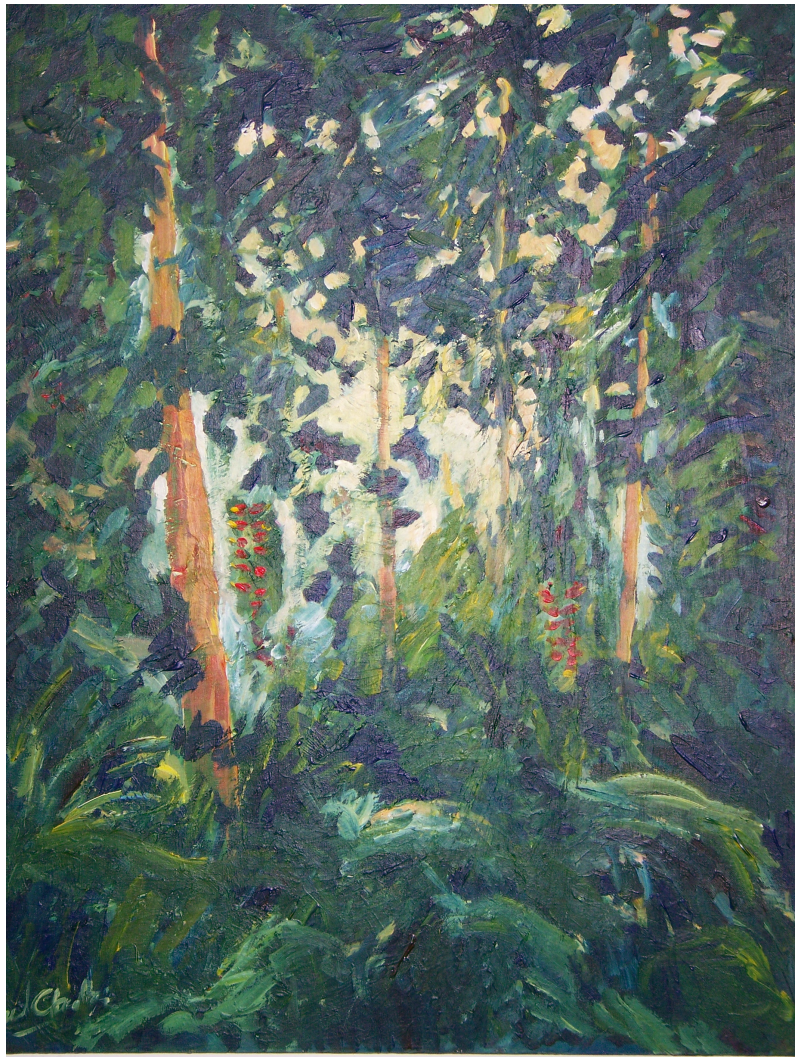


The Interior



David Chorlton



David Chorlton was born in Austria, grew up in England, and spent several years in Vienna before moving to Phoenix in 1978.

He has become increasingly fascinated by the drama of the Arizona landscape, and continues to explore it when he can, along with his wife Roberta, with a birding field guide close at hand. The poems in *The Interior* are drawn from their second visit to the different landscapes of Costa Rica in the summer of 2007. His newest published books reflect his concern for the natural world. They are *Waiting for the Quetzal*, from March Street Press, and *The Porous Desert*, from Future Cycle Press.

Acknowledgements:

Abbey: Puerto Limon
Ascent: Tropical Forest Reverie
Avocet: Rainforest Sketchbook
Iodine: Forest Texture
MiPoesias: Las Horquetas
New Verse News: Casa Hilda
Poem: Rara Avis, In Between
Poetry at Lehani's: Three Studies of Rain
Presa: Photographic Memory
Skidrow Penthouse: Fer-de-lance

The painting on the title page is an acrylic on canvas (40 x 30 inches) by the author. The illustrations in Twelve Days in Costa Rica are from the notebook he carried on the journey.

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Photographic Memory

The inefficient eye of the cheapest camera
we could buy after our good one
went blind in the humidity
recorded what it could of the silver light
that shone in rain; hills unrolling
beneath clouds as they cleared;
chiaroscuro forest interiors, twisted barks
of trees drilling into the sky;
friends wading the river where a bridge
had washed away; the warm mist
that swallowed us and slowly dripping
palm fronds as they grew their sharpness back
when it cleared; ourselves
with heads cocked to examine sounds
that hopped from leaf to leaf;
a view along the fruit stalls on a street
yawning early in the day; waves too muscular
for sailing on; a bamboo seat
in a room without walls and the cross-hatched
foliage behind it where the collared aracari
briefly landed and turned to display
on its back a red so bright it was memory
even in the moment
it appeared.

Twelve Days in Costa Rica



I *The Bus from San Jose*

A monk breaks sticky bread
in the bus station café
where he waits with a ticket
to San Isidro, while
his companion cradles a guitar
on his lap like a child
who goes wherever he goes.
Plates of rice and something fried
mysteriously guide
travellers to their tables and float
to rest. A television screen
displays a decades-old United States
in silence; another one the soap
dream on a beach whose tide
is washing Spanish syllables ashore.
There is kissing. Tears.
You don't need to hear
the dialogue to understand.
It's romance above our heads
as we board
for the winding winding road
through clouds
to the clouds inside them.



II *Mirador de Quetzales*

Kyow kyow the call
repeats four times from deep
forest dark and we walk
on roots to pursue it, climb
where our steps sink
wet into wet
as far as a cypress
with centuries inside it,
as far as the epiphytes
strung between clouds
and the layers of water and leaves
giving way to our weight
when we stop at a new *kyow*
kyow. A quetzal
is close as the rain
drifting slow in the chill,
starting its fine descent
through the trees that part
a second and close
around the moss and ferns
where we wade into darkness
that sings from its core.
A flash in the foliage
of brilliant sheen with a stream
of feathers behind
lands on a bough dripping light
as a squall hits and vision

is washed to the valleys
until trees step out of clouds
and their shadows soak
up moisture as they fall.

III *La Florida*

The path to the blue-walled schoolhouse
is lined with bananas and bamboo.
It connects the piercing cry
of a Roadside hawk with the green
screeching flock of parakeets, crests
at a basketball hoop circled
by Black vultures, and lies quietly
waiting to become invisible
when the hill changes into calls
in the dark, sparkling
from the underside of leaves
while we sleep suspended in rain
and wake up on a bed
of thunder and bird cries.

IV *On the Road to San Isidro*

A driver leaving San Isidro
signals those approaching
to beware ahead.

Police?

Fasten seat belts.

Accident?

Check brakes.

A sloth

is crawling inchwise
across the road, his patient claws
on the paving and a plea
in his eye where the long hair
parts for the big truck
to wait.

And it does,
while he pulls himself
to safety at the ancient pace
of mist clearing.



V *The Rara Avis Truck*

Each day a truck drives off
the world's edge and arrives
on the route to Rara Avis
struggling to become a road.
The wheels rattle the letters
into all permutations; r-d-o-a,
a-d-r-o, and sometimes stall
at r-r-r-r until the thick tires grip,
water sprays and the vehicle kicks
forward. A lurch and a growl
place the letters in order at r-o-a-d
as the journey continues.
Spitting mud and bucking
passengers, the wheels progress
to a halt then claw
a few more angry feet
through fresh brown slush
before the motor snarls a protest.
Bridges straighten their spines
in respect when the truck approaches.

After crossing them it exhales
bad breath and continues
its bitter mission
where even horizontal movement
means defying gravity.

VI *Primary Rainfall*

A raindrop hangs on a high-wire
of sound stretched between
Strawberry poison dart frogs
with clouds welling behind.
The shaft of light illuminating
a Black-faced grosbeak
is snapped by a thunderclap
and the sky blossoms
into a downpour. We hold
to the trail by the soles on our boots,
climb a staircase of water
then descend with the stream,
parting curtains of rain
to pass through.



VII *Caribbean Rain*

Blue crabs' shells
glisten in their burrows
where the noise of the storm
flows into sand

with no difference between
decibels and moisture
where each wave is louder
than the last, and the rain
is three parts water, one
part thunder so close
we wipe it from our brows.

VIII *The Bus to San Jose*

The radio plays low volume
songs of romance as we leave
the grey Atlantic tide
for pineapple fields
on two lanes without respite
from the rain. *Hola!* Our driver
makes a cell phone call
that lasts for miles, past banana
leaves and misty nests
of oropendulas hanging
from traces of light. Listing
with the angle of the road
we wind to taller trees and epiphytes,
look down into valleys filled
with cloud and brush
past ferns and waterfalls until
city traffic crowds the bus
still with music's shadow in our ears.



Rainforest Sketchbook

I

Our feet sink into the path
as it curls past the sage green and the cedar
into a cloud
at the centre of which
an old cypress holds to the earth
with strands of time. The trees surrounding it
are penstrokes; the cypress
is a gash in the centre
of a book's open page.

II

So loosely green
must the trees upon the hills dissolving
into rain be drawn
that they can be lifted from the paper
and replaced when it is dry.

III

In black on white, with nervous lines
ink imitates the passage of a tree
from roots to slender branches
where white space rains
out of a clearing sky.

IV

In the cross-hatched silence of shadows
amid the impasto
of leaves upon leaves
and mosses in the dark
we are enmeshed in the forest
unable to separate ourselves from all
that grows around and into us
until we are invisible
in our own portrait.

Changing Money in San Isidro

Between the high, cold forest that belongs
to resplendent quetzals
and the hills where rain is warm
we change buses and currency
in San Isidro. The two armed guards
at the door to the bank
are more cordial than the teller
who holds my travellers' cheques to the light,
turns them and touches
each one with inquisitorial fingers
while I wait without even a language
in which to ask him what's wrong.
He wants my passport, takes it
into a private room, and leaves me
to marinate in impatience
while the local customers stand in line
without complaining. I think I hear the teller's voice
on a telephone. Will he make us late?
What does he need to find out about me?
For twenty minutes I'm stateless
before the teller returns
and stamps helpless papers
in the rhythm of bureaucracy
before he hands me back
my identity, counts out Colones
and releases me
from air-conditioning
to the city square where a clock
on the church tower has hands that never move
from the time displayed once
and forever, Amen.

Forest Texture

The forest is a tangle in the eyes
of its beholders, a lushness
for which the textures
challenge language. Say *spongy*
and bark softens to a finger's pressure;
say *it's like soap dissolving* and you'll be
on a walkway; say *taut and mossy*
and an epiphyte rooted in the canopy
will have just reached the ground.
Some leaves taper
to a flourish at their tips
drawn in pencil on the atmosphere.
Others ripple at their edges
and toughen to every touch.
Light slides along a chute
into a narrow clearing where tanagers
and grosbeaks flock in sudden
colour against deftly woven trees.
Say *quicksilver*. Say *the water*
has a heart of rock when it flows
directly from the sky
into your path and you're feeling your way,
half liquid, half invisible,
against a current of delicious mud
that has you slapping
trunks to left and right as you trace
a way to solid ground
still turning words on your tongue:
wax, steam, cold velvet.

Tropical Forest Reverie

Easy as a waterfall
flows through our ears
the light of another country
illuminates the shiver
and the moisture
in our shoes
sinking into leaves and early
morning mud
in a high forest holding
to an incline whose grip
becomes slack in a storm.
The law here once ordered
land to be cleared
for grazing, and the hills
bear scars as they fade
from green to green to a colour
between foliage and sky.
Then the law said trees
were not to be cut
but left with their crowns
disentangling themselves
from the clouds
that come daily to wrap
the forest in a tropical chill
where a Sooty-capped Bush Tanager
lands on a branch
with a tease in its call
while a hummingbird with fire
on its throat
hangs like a drop of water
in indecisive air
above the valley.

*

A path threaded through
long grass and ferns
leads to an opening
where it marries a road
and climbs to the peak
of a village where kingbirds
perched on wires

watch for insects
trapped in sunlight. Up we go
and back down, deep
into a thicket with a stream
crawling over stones, with shadows
layered and the wet sounds
of invisible life soaking
into the trunks
of trees soft as darkness.
With a flashlight
leading our way by a beam
like a blind man's cane
we cross a slender bridge
to find our way back
to a house of bamboo whose roof
is a drum in the rain
that batters it all night
while the water runs down
to the ocean and sleep
washes over the land.

*

A bridge stands heavy in the space
between the past
and the present. Its construction
is iron sheets with cable strung
from bank to bank
of a river that carries words
away and brings them back with new
meaning; *forest* as a force
that grows as fast as it absorbs
a rainstorm; *horizon* as a hidden
element in landscape; and *roots*
as a shallow tangle
three feet deep and holding
massive trunks
to the earth. After crossing it
we look back and see
our former selves waving
from the other side.

*

Here's a snake so thin
it can stand up on your hand

with its body stiff
like a check mark beside an item
on a wish list
carried to this point
where the ground underfoot
almost slips away
and the birds move in flocks
of so many colours
we struggle to identify them
as their cries are embedded
in the foliage close by.
Here's a print
made overnight
by a cat we'd like to see but
not meet face to face.
With a breath held
coiled inside the chest
we follow a curve
in the forest trail as it slithers
from where we cannot see
what caused a leaf to slide
along a beam of light
to a point so narrow
only a voice can pass through.
From here we make our way
by listening
and by touch
as our hands find the colours
of flowers holding water
inside their folds
but never of the toxic brightness
on tiny frogs
like liquid
on the surfaces of leaves.

*

When light has soaked
into moss
animals follow scents
slowly through darkness
with sounds in the key of night.
Nectar bats
come for the sweetness

and stroke our cheeks
as they pass
with the breath of their
hovering wings.

Las Horquetas

The headlights on the bus to Horquetas
part roadside trees
as it passes fields and hills
and the houses whose rooms are open
to the world with simple furnishings
from which to view an evening
television show that glows
in a breathless voice. It has rained.
Water rolls downslope to the coast
with miles to go of swollen rivers
and the streams that feed them.
Water fans from the wheels
of the bus in a spray
as fine as the ferns leaning over
the paving with the pressure of darkness
upon them. Water pools
in front of the fruit market
open late, and back of the shack
whose roof is a soundboard
for the rain. A girl is carrying her own
weight in plastic bags
up the slickened grass toward it,
never stopping for breath.
She lives by squatter's candlelight
amid the poison dart calls
of frogs imprinted on leaves
that grow as fast as storms
can nourish them.

Rara Avis

The crossbeams of the forest
sag and twist
through wet green air
and the steam that embraces
slender trees and knotted ones
holding to three feet of earth
that softens after each fresh storm
nails the mud to the clay
beneath it. An early squall
has passed, and the thick growth cracks
allowing light
to glaze patches of leaves
above a trail holding to darkness
and roots. A Morpho
passes quieter than the whisper
with which one of us tells
the other of the butterfly's unsteady
flight through time. We patiently
infiltrate the silence
looking as we go
for the emerald tanager and blue dacnis
before the next wave
of rain turns lianas
and bromeliads to water.
Our steps disappear
as we retrace them
and shelter is all in the mind.

Fer-de-lance

Beware the fer-de-lance when the forest draws you in.
It might be coiled
around a shaft of sunlight

where it falls
onto the mud you follow through shadows
that drift against your face.

Step carefully
where the path flows underneath a stream whose water
shatters on a stone.

Look ahead as you peel
away layers of sound to discern the call that pulls
you to its source. You could be inches

about to spring from a trap

but the lush
warm leaves steaming around you sparkle with sounds
and not even droning thunder
turns you back. Above your shoulder
on a bough dripping moss

a sudden movement
stops your breath. You look, you look
and keep looking, but nothing
appears. And you realise it's always what you can't see
that bends its spine and stirs a little
as it considers whether
or not to strike.

The Interior

At the end of the roads, after the pastures
have disappeared, where a thin path leaves
the world you know for one
without horizons,

you look up to see the sky
for a last time before
it turns into leaves

and glance back to see the rainforest
close behind you. From here
you find your way by touch
between wet moss growing on bark
and strings of light
hanging from cracks in the foliage.
A sound you can't identify

tugs at your imagination
inviting you to cross the river
that washes away your past.
Irresistible, the glistening dip between a stone
and a fern

draws you down
and a slippery incline offers
a way back up,
and you balance
on ground that gives way

as you plant one boot at a time
into it, hardly moving, breathing deeply,
taking root in the moment,

no past, no future, no shelter, no name.

Casa Hilda

Welcome to San Jose. Breakfast
is at seven. Papaya. Coffee. Conversation
in the language of your choice:

German
to describe the turtles on the coast
or faltering Spanish for us
to make a friendly gesture and sidestep
talking politics.

There are books
for the visitor to read beside the chairs
downstairs:

an Austrian novel too long
for short stays, some elegant French, Time
magazine, and the first ever guide to the birds
of Costa Rica, compiled by an American
thirty years ago when reproducing photographs
turned them misty

but the author's dedication
to the flowerpiercer and euphonia
survives in letterpress. Touch the page
and feel the wells made by the type
before Americans felt the need to apologise
for what their president is doing.

Guapiles

Trucks roll along the main street
loaded with bananas
that were wrapped in blue netting
on their trees to keep pests
and flavour out
then picked before their time.

Between the coast and the capital
this town is on the way
to somewhere else. It tastes a little
of exhaust, a little of papaya,
with enough hot sauce to make
a cheap meal of casadas worth more
than the restaurant charges.
We're here to change buses,

change clothes, and for a night
of air conditioned sleep,
then breakfast with a view
along fruit stalls waking up
with stacks of produce that ripens
in the moment it is bought.

Three Studies of Rain

I

In a forest overpowered by rain
which falls hard and grows harder
when it climbs the dense slope
and comes down on the other side
as a river that pulls the foundations from a bridge,
a lost footprint sinks into the earth.

II

The call of a Bright-rumped Attila
hiding in foliage
turns into a raindrop
in a garden whose brilliant flowers
bow their heads while the storm
flies through on invisible wings.

III

Not a colour survives
the onslaught of the rain
when it slashes into the trees
until the puddles turn to steam
from which the miraculous blue
of the Morpho's wings
steer their course back to light.

We Speculate on Moving

As the cordillera slides
past the window of the bus on a day
rising and falling with the road
we sink into our seats and wonder
what it would be like if we
were more than passengers
in this country where trees
grow toward the earth
and the army doesn't exist.
Owning a wardrobe of loose
fitting shirts and a house without glass
in its windows
we consider ourselves living
with rain for a neighbour
who knocks on the walls
and no foreign policy to deplore.
Forests step out of the mist
with their orchid promises and calls
of birds pitched high
in the canopy. Our minds lie back
in our seats while we lean
our bodies forward for a better look.
We're on the narrow road
on one side of which is a view
so delicious we could reach
out and take a handful to taste
and on the other a ravine
with a river so fast it would never
give us a chance
of bringing back what we lost there.

Puerto Limon

A wall scarred with evangelical graffiti
marks the end of the street
where a taxi turns, accelerates
and brakes in a stream
of stubborn traffic
pressing through Limon.
Nothing moves for more than a minute
without stopping again
beside a window of fish or a fruit vendor's stall
where the tables lean
onto the sidewalk, weighted
with papayas and bananas so ripe
they smile through their skins.
Never worry that time
will drain faster
than the shower that preceded you
in Limon, the taxi's virtuoso
wheels slice through the water
in the road and deliver you
where you need to go; the Christ
the colour of the stormy sky, the chain link
razor wire enclosure with its stock
of long containers marked *Chiquita* or *Dole*,
the corner station for the bus
whose fare is never more
than loose change, or the break
in clouds where the salt air glows
around the wingspan of a frigatebird.

Coastal Storm

The ocean's grey contends
with that of sky
as the tide brings a storm
to the beach along
with new shells
and a kingfisher's cry
against approaching thunder
like a white, flashing line
on the darkest clouds.
All night there is rain
and the rush of it dreams
a way into the earth
while we sleep with the sound
of darkness passing
through our ears
like torn sheets of silk.

In Between

When the trip is over, the last
of the anti-malaria pills have been swallowed,
and photographs have come back
from the dark room, some images
are still developing
from moments in between the anticipated ones.
The obvious recollections

of a dozen horizons, each one paler than the last,
ending in a velvet sunset;
the sighting of a Bare-necked umbrellabird
displaying bright red; or the trembling flight
of the Blue Morpho along a trail
accessible only by forgetting who you are
come back with the unexpected

from a chance conversation in a side-street bus station
to one with the Cuban-born custodian
proudly sweeping the paths
to the portal of his church. Forest sounds
mingle with the drone of trucks
and air conditioners in a town too busy
for tourism, where our cheap meal

tasted of someone else's life. Our many walks
through nature in the raw
intersect with those along
the street in a city strange to us
with gutters deep enough to swallow storms
and common sparrows with rufous collars
insistent as the snapshot filed under memory

of a country bus stop at the edge of daylight
where a signpost pointed nowhere in particular
and to wait was to float above time.