

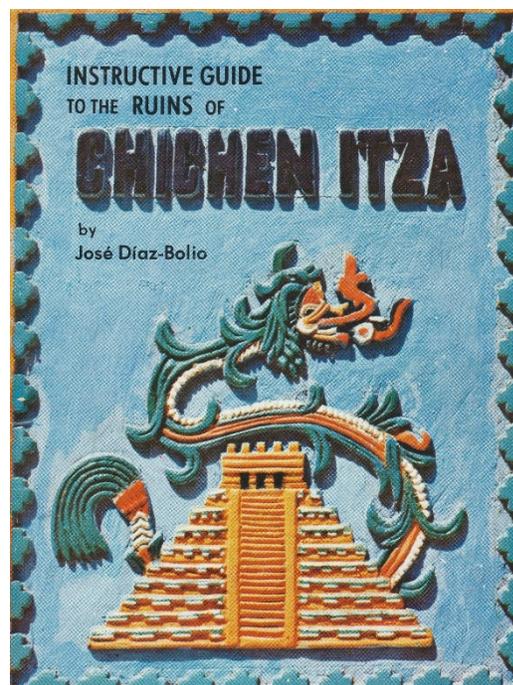
The Jaguar's Teeth

by Courtney White

When I was thirteen, I took a photograph that set me on a difficult path of questions and answers for the rest of my life.

It happened outside a stone building with a curiously rounded roof called *El Caracol* in the great ruined Mayan city of Chichen Itzá, on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. It was the summer of 1974 and my parents had signed me up for a lengthy driving tour of Mexico organized by a private school that I didn't attend, most likely to get me out of their hair for five weeks. The tour had an archaeological focus and the tenth ruin on the itinerary was Chichen Itzá. As usual, I separated myself from the rest of the group as quickly as possible, a guidebook in one hand and my sturdy Kodak Instamatic X-15 in the other. The camera was a small rectangle of gray plastic with a push-down lever for a shutter and a noisy dial near the eyepiece that advanced the film. A thin strap connected the camera to my thin wrist, which made the motion of drawing the Instamatic to my eye rather awkward. But then, at thirteen everything I did felt awkward. I had already dropped the blasted thing two or three times, chipping the plastic. My heart leaped each time. I loved my little camera – after three weeks away from home, it had become my best friend.

El Caracol means “snail” in Spanish and the guidebook described it as an observatory that the ancient Maya used to track the movements of celestial bodies. *Cool*. I hadn't experienced an observatory yet and I was eager to see one. I carefully threaded my way through the sprawling ruins, following the guidebook's map like a pro. By this point on the trip, I had the deep privilege of exploring marvelous temples, huge pyramids, damp underground vaults, vast plazas, spooky ball courts, jungle-encrusted arches, quiet palaces, beautifully colonnaded markets, and solitary, starling-infested structures of mysterious function. I especially liked to prowl the periphery of a site, where the line between order (the tidy, tourist-friendly grounds) and chaos (the jungle) blurred intriguingly. It was on these rough edges that a ruined city seemed most genuine and secretive. Exploring them stirred a romantic yearning in my thirteen-year old soul,



The guidebook I used

requiring that I literally wander off the beaten path, much to the consternation of our four adult chaperones. Not that they didn't try to stop me. When their early protests proved futile, however, they threw up their hands, letting me go where I wanted.

It was a sign of things to come.

The romantic yearning began during a visit to the first ruin on our trip, Tula, the former capital of the Toltec Empire, located north of Mexico City. Climbing out of our vehicles, I saw a



Tula (my original photos)

wide staircase that led to a flat-topped pyramid crowned with tall, stony statues of human figures in elaborate costumes. I was instantly smitten. According to a guidebook, the Toltec Empire flourished a thousand years earlier. *Jesus*. Back home in Phoenix, Arizona, “old” meant anything built before World War II, including the feed store down the street that we frequented for horse supplies. I knew Phoenix had ‘risen from the ashes’ of a prehistoric village, but so far I hadn’t discovered anything in town older than a ranch house. Tula hit me like freight train. I bounded up the pyramid and wandered among the statues, whose martial bearing and silent, vacant eyes

fascinated me. Nearby, a human figure reclined on its back, its knees bent up and its head turned alertly to one side. Resting on its stomach was a bowl, which its hands held carefully as if anticipating a delicate offering. It was a *chacmool*, said the guidebook, and what it anticipated was a bloody human heart. *Yikes!* Human sacrifice was part of the deal with the Toltecs as it was for their imperial successors, the famous Aztecs. I suddenly realized I was a long way from the feed store.

Exploring the pyramid, I felt jazzed for the first time all trip. Up until that point, I had been lonely and homesick, paying scant attention to the foreign sights that greeted me as we drove south. The tour consisted of two vehicles, two sets of married adults, a dozen or so kids (of which I was the youngest), many cities, and near-constant driving. So far, only two stops had stood out. In Chihuahua, we met the ancient widow of Pancho Villa, who served us cookies in her living room. As we sat in stiff chairs, I gawked privately at a house that looked like a museum. Then, in the charming town of Guanajuato, I deliberately broke away from the other

kids, who seemed only interested in drinking and fooling around, and went on an impromptu solitary stroll down a narrow street. I must not have asked permission because a chaperone quickly caught up and steered me back to the hotel. To my surprise, I wasn't chided for my unauthorized initiative. Otherwise, the trip had been notable only for the long hours we spent driving in cramped cars. Mostly, I dozed.

Tula changed everything.

Something woke up inside of me among the stony statues – something that has not slumbered since. Here's what I wrote in a little journal I kept: "We arrived in Tula via a very bad and rough road. I thought Tula would be just one temple with some statues on top, but I was wrong. There was the temple, but as we fanned out, there were long ditches with walls and the walls had engravings all over them. We got to the top of the temple you could see another big mound nearby partly excavated. I took six pictures. I walked over to the top of the unexcavated pyramid." No one else went with me to this second pyramid, probably because it was out-of-bounds. Either I didn't notice or didn't care – I had my heart set on exploration. I prowled the pyramid excitedly until one of the chaperones came rushing over to fetch me, this time exasperation etched on her face. "What was I doing?" she asked irritably. "Who did I think I was?"

Questions I'm still trying to answer to this day.

Ignited by Tula, my curiosity grew into a bonfire during our visit to the great National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park. I couldn't believe my eyes as we wandered from room to room. Human skulls, jade masks, gold weapons, grim statues, dark tombs, colorful murals, maps, photographs and best of all: scale models of ruined cities. I loved models. Back home, I spent many productive but lonely hours in my room assembling models of World War II-era airplanes, ships, and tanks. A prehistoric temple, however, was something else.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
JULY 14 TRIP DEPARTS THRU PHOENIX TUUCSON (ENROUTE) TO LAS CASAS, N. MEXICO (475 MILES)	15 IN MEXICO CITY CHapultepec Castle Chapultepec Park METRO SMITHSONIAN HOUSE OF THE LATE AMERICAN TRADER SAN JUAN MARKET (END DRIVING)	16 CROSS BORDER AT EL PASO, TEXAS TO CUERNAVACA GUERRA LAS FERRERAS PLAZA CENTRAL CANTONAL RESTAURANT STAY IN CUERNAVACA (125 MILES)	17 THRU GOMEZ PALMERO CUERNAVACA - (LOCAL) TO SANILLO TO ZACATECAS (385 MILES)	18 THRU ADAMS-VALIENTES LOCAL TO GUADALAJARA GRAND TOUR OF AVON S. RIVER PANTHER THRU MOUNTAINS OF PUPA (275 MILES)	19 IN GUADALAJARA JARDIN DE LA UNION TERRAZA TRAIL GRAND CHURCH OF SAN DOMINGO MARKET (LOCAL DRIVING)	20 THRU DOONES HORLOGE HORLOGE'S HOME TO SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE EXHIBITION ALLIANCE PRINCIPAL CHURCH LAS MICHAS MARKET (10 MILES)
21 THRU QUERETARO RESTAURANT TO TULA (LOCAL) TRAIL OF CATEPECHE TO MONTELUZAN MOUNTAIN OF MONTELUZAN CANTONAL RESTAURANT CANTONAL RESTAURANT LOCAL RESTAURANT (115 MILES)	22 IN MEXICO CITY CHapultepec Castle Chapultepec Park METRO SMITHSONIAN HOUSE OF THE LATE AMERICAN TRADER SAN JUAN MARKET (END DRIVING)	23 IN MEXICO CITY MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART METRO ZOOLOGICAL NATIONAL PALACE CENTRAL NATIONAL MUSEUM SHOP (END DRIVING)	24 LEAVE MEXICO CITY BARRIO DE GUADALUPE FRANCISCA DE TETHELMANO ACOLMAN TO CUERNAVACA CENTRAL BARRIO DE GUADALUPE BARRIO DE GUADALUPE COATES PALACE (140 MILES)	25 TO OAXACA LEAVE MONTELUZAN DE LEON CANTONAL OAXACA MARKET (HUGE) (300 MILES)	26 IN OAXACA MONTE ALZAR (LOCAL) BARRIO DE LA SOLEDAD BARRIO DE LA SOLEDAD CENTRAL CHURCH OF SAN DOMINGO MARKET (10 MILES)	27 VISIT YAGUL (LOCAL) YAGUL (LOCAL) THRU TLANTEPEC JUCHITAN TULUA RESTAURANT TO SAN CECILIO LAS CASAS (400 MILES)
28 IN SAN CRISTOBAL DE CASAS CENTRAL ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM INDIAN MARKET (LOCAL DRIVING)	29 TO VILLAHERRERA BARRIO DE LA SOLEDAD CENTRAL - MARKET BARRIO DE LA SOLEDAD MUSEUM TABASCO MUSEUM (130 MILES)	30 TO PALENQUE (CENTRAL RUINS) TO CAMPECHE SUBURBAN HOME CHURCH OF SAN JOSE (155 MILES)	31 TO KABAN (LOCAL) TO UXMAL (LOCAL) TO MERIDA (160 MILES)	AUGUST 1 IN MERIDA PUERTA DE LA INDEPENDENCIA MONTAZA HOUSE CENTRAL MUSEUM OF YUCATAN MARKET (LOCAL DRIVING)	2 TO CHICHEN ITZA (CENTRAL RUINS) FULL DAY TO TOUR SHIVAT RUINS IN RUCIENDA CHICHEN (175 MILES)	3 TO AKUMAL ON THE CARIBBEAN TIME ON THE BEACH SUNBATHING RELAXING (100 MILES)
4 REMAIN AT AKUMAL ON THE CARIBBEAN TIME ON THE BEACH SUNBATHING RELAXING (LOCAL DRIVING)	5 VISIT TULUM (LOCAL) (MARKET) ON TO TUCUMAN DE VILLAHERRERA DE ARAGON RESTAURANT IN CENTRAL (100 MILES)	6 WESTWARD THRU BARRIO DE LA SOLEDAD VILLAHERRERA TO CORTAZARCOLOS (415 MILES)	7 BY LAKE CATEMACO THRU SAN ANTONES TONTO TO VIOGACATE CASTLE OF SAN JUAN DE ULVA VIEW FROM BANCO (130 MILES)	8 THRU CORDOBA AND FOREN BE LAS FLORES TO PUEBLA MUSEUM OF PUEBLA MUSEUM OF PUEBLA CENTRAL - MARKET CHURCH OF SAN DOMINGO (130 MILES)	9 TO PUEBLA FOREN BE LAS FLORES SECRET CONVENT THRU PUEBLA CITY TOLUCA TO MORELIA BARRIO DE LA SOLEDAD CHURCH OF SAN DOMINGO CANTONAL (130 MILES)	10 TOUR MORELIA MUSEUM HOUSE OF MANRIQUE CHURCH OF SAN DOMINGO TOUR PATRIOTIC CHURCH OF LAKE HOUSE OF II THESE THRU OAXACA, PUEBLA, AZTEC CHURCH TO GUADALAJARA (135 MILES)
11 IN GUADALAJARA BARRIO DE LA SOLEDAD CENTRAL MUSEUM OF GUADALAJARA CENTRAL MUSEUM OF GUADALAJARA CENTRAL MUSEUM OF GUADALAJARA CENTRAL (145 MILES)	12 IN GUADALAJARA BARRIO DE LA SOLEDAD CENTRAL MUSEUM OF GUADALAJARA CENTRAL MUSEUM OF GUADALAJARA CENTRAL MUSEUM OF GUADALAJARA CENTRAL (145 MILES)	13 THRU TEPIC (CENTRAL) TO SAN JUAN BLAS CUSTOMS HOUSE JUNGLE RIVER TRIP TIME ON THE BEACH (185 MILES)	14 TO MAZATLAN TIME ON THE BEACH (195 MILES)	15 IN MAZATLAN TIME ON THE BEACH (LOCAL DRIVING)	16 LEAVE MAZATLAN THRU CULIACAN TO LOS MICHES SUCRE MILL (275 MILES)	17 THRU NAVAJA CIUDAD OREGON GRANMAS BARRIO DE LA SOLEDAD SAN CARLOS BAY TO HUAPASTILLO SHIP OF SUCRE (415 MILES)
18 RETURN TO OJEME THRU NOGALES TUUCSON PHOENIX	19 6660 TOTAL MILES	20	21	22	23	24

Our Itinerary

The beautiful model of the Temple of the Niches at El Tajín stopped me dead in my tracks. *Wow*. I scanned the map on an adjacent wall. Where *was* El Tajín? How could I get there? The museum's Mayan rooms were even better. "The models, pictures, maps and stele [statues] were



Museum of Anthropology

great," I wrote enthusiastically in my journal. "I like very much the tomb of Palenque but I did not take a picture because I will see the real thing...The models helped me to figure out where to take my pictures."

After lunch in the cafeteria, I charged into the Aztec room, home to the famous circular stone calendar, where I lingered so long that our chaperones grew irritable again. They probably couldn't decide who was more exasperating, the bored, ever-partying older kids or the nerdy, ever-straying one in dorky glasses. When it came time to leave the museum and go back to the hotel,

they granted me permission to stay longer, probably out of relief. Thrilled, I wandered around until closing time, fanning the flames of my curiosity, but also paying a price when I got lost twice on the walk back to the hotel. Worse, the door to my room was locked and I didn't have a key. I had no idea where the group was, so I drifted outside intending to find a park bench so I could read a book on the history of Mexico that I had purchased in the museum bookstore, only to be badgered by a peddler until I agreed to an unnecessary shoeshine (for *mucho* pesos).

I managed to get lost again the following day, this time during a visit to the huge ruined city of Teotihuacan. It started with a nauseating exchange of flirtations at the foot of the Temple of the Moon between my roommate and a cute girl on the tour that he had an eye on. To demonstrate his virility, he hustled to the top of the steep staircase without a pause, drawing exaggerated oohs from the girl. It made me sick to my thirteen-year old stomach, so I spun on my heel and headed for the other great pyramid in town, the massive Temple of the Sun, telling a chaperone I would be "right back." He didn't stop me, so off I went alone (those were the days). After climbing up and down the pyramid's huge, endless staircase without the benefit of an admiring audience, I headed down the Avenue of the Dead to the lovely and mysterious Temple of Queztlacoatl, at the other end of town. To my delight, the sculptured heads of feathered

serpents and round-eyed gods that festooned the temple were immediately recognizable – copies adorned our favorite Mexican restaurant back in Phoenix!

The world, I began to see, was smaller than it seemed.

More amazing ruined cities followed: Monte Albán, Yagul, Mitla, La Venta, Palenque, Uxmal, Kabah, Chichen Itzá, and lastly, Tulum, perched attractively on Yucatan’s east coast. It was an unending feast for hungry eyes. I saw huge stone Olmec heads in an outdoor museum, lovely Mayan friezes, carved sarcophagi, and delicately-facaded temples. I climbed up broken staircases, crawled through dank tunnels, and stared wistfully at forbidding mounds of unexcavated ruins in the verdant distance. I bought fraudulent artifacts from a local “farmer,” pulled a dirty shard of pottery from the slope below a decaying building, ran my hand along thick Spanish city walls, prowled local markets for souvenirs, fretted whether the crocodiles at a stinky zoo were dead or alive, swatted at a steady assault of mosquitoes (also a novelty), eavesdropped on



Mitla



Palenque

English-speaking guides, and raised my eyebrows when I learned that one of the chaperones had to bribe a Mexican policeman in order to leave the scene of a traffic accident. In between, I read in my history book and ignored the other kids who seemed as relentlessly focused on beer and smooching as ever. I also took photos, lots and lots of photos.

The traffic accident caused us to miss the important Mayan center of Uxmal, much to my disappointment. We arrived at the ruin a few minutes after closing time, which made me quietly angry (we were habitually late to things, usually because the other kids were such sleepyheads). Sensing my indignation, one of the chaperones kindly volunteered to return to Uxmal the next day, which they had scheduled as a layover in Merida, Yucatan’s capital.

Who wanted to go, he asked? I raised a hand, of course, as did my roommate. Two other kids wanted to go as well. *Great!* The trip was on. Stoked, the following morning I rose early and

went searching through the streets of Merida for a tour company that would take me to the Mayan ruins of Labna and Sayil, which I wanted to see as well. I sought a half-day outing, figuring there would be plenty of time to see Uxmal in the afternoon as planned. I was certain the chaperones would let me go and if no one else wanted to come along, I'd go by myself. I found a guided tour and triumphantly beelined back to the hotel – where the chaperones scotched my plan *muy pronto*. I was disappointed, but at least the search itself had been educational.

I learned I could seek and find things on my own.

Uxmal was amazing. Once released from the car, I climbed straight up the towering Pyramid of the Magician, clutching the heavy chain that officials had placed on the stairs for us unsteady tourists. The view from the top was heart-stopping. Built during the Mayan Classic Period (circa 900 AD) out of lovely yellow stone, Uxmal became a major administrative center for the region with an architectural style that was both unique and beautiful. For a time, the city prospered and grew fat. Then it fell to conquering Toltecs (from Tula!) who subdued the entire region within a few short decades. Soon, the entire Mayan civilization collapsed into nothingness. According to my history book, the reasons for the collapse were shrouded in



Uxmal

mystery, creating one of the great enigmas of archaeology. Questions filled my mind as I wandered through the lovely ruins. What happened to the Maya? How could a large, complex society crater so quickly? How could a place like Uxmal be abandoned like that? Where did everyone go?

Uxmal mesmerized me with its mystery and quiet beauty. After taking too many photographs of the stately Governor's Palace, I decided to head over to the House of the Doves. I didn't make it. "I wanted to get over to some buildings," I wrote later in my journal. "I found a path, so

I followed it. I did not have any bug spray and I was sorry. Bugs attacked me from all sides. It started to rain, so I hid in a temple in the cemetery group... The ride back [to Merida] was done in rain and overcast skies. They talked about beer most of the way."

Uxmal had pushed my adolescent yearning up a big notch. On the drive back, I closed my eyes and wished with every ounce of my teenage heart that the jungle would magically lift, just

for a moment, revealing hidden ruins – and answers to my questions. I squeezed my eyes tight, concentrating. I didn't want fame or fortune. I wasn't looking for Mayan gold or Spanish treasure. I just wanted to *know*. What had happened out there, in the thickness of the jungle? I opened my eyes. Nothing had changed. I tried again, praying earnestly to a deity, any deity, for a quick peek under the jungle, asking it to lift it like a vast green rug. I opened one eye. Nope. I tried again. No go. I sighed. I knew I was being childish. I suddenly felt embarrassed and scanned my fellow passengers. No one had noticed my prayerful behavior. As I turned my gaze back to the leafy foliage zipping past us, embarrassment gave way to disappointment. There were no shortcuts to answers, I suspected, no accommodating deities available to lift jungle rugs. I settled in for a doze.

Our next stop was Chichen Itzá.

Resupplied with film and burning brightly again with curiosity, I headed into the heart of the magnificent city, aiming for *El Caracol*. Every ruined building I had seen so far was square, so when the round form of the observatory came into view, with its roof eroded at a rakish angle, I knew I needed a photograph. Excitedly, I snapped a quick one, climbed the stairs to a large platform and snapped another. Satisfied for the moment, I looked around, drinking in a marvelous view of the ruined city. *Wow*. Walking to the edge of the platform, I saw a square-shaped building a short distance away, which my map identified as the Nunnery. It was pretty, so I lifted my little Instamatic to my eye, framed the image carefully, groped for the shutter lever with my finger, and...hesitated. Something was wrong. I peered over the camera at the building and then looked again through the X-15's tiny viewfinder. I suddenly realized what it was: the picture was boring. I had snapped this photo a hundred times. I needed a new angle. Craning my neck, I looked around for inspiration. Suddenly, I spied what looked like a life-size stone jaguar nearby, its mouth stretched wide in a silent, defiant roar. This gave me an idea. I walked over and bent down behind it so I could frame the Nunnery in the middle of the jaguar's gaping mouth.



The Jaguar's Teeth

Looking through the viewfinder, I saw the teeth of the jaguar about to close ravenously on the hapless edifice. *Chomp!*

I pushed the lever down.

The photo set me on a difficult path for the rest of my life because it established a pattern of responding to left-brain questions (science) with right-brain answers (art). I knew early on that I would never be a scientist or an academic even though I had earnest and anguished questions – lots of them as it turned out – about the world. I also knew, however, I couldn't be 'just' a creative person either, focused on shape, color, words, or other forms of self-expression. I wanted to do both. But how? Answering *that* question has occupied my waking hours from the moment I took the photograph through the jaguar's teeth. I also knew I wouldn't be content in any single genre or mode of expression. My creative responses needed to be as diverse as the questions that motivated them. That raised another set of challenges, as I discovered. Was there such a thing as a *career* creating right-brain answers to left-brain questions? I had no idea, though one thing was clear – there wasn't a prepared path. I had to make my own.

Not long after visiting Chichen Itzá, my little journal fell silent. Thumbing through it, I was puzzled at first then I remembered why. After our group arrived at a small resort on the



Puebla (I think)

coast of Yucatan not far from the Mayan ruin of Tulum, I came down with a fever and spent two days sweating profusely under a mountain of blankets in a thatch hut. I remember faces peering down at me, their expressions etched with concern. "Great," I probably thought to myself, "now the dorky kid in glasses has found another way to be a nuisance." When I recovered, I remember feeling subdued for the remainder of the trip, getting fired up only once. It happened when I broke away from the group in downtown Puebla and went for a roaming walk on my own – a walk that resurrected the yearning I had first encountered at Tula. It was still

there, I realized, somewhere deep inside, burning brightly. It would never go away. The winding path would never end. By time we reached Guadalajara, however, I just wanted to go home.

I am grateful to my parents beyond words for sending me on this summer adventure. And I was wrong about their desire to get me out of their hair for five weeks. Looking through my little journal from the trip, I discovered a short poem that my mother tucked away in the back across from the Clothes Checklist (she was always doing things like this). Her note said it was a prayer uttered by an Aztec chieftain upon his elevation to a position of leadership. I don't know why she chose it, except it reads like a blessing for anyone setting out on a new adventure. Perhaps, she suspected I was heading out on a memorable journey. Maybe it was her way of saying that she wanted to go on a trip too.

Either way, many decades later the words still ring true:

*Grant me, Lord, a little light,
Be it no more than a glowworm giveth
Which goeth about the night,
To guide me through this life,
This dream which lasteth but a day,
Wherein are many things on which to stumble,
And many things at which to laugh,
And others like unto a stony path
Along which one goeth leaping.*

