

## Overactive Imaginations:

### Childhood with Sticks:

I have often felt that I have an overactive imagination. When I was a child I would read the Redwall books by Brian Jacques and then write my own out in the backyard. The Redwall books had a fantastical, medieval setting and they were as bloody as children's books could get, with grand battles acted out by talking mice, rats, and weasels. I always liked the weasels myself, even though they were always the bad guys. In my mind I'd be some weasel leader, often a pirate on a ship off the coast of Salamandastron, with the whole backyard alternating as a deck, a small boat, the shoreline, or anything else I could conjure up. When acting as skilled weasel warrior, I preferred to use sticks to toy swords, they seemed more authentic somehow. A toy sword was obviously an illusion of a real sword, while a stick was just a stick—free to become whatever I wanted. I became quite the connoisseur of sticks: they had to be of a certain length and shape, not too brittle or too dirty—especially not dirty. I hated getting dirt on my hands; it tore away at the fantasy. There was this one stick I found—God knows where—that was perhaps the best one I ever acquired. It was bamboo; long enough to serve as either a sword or short spear in my ten year old hands. I didn't have video games, I had that stick. With it I tore through swathes of vermin—rats, weasels, ferrets, stoats, you name it. I took it to Chile with me when I went—it was such a wonderful stick. But when I got there, things were different. For years back in the States, I had run around our backyard (and front yard) barefoot, developing impressive calluses on my feet, which got even more impressively dirty. But in Chile, you couldn't run around our yard like that. The first yard had lurking nails in it, while the yard of our second house had those detestable acorn-like things scattered across it. They couldn't poke you like nails, but they weren't fun to step on. We were there for only a few months before I lost that stick.

La Serena, Nov 7, 1999

This is not a journal. I hate journals. I hate the very concept of journals. What's the point of writing down what happened in a day? Who cares! You'll remember the important stuff and the rest of it can be forgotten. The world is boring, why savor it? And why savor Chile, for that matter. We'll be going in December and I say it's past time.

La Serena, Nov 9, 1999

This is not a journal. The Quebrata is like another world, when you think about it. You step into that little ravine and suddenly you aren't in the Recinto anymore, no green lawns and frame houses and Spanish tutors. Instead it's just sand and rock, littered with Eucalyptus leaves. Not a person in sight. And the way the noises of the city filter up it, especially in the lower Quebrata, all blurred and distorted until they sound alien. It's easy to get lost there. Not to lose your bearings, but just to wander in that other world for hours on end, like some interstellar explorer. Each time you enter it seems different, not new, just different. The States are like that, every time we

visit them over the years. I wonder if we can even go home again, really. But where else is there. Space?

#### Science Fiction's Curse:

It is a proven fact that science fiction readers have difficulty with metaphors. Orson Scott Card explains this in his book *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*. He says that he was teaching a class on science fiction, where half the students were science fiction readers while the other half had never read it before. He had them read a passage from a science fiction story in which the author uses a metaphor to describe the twisting, snake-like airport baggage trolleys (lizard carriages? I believe was the term). The half of the class that had read no science fiction before immediately understood the metaphor, while the other half, the science fiction readers, had confused images of people riding dinosaurs. Science Fiction is filled with such outlandish descriptions and fantastic beings that science fiction readers instinctively read metaphors in a pure literal sense, grouping them with the other amazing things they've read that were indeed meant to be interpreted literally. It is certainly something of a problem for science fiction writers, who must avoid using metaphor if they wish to write clearly. And as an aspiring science fiction writer, I habitually prefer to use analogies over metaphors when writing. Yet what an even greater hindrance it is to those poor science fiction readers, who must be clubbed over the head with a metaphor before they realize it for what it is. Think of it, millions of lost souls wandering the globe, incapable of grasping this simple literary technique without great effort. But is that truly so awful? All the obvious metaphors are cliché, originality and oddness are what surprise the reader now. Wouldn't it be more surprising to learn that the original, unconventional metaphor is not metaphor at all, that the guards actually have the faces of hamsters or the patent office really is a dog food factory?

I have experiences like this when reading poetry. Someone will read a line that is literally surreal and impossible and we will try to find out what the poet actually means. But I can only do this when prodded. I read a poem full of bizarre metaphors and symbols and I just read them. Then I come to class and find out the poem was really about sex, or love, or persecution. And I think this is why; it's certainly an easy explanation. Strangeness, nonsense, is fine to me. The poet's writing what she means, all in the literal sense. So what if it makes no sense that way? It's beautiful! That's how I ended up *lost in the cave*, if you'll recall. But it happens with much more obvious metaphors than that one (and I still maintain the metaphor was drawn so realistically it began to slip out of metaphor and into description). Remember, say, Abby's poem with the leper remark? I just read that, thought it was nice. I didn't really go looking for metaphors. We just started in one place, traveled along, and ended up beneath an underpass. Saw some neat things along the way. Nothing more to it, really. What a psychological blind spot. But do I really want it cured? Sure, I might be able to appreciate great poetry but I doubt I'll be reading it in my spare time after this course. One class

isn't going to change me that drastically; it takes more than three point five hours every Thursday for semester to change one's ingrained habits. And since I want to write science fiction anyway, isn't it better that I avoid metaphor? Not using it is one of the tricks of the trade, after all, and I'm desperate to pick up the trade. But, on the other hand, I always like seeing all options? I don't like having a blind spot.

Starships Over the Painted Desert:

?Star Trek? is an abomination. Space travel isn't clean, it's gritty and painful. And starships are dirty, cantankerous, and look functional rather than aesthetically pleasing. Get up on any decent vista in a desert; survey the canyons and dry flat land around and below you. Wouldn't a starship just look right swooping across over there, or landing on that rock outcropping? Not a ?Star Trek? ship in its pretty, artificial white, but a real starship, all rusty steel and belching engines. The desert was made for starships, because the desert doesn't belong on Earth. It deserves its own world, a land of canyons, mountains, and dust where only the toughest can eke out a living. Just stand in a desert at night and look up at that Moon high in the sky and tell me we're standing on Earth. I sure won't buy it. Not tonight.

La Serena, November 17, 1999

We spent most of the night out in the Elquí Valley, away from the city's light pollution. We went out there to see the Leonid meteor shower; the viewing's better down here in the Southern Hemisphere, so it's a good thing we caught it now before we move back. We were out by some observatory, a little one that must be private, I think. The observatory looks so weird, like all observatories, kinda like a spaceship. Finally—I don't know how late—the first meteor streaked across the sky. It was heading west and looked like it was going to vaporize La Serena. Within a few minutes there were dozens of them streaking across the sky like bits of gold. It really felt like we were somewhere else, on some other planet. This sort of this just doesn't happen on Earth! It was cold, and dark, and wonderful. Elizabeth fell asleep halfway through. Times like these make me wish we weren't leaving Chile? but then I come to my senses.