

Paraguay

THE UPPER PART of the plain that we had crossed the day before was now white with snow, and it was evident that there was a storm raging behind us and that we had only just crossed the Burji La in time to escape it. We camped in a slight hollow at Sekbachan, eighteen miles from Malik Mar, the night as still as the previous one and the temperature the same; it seemed as if the Deosai Plains were not going to be so formidable as they had been described; but the third day a storm of hail, sleet, and snow alternately came at noon when we began to ascend the Sari Sangar Pass, 14,200 feet, and continued with only a few minutes' intermission till four o'clock. The top of the pass is a fairly level valley containing two lakes, their shores formed of boulders that seemed impossible to ride over. The men slid and stumbled so much that I would not let anyone lead my pony for fear of pulling him over; he was old and slow but perfectly splendid here, picking his way among the rocks without a falter. At the summit there is a cairn on which each man threw a stone, and here it is customary to give payment to the coolies. I paid each man his agreed-upon wage, and, alone, began the descent. Ahead was Paraguay.¹

1. Quoted from *A Summer Ride Through Western Tibet*, by Jane E. Duncan. Collins, London. 1906. Slightly altered.

PARAGUAY

Where Paraguay Is

Thus I found myself in a strange country. This Paraguay is not the Paraguay that exists on our maps. It is not to be found on the continent, South America; it is not a political subdivision of that continent, with a population of 2,161,000 and a capital city named Asunción. This Paraguay exists elsewhere. Now, moving toward the first of the “silver cities,” I was tired but also elated and alert. Flights of white meat moved through the sky overhead in the direction of the dim piles of buildings.

Jean Mueller

Entering the city I was approached, that first day, by a dark girl wrapped in a red shawl. The edges of the shawl were fringed, and the tip of each strand of fringe was a bob of silver. The girl at once placed her hands on my hips, standing facing me; she smiled, and exerted a slight pull. I was claimed as her guest; her name was Jean Mueller, “*Teníamos grandes deseos de conocerlo,*” she said. I asked how she knew I had arrived and she said, “Everyone knows.” We then proceeded to her house, a large, modern structure some distance from the center of the city; there I was shown into a room containing a bed, a desk, a chair, bookcases, a fireplace, a handsome piano in a cherrywood case. I was told that when I had rested I might join her downstairs and might then meet her husband; before leaving the room she sat down before the piano, and, almost mischievously, played a tiny sonata of Bibblemann’s.

DONALD BARTHELME

Temperature

Temperature controls activity to a remarkable degree. By and large, adults here raise their walking speed and show more spontaneous movement as the temperature rises. But the temperature-dependent pattern of activity is complex. For instance, the males move twice as fast at 60 degrees as they do at 35 degrees, but above 60 degrees speed decreases. The females show more complicated behavior; they increase spontaneous activity as the temperature rises from 40 to 48 degrees, become less active between 49 and 66 degrees, and above 66 degrees again go into a rising tempo of spontaneous movements up to the lethal temperature of 77 degrees. Temperature also (here as elsewhere) plays a critical role in the reproductive process. In the so-called “silver cities” there is a particular scale—66, 67, 68, 69 degrees—at which intercourse occurs (and only within the scale). In the “gold” areas, the scale does not, apparently, apply.

Herko Mueller

Herko Mueller walks through gold and silver leaves, awarded, in the summer months, to those who have produced the best pastiche of the emotions. He is smiling because he did not win one of these prizes, which the people of Paraguay seek to avoid. He is tall, brown, wears a funny short beard, and is fond of zippered suits in brilliant colors: yellow, green, violet. He is, professionally, an arbiter of comedy. “A sort of drama critic?”
“More what you would term an umpire. The members

PARAGUAY

of the audience are given a set of rules and the rules constitute the comedy. Our comedies seek to reach the imagination. When you are looking at something, you cannot imagine it.” In the evenings I have wet sand to walk upon—long stretches of beach with the sea tasting the edges. Getting back into my clothes after a swim, I discover a strange thing: a sand dollar under my shirt. It is strange because this sand is sifted twice daily to remove impurities and maintain whiteness. And the sea itself, the New Sea, is not programmed for echinoderms.

Error

A government error resulting in the death of a statistically insignificant portion of the population (less than one-fortieth of one per cent) has made people uneasy. A skelp of questions and answers is fused at high temperature (1400° C) and then passed through a series of protracted caresses. Amelioration of the condition results. Paraguay is not old. It is new, a new country. Rough sketches suggest its “look.” Heavy yellow drops like pancake batter fall from its sky. I hold a bouquet of umbrellas in each hand. A phrase of Herko Mueller’s: “*Y un 60% son mestizos: gloria, orgullo, presente y futuro del Paraguay*” (“... the glory, pride, present and future of Paraguay”). The country’s existence is “predictive,” he says, and I myself have noticed a sort of frontier ambience. There are problems. The problem of shedding skin. Thin discarded shells like disposable plastic gloves are found in the street.

DONALD BARTHELME

Rationalization

The problems of art. New artists have been obtained. These do not object to, and indeed argue enthusiastically, for the rationalization process. Production is up. Quality-control devices have been installed at those points where the interests of artists and audience intersect. Shipping and distribution have been improved out of all recognition. (It is in this area, they say in Paraguay, that traditional practices were most blameworthy.) The rationalized art is dispatched from central art dumps to regional art dumps, and from there into the lifestreams of cities. Each citizen is given as much art as his system can tolerate. Marketing considerations have not been allowed to dictate product mix; rather, each artist is encouraged to maintain, in his software, highly personal, even idiosyncratic, standards (the so-called "hand of the artist" concept). Rationalization produces simpler circuits and therefore, a saving in hardware. Each artist's product is translated into a statement in symbolic logic. The statement is then "minimized" by various clever methods. The simpler statement is translated back into the design of a simpler circuit. Foamed by a number of techniques, the art is then run through heavy steel rollers. Flip-flop switches control its further development. Sheet art is generally dried in smoke and is dark brown in color. Bulk art is air-dried, and changes color in particular historical epochs.

PARAGUAY

Skin

Ignoring a letter from the translator Jean sat on a rubber pad doing exercises designed to loosen the skin. Scores of diamond-shaped lights abraded her arms and legs. The light placed a pattern of false information in those zones most susceptible to tearing. Whistling noises accompanied the lights. The process of removing the leg skin is private. Tenseness is eased by the application of a cream, heavy yellow drops like pancake batter. I held several umbrellas over her legs. A man across the street pretending not to watch us. Then the skin placed in the green official receptacles.

The Wall

Our design for the lift tower left us with a vast blind wall of *in situ* concrete. There was thus the danger of having a dreary expanse of blankness in that immensely important part of the building. A solution had to be found. The great wall space would provide an opportunity for a gesture of thanks to the people of Paraguay; a stone would be placed in front of it. and, instead of standing in the shadows, the Stele of the Measures would be brought there also. The wall would be divided, by means of softly worn paths, into doors. These, varying in size from the very large to the very small, would have different colors and thicknesses. Some would open, some would not, and this would change from week to week, or from hour to hour, or in accord with sounds made by people standing in front of them. Long lines

DONALD BARTHELME

or tracks would run from the doors into the roaring public spaces.²

Silence

In the larger stores silence (damping materials) is sold in paper sacks like cement. Similarly, the softening of language usually lamented as a falling off from former practice is in fact a clear response to the proliferation of surfaces and stimuli. Imprecise sentences lessen the strain of close tolerances. Silence is also available in the form of white noise. The extension of white noise to the home by means of leased wire from a central generating point has been useful. Herko says. The analogous establishment of “white space” in a system paralleling the existing park system has also been beneficial. Anechoic chambers placed randomly about the city (on the model of telephone booths) are said to have actually saved lives. Wood is becoming rare. They are now paying for yellow pine what was formerly paid for rosewood. Relational methods govern the layout of cities. Curiously, in some of the most successful projects the design has been swung upon small collections of rare animals spaced (on the lost-horse principle) on a lack of grid. Carefully calculated mixes: mambas, the black wrasse, the giselle. Electrolytic jelly exhibiting a capture ratio far in excess of standard is used to fix the animals in place.

2. Quoted from *The Modulor*, by Le Corbusier, M.I.T. Press. Cambridge, 1954. Slightly altered.

PARAGUAY

Terror

We rushed down to the ends of the waves, apertures through which threatening lines might be seen. Arbiters registered serial numbers of the (complex of threats) with ticks on a great, brown board. Jean meanwhile, unaffected, was casting about on the beach for driftwood, brown washed pieces of wood laced with hundreds of tiny hairline cracks. Such is the smoothness of surfaces in Paraguay that anything not smooth is valuable. She explains to me that in demanding (and receiving) explanations you are once more brought to a stop. You have got, really, no farther than you were before. "Therefore we try to keep everything open, go forward avoiding the final explanation. If we inadvertently receive it, we are instructed to 1) pretend that it is just another error, or 2) misunderstand it. Creative misunderstanding is crucial." Creation of new categories of anxiety which must be bandaged or "patched." The expression "put a patch on it." There are "hot" and "cold" patches and specialists in the application of each. Rhathymia is the preferred mode of presentation of the self.

The Temple

Turning sharply to the left I came upon, in a grove of trees, a temple of some sort, abandoned, littered with empty boxes, the floor coated with a thin layer of lime. I prayed. Then drawing out my flask I refreshed myself with apple juice. Everyone in Paraguay has the same fingerprints. There are crimes but people chosen at

DONALD BARTHELME

random are punished for them. Everyone is liable for everything. An extension of the principle, there but for the grace of God go I. Sexual life is very free. There are rules but these are like the rules of chess, intended to complicate and enrich the game. I made love to Jean Mueller while her husband watched. There have been certain technical refinements. The procedures we use (called here "impalement") are used in Paraguay but also new techniques I had never before encountered, "dimidiation" and "quartering." These I found very refreshing.

Microminiaturization

Microminiaturization leaves enormous spaces to be filled. Disposability of the physical surround has psychological consequences. The example of the child's anxiety occasioned by the family's move to a new home may be cited. Everything physical in Paraguay is getting smaller and smaller. Walls thin as a thought, locomotive-substitutes no bigger than ball-point pens. Paraguay, then, has big empty spaces in which men wander, trying to touch something. Preoccupation with skin (on and off, wrinkling, the new skin, pink fresh, taut) possibly a response to this. Stories about skin, histories of particular skins. But no jokes! Some 700,000 photographs of nuclear events were lost when the great library of Paraguay burned. Particle identification was set back many years. Rather than recreate the former physics, a new physics based on the golden section (proliferation

PARAGUAY

of golden sections) was constructed. As a system of explanation almost certain to be incorrect it enjoys enormous prestige here.

Behind the Wall

Behind the wall there is a field of red snow. I had expected that to enter it would be forbidden, but Jean said no, walk about in it, as much as you like. I had expected that walking in it one would leave no footprints, or that there would be some other anomaly of that kind, but there were no anomalies; I left footprints and felt the cold of red snow underfoot. I said to Jean Mueller, "What is the point of this red snow?" "The intention of the red snow, the reason it is isolated behind the wall, yet not forbidden, is its soft glow—as if it were lighted from beneath. You must have noticed it; you've been standing here for twenty minutes." "But what does it do?" "Like any other snow, it invites contemplation and walking about in." The snow rearranged itself into a smooth, red surface without footprints. It had a red glow, as if lighted from beneath. It seemed to proclaim itself a mystery, but one there was no point in solving—an ongoing low-grade mystery.

Departure

Then I was shown the plan, which is kept in a box. Herko Mueller opened the box with a key (everyone has a key). "Here is the plan," he said. "It governs more or less everything. It is a way of allowing a very wide range

DONALD BARTHELME

of tendencies to interact.” The plan was a number of analyses of Brownian motion equipped, at each end, with alligator clips. Then the bell rang and the space became crowded, hundreds of men and women standing there waiting for the marshals to establish some sort of order. I had been chosen. Herko said, to head the column (on the principle of the least-likely leader). We robed; I folded my arms around the mace. We began the descent (into? out of?) Paraguay.

Paraguay Press is a co-operatively run, independent art publishing company, managed by the artists, writers and curators behind castillo/corrales, Paris. Paraguay Press was conceived in order to reclaim control of the means of creation, production and distribution of the books in which their work appears and to create a framework for producing publications with a growing number of artists, writers, and institutions. Each project developed by Paraguay Press looks carefully into the pragmatics of publishing, and adapts each print-run and scope, deploys different printing devices, and considers various distribution strategies—according to the nature of each publication. All depart from an understanding of the space of the book, considered not as a medium of documentation nor a vector of promotion, but as an act of translation and the extension of artistic, critical and curatorial thinking into a graphic, mobile, democratic and durable form.