

Guidebook

Erosion is the greatest threat to the stability of this island. Once as large as the imagination itself (galaxies, universes), now it fits snugly in the palm of your hand, its coastline having been eaten away by tides of a mysterious origin. Yet the population is exploding, and with shortages of food, water, and housing the clerics' prohibitions against contraception only anger the dispossessed—to say nothing of their edicts on the future of complex numbers and natural history, which frighten the elites, bewilder the scribes, and comfort the families of the sick and dying.

To quell the unrest, the authorities have created a bureaucracy to chart the weather, employing a sizable portion of the work force. Equipped with thermometers and wind vanes, field-workers fan out across the island at daybreak and do not return until dusk. They send back hourly readings to statisticians who record and interpret their findings, which are broadcast everywhere; scrutinized by scholars, these statistics are the source of continuous debate. For time, like the coastline, has also shrunk, causing the seasons to change without warning; every solstice and equinox, of which there are more than a dozen a day, must be accounted for; the work is endless.

Scientists cannot determine if the weather and corresponding tides are a function of the planet tilting in a new direction, of a change in the orbit of the moon, or of fallout from a secret military experiment gone awry. How to account for the sudden emergence of spring after a summer-like drought—the new shoots sprouting in the cracks of the sidewalk, the erratic behavior of the swans circling the pond in the last park, the river overflowing its banks? Why is the autumnal division of fruits certain to succeed any shift in domestic or foreign policy? And where does winter figure into the calculations of the media, which have reaped enormous profits from the crisis?

Thus from hour to hour the road crews do not know whether they will need to repair potholes or plow snow; commercial jets stay in holding patterns all day long; the inversion never lifts. And the clerics? They have enlisted the homeless to keep track of who does what, when, and where. You, for example. Where are you supposed to be now? Why are you still here?