

On “Day Five,” his voices resonate with García Márquez. On “Six,” Accame’s question, “Where does this fear come from, from which part of our souls?” finds its answer on the first pages of *The Rule of Love* by Esquivel, the Mexican novelist, who answers, “Fear makes itself the command center of all action. Situated immediately behind the belly button, it receives all sensations before the brain does.”

Magic realism, as people have come to call it, in Accame as in other writers, is essentially a way of reflecting Latin American reality, with its modes of thinking at once militaristic and indigenous, and its exuberant sense of the natural world—an immense landscape that both absorbs and devours. “I have to convince myself that only the jungle is to blame,” says Accame.

—Lourdes Espinola

## DIARY OF AN EXPLORER

*Not long ago, a young woman—I’ll call her Elisa Villagarcía—handed over to me a diary her deceased grandfather had kept while serving as a scout for the Bolivian army in the jungles of Paraguay during the war of ’32.*

*I have removed all personal references, and, aside from certain literary adjustments I believed convenient, left the text essentially the same:*

### *Day One*

I am first lieutenant Ernesto Villagarcía, leader of a group of scouts charged with finding the straightest and least challenging route to C. The men with me are: Tobías, a Mataco Indian; Abel Nieve, a hefty and bald giant two meters tall, who looks like an enormous kneecap protruding from a military uniform; Agamenón and Teófilo Sánchez, identical twins who speak always at the same time, as if both coming up with the same idea instantaneously; and finally, Cancio Cruz, the youngest of the squad. I don’t know his exact birthday, but he can’t be more than seventeen.

Yesterday we left base camp and entered the jungle.

I’ve seen at least three birds I’ve never seen before. I asked the Mataco, our guide, for their names, but he told me them in his own tongue and now I can’t remember them.

Night watchman: Agamenón Sánchez, nothing to report. My turn tonight.

### *Day Two*

An uneventful night. Noises of animals I don't recognize. I'll have to get used to them.

This morning a tortoise crossed our path. The Mataco killed him with two perpendicular machete blows in the shape of a cross. He says they bring bad luck. I have to admit his slaughter disgusted me, but I said nothing as I watched. It wouldn't be smart to belittle his beliefs. It's best to be careful with the Indians. They're extremely touchy and refuse to be subordinated to military command or the values of our culture. If provoked, he wouldn't hesitate to abandon us in the middle of the jungle.

We crossed some wetlands. Small bogs began cropping up a few kilometers back.

On the highest branches of the trees, we saw braided reeds in enormous, compact knots. From below, they look solid—I think a man could live comfortably inside.

I feel sorry for Cancio who's getting eaten alive by mosquitoes. His face is purple from slapping it all the time.

The Sánchez boys spent the afternoon telling stories. It's hard to understand them since they never let one another talk. They have to say everything at the same time. It's disconcerting.

Watchman: Teófilo Sánchez.

### *Day Three*

A quiet night.

We headed further inland.

Hunted down a boar today. Though our provisions are still plentiful, a little fresh meat will be nice.

But there was nothing typical about the hunt. We were cutting our way with machetes over the mountainside when suddenly we heard a squeal. Nieve and I dropped our rucksacks and took off running; the others followed at a distance behind. Nieve's agility in cutting through the underbrush surprised me. We reached a clearing and found the boar pressed up against the edge of a ravine. It was a surprising sight since nothing was blocking its way. Even so, the animal refused to budge, as if frozen stiff in fear. It even occurred to me it might be sick. We crept closer, our rifles at the ready. One, two, five meters. I think we could have killed it from even closer. It wasn't a hunt as

much as an execution. The boar didn't try to escape or attack; it just stood there waiting for us to shoot then dropped to the ground.

As we watched it writhe a little, I noticed an unpleasant expression on Abel Nieve's face. I don't know how to describe it, but I too had my suspicions that we hadn't earned our prey.

The others didn't seem to care and are at this minute waiting for the meat to be cooked. From the smells reaching my tent, I can tell there's not long to wait. Cancio is on guard tonight.

#### *Day Four*

A quiet night.

We are already pretty far from where we last camped. Sometimes a small path will appear along our way. Then we'll lose it and come across it again later. In the afternoon, Tobias found something and called us over. It was a skeleton, white and opaque, the bones strong and delicate, as if from a large bird.

I asked the Mataco what it was.

He said we were in Pitáyovai territory and the skeleton belonged to one of them. It's a tribe that doesn't bury or burn their dead.

I've heard the name of these Indians before but never come across one. I glanced at the men.

Tobias explained they attack from the treetops with double-edged axes sharpened from stone. After killing you, they eat you, he said. A silence fell over the group. I would have liked to discuss the matter further, but I felt that it would have been a mistake to insist. The jungle is no place to be nervous.

Besides, what difference would it make? There are all kinds of Indians in these parts: Chiriguanos, Chorotes, Chulupies, Matacos, Tobas—almost all of them peace-loving.

The fact that we are carrying plenty of rifles and bullets for any skirmish reassures me.

Abel Nieve on guard.

#### *Day Five*

It was a strange night; we could hear a howling in the distance no one could identify. Today was a hellish day as well. The men have been restless since dawn. Something happened that disturbed Abel Nieve on guard last night and made him pick a fight with the Sánchez twins, saying he was fed up

with their always repeating one another. I'd gone with Cancio and Tobias to get water from the river, and when I got back found the battle raging in camp. The twins were climbing all over Abel Nieve as if he were a hill. Abel was fighting back, lifting them off him by the napes of their necks and sending them flying through the air. We shouted for them to break it up, then started pounding on them ourselves, but it was no use. We were caught up in the fight before we knew it. After a few seconds, I got Nieve to calm down by beating him on the back with a large branch (I was sorry to do it, I like the giant). Then I had to defend him at gunpoint because the twins kept threatening to tackle him and pound him to death.

We stood panting and staring at one another until we'd calmed ourselves.

We took care of Nieve and about mid-morning he was in good enough shape to depart. The giant was still feeling a little dizzy, but he got better during the hike.

In the afternoon, near a rancid bog, we found some small strange footprints. They had no toes.

Tobias said they were Pitáyovai. He said the feet of the Pitáyovai or Talonyovai ("yovai" meaning "backwards") have a rounded edge without toes, so it's impossible to know which way they are heading or to follow their tracks.

A short distance away, Cancio thought he heard a rustle in the vines growing over the trees. We opened fire like crazy on the foliage, emptying our cartridges. The mountainside echoed with the noise of our rifles. Then all was silent as we waited for some sign of the enemy. Leaves and pitted branches showered on us, then a thick, disturbing silence filled the air. Maybe it was a monkey or some bird. Maybe it was just our imagination.

Tobias on duty tonight.

### *Day Six*

I have no idea what's going on. The Mataco woke us about half an hour ago. It's about three in the morning, and we can hear shouts in the jungle. They're slipping between the trees and heading for the tents. Maybe it's just some nocturnal bird or beast, but we're all thinking the same thing. It's like the blood in our temples is beating the same rhythm for all of us: Pitáyovai, Pitáyovai.

Where does this fear come from, from which part of our souls? It's born like a tiny animal growing rapidly until it overcomes us. And we ourselves are

responsible for its growth, we feed it, we mistreat it. I don't want to move. I'm frozen in fear like the rest of them. Even so, I've made my decision, and I think it's the right one: in a few more seconds I'll gather the men, we'll split up into small groups and go out to investigate. We can't go on like this. We have a mission to accomplish and fear is getting in the way of our good judgment.

### *Day Eight*

May the Lord forgive me for what I've done. I'm sorry we ever quit the tents. It would have been better to remain in camp, to have waited until daybreak. At least we might have had a chance then.

It pains me to explain what happened. I can't help but think it was nothing but a nightmare, that it can't be true. Any minute now, I'll wake up at home and go downstairs to have breakfast with my family.

The last night we were together, we split into three pairs: Tobías and Abel, the twins, Cancio and myself. The plan was to fan out in a large circle and close in on the area where we could hear the howling, then to meet up later at the edge of the river. We took our leave and promised to whistle in case of distress. The war cries never stopped, only they sounded more like laughter once we left.

Cancio and I walked to the edge of the river without finding anything. We waited a while, but the rest of the group never showed. After an hour, we began to feel uneasy. We went back to the tent, following the route the Sánchez twins had taken. We whistled every so often, but heard nothing back. The mysterious shouting had stopped. We spent the rest of the night searching for the other men in vain.

In the morning, about two kilometers to the east, we found Tobías up against a tree. It took us hours to get him to speak. Around noon, he led us over the mountain to a strange, abandoned campsite. I can't, nor do I wish to describe in detail what we saw, since it is beyond the limits of imagination of even the most perverse minds. From a pole balanced on two trees, three human skins were hung: we knew right away they were the skins of our companions. Near the ashes of a fire there was a well about half a meter wide and slightly more than that deep, filled with a thick, dark liquid. It was blood.

In the remains I found a small stone ax with its handle missing, and I put it in my rucksack.

### *Day Nine*

None of us could sleep last night.

Tobias finally told me what he knows.

He said that when we left to investigate the shouting, he got separated from Nieve. He thought he'd heard footsteps behind the trees. He walked only a few meters ahead but when he turned back the man was gone. He waited briefly. Then he whistled for a response but got none. In a clearing nearby and with the help of the moonlight, he thought he could make out tracks from boots mixed in with Pitáyovai prints. He trailed them slowly for several hours over the mountainside until at dawn he came to the sight of the remains I've already described. The Indians must have surprised the Sánchez boys as well and killed them along with Nieve.

According to the Mataco, the Pitáyovai are the only living, flesh-and-blood demons still walking the jungle. They capture their victims by moonlight and use the meat for sustenance.

### *Day Ten*

All I could think about the entire day was the Mataco's story. I've been obsessed by that pit of blood and asked him what it meant. He told me what he's heard from others: that the Pitáyovai chop their flayed prisoners to pieces without killing them first, then drain the blood into a pail or well. Then they wait for the souls of the dead to appear before drinking.

I've tried to consider the situation coldly but nothing helps calm my nerves.

Lack of sleep and the gruesome sights I have witnessed keep me from making sound decisions. What should I do? Pretend the skins and bones of the men we buried didn't belong to my men? That Abel and the Sánchez brothers are deserters, sent on a mission from which they never returned? I wish that were true, that in a few months I would come across them in the city, with false names, on the lam from the authorities.

We combed the region carefully today, as if pretending we would find the men, and as a precaution against any accusations.

### *Day Eleven*

Tomorrow, God willing, we'll reach base camp. We started back yesterday. I decided not to continue our reconnaissance. I don't consider it an advisable route for our army.

Pitáyovai. Whenever we stop to rest and I close my eyes to sleep, I see the marks of their footprints in the muck. Is it really possible they have no toes? Maybe it's a trick they manage with some tool they've devised.

Tobías the Mataco vanished as soon as we reached familiar territory.

Cancio and I are the only survivors of the group. There's not a smidgen of doubt in our hearts that the others are dead, and that nothing we could have done would have saved them. Nothing anyone could have. Even so, we are overcome with guilt, as if we'd abandoned them. I have to convince myself only the jungle is to blame—they died victims of a fluke of nature. Pitáyovai are nothing more than a natural phenomenon, like hurricanes or quakes.

When my hand grazes the stone ax in my sack, I try to think what I will tell my superiors. They won't believe me if I tell them what really happened. The most sensible thing would be to claim we were attacked by the enemy and that we lost three men in the ambush. The enemy is easy to understand in war. I'm sure they'll think it's the truth.

*Translated by Hillary Gardner*