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The Expedition

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Pola Oloixarac (1977, Argentina) is a fiction writer and essayist. Her debut novel, Las teorías salvajes (The Wild Theories), has been translated into various languages. Her fiction was included in the 2010 collection Granta: The Best of Young Spanish Novelists. She was a writer in residence at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. Currently she is at work on a novel titled “A History of Venus in the Tropics,” from which the following piece is taken.

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In the year 18..., a group of explorers reached the sea surrounding the Famara Crater, a volcanic mass rising out of the Juba Archipelago. Like a fortress on the water, the crater’s aerial line shrouded the bay in grandeur. The travelers anchored the boat near a beach marked by extensive serpentine rock formations, next to a rocky precipice overlooking the sea; they alighted on the black sand and undertook their ascent on a mossy trail, by way of green crags that were lost in the heights among cloudy formations of suspended sand. They walked for hours, following the curve of the ground, towards the island’s interior valleys; forests of vegetation interrupted the undulating landscape of black rocks, on an expanse free of all human traces. Anchored in the bay, the main ship resembled an old dinosaur shedding its viscera with the help of parasites—the slaves carrying ashore, amidst the rocks, cages, bronze tools, wooden traps, and ropes. They entered the forest, damp and cold beneath the trees entwined on high; from time to time, the sky opened up into a brilliant whiteness.
Though submerged in the sandy vapors of the Sahara, the island was rich in *Crissia pallida*, small green flowers with a spidery appearance and golden pistils whose astounding properties were as yet unknown to the West. The story of these visitors is known to the belief system of the Guanche sect of Mahan. That, at nightfall, the foreigners entered the island’s deep valleys, guided by weak starlight, confusing the dark vault of heaven with a cave covered in insects (they would later swear that it was the inverted face of Auriga, blurred by the mist); that, because of this mistake, Zacharias Loyd, the captain of the expedition, ordered no rest periods until they had reached solidly mineral, lifeless ground, because it horrified him that no one, not even he, could distinguish anything abnormal in the noise made throughout the cave by those demons, which only presented themselves in their true form once the throat-shaped terrain left them facing an interior lagoon. Only then, standing before the subterranean lake, did they see the sky’s image duplicated in a small multitude of eyes absorbed in the blackness level with the water, and their own eyes stimulated by their brush with darkness. At this point, the young Leopold Bruun knelt down to draw what he was seeing; the zoologist Diotimus Redbach, standing, observed a lepidoptera the size of his hand; two men squatting with their backs to the sketcher who must have been Pavel Ulrich, a somewhat ill-famed trafficker in species, and Captain Loyd, chatting while Pavel dabbed at the water line with his fingers; Torben Stchats, a geographer, stroking the rocky walls in silent veneration, while the cave hollowed itself out above him in stalactites that enclosed the lake and the scene in an oval. Upon reaching the highest point of the crater, still sleepless, the explorers described some elongated monuments, like disfigured sphinxes, which resembled nothing they had ever seen; Bruun drew them with the shaded pale blue that he reserved for lugubrious apparitions, covered with dried algae. On this stretch of the path, they could get an idea of the labyrinth of interconnected caves under the island, the system of subterranean grottos beneath the crater: how the sea entered in tongues beneath the earth, brought by means of swift conduits to the center of the island, in caves several dozen miles long which must have been shaped like large bubbles of air and gas when the lava descended in a cloak of smoke and chaos from the heights of the sky before sinking into the sea. That the men (a botanist, a geographer, young Bruun, Loyd, and the slaves Suri-Man, Betú, and Sasha) reached the hidden village of Mahan, following one of the trails that descended to a valley of reddish-colored rock, but the longer they wandered through the desert constructions, fatigue overtook them, and they threw themselves down to sleep like a huge beast made of humans, each snoring louder than the other. The murmurings awoke them. It was time to strike a deal with the natives, establish contact. Calm and smiling, the local people (bare-chested, their pudenda covered by a sheepskin shirt) led them through the labyrinth of grottos to a large circular cavern, where the most
distant stalactites looked to them like groups of expectant creatures, softly bathed in a strange light; up above, a hole in the rock opened onto the sky. By day, the sun was so strong that it could have blinded them, which is why the travelers concentrated on taking specimens of the flora inside the cavern, burnished lichens and blue anemones, the dwellings of a few turtles and crabs, and the collection of specimens on the island’s surface was postponed until the following day. At night the songs and the drumming began; the men saw appear, from behind the stalagmites, several dozen villagers they hadn’t seen before. Meanwhile, Venus advanced, projecting her serene features onto the Earth, silhouetted like a new moon against the sphere of the sun; during the phenomenon, which occurs only twice in a century, and which would later be made responsible for marvels and catastrophes, Venus’s gravitational force, it was said, drove tides and animals mad because it presided as a cosmic bridge between the Earth and the Sun; but there could barely be made out from the island a misty gleam through the clouds of sand arriving from the Sahara and which stretched like a cloak over these islands. Then, with remarkable voraciousness, the visitors began to commingle with the native women, entering, in a torrent of blood and semen, into the genetic history of the island.

The commentators calculate the existence of some twenty-three girls but also of tortoise-shell-skinned adult models, on an island where the trees can live several hundred years (the Dragos, whose dried skeletons branch out into cartilaginous green crests and carry within themselves a dark lymph, famous for its regenerative properties). In something which they do not hesitate to assimilate to an astonishing fertility ritual, whose method and foundations are unknown to them, the members of the expedition, at the moment the orgies commenced, lost their habitual precision. In a somewhat cryptic style, though marked by phrases of disconcerting clarity, Leopold Bruun describes the advances of these women, alone or “in groups of two or three” hurling themselves with tranquil ferocity on the genital geysers, coiled upon the tip of the organs. The penumbra of the documents enables us to follow, however, some concurrent data: every woman received each foreign organ several times, an average of three milliliters of internal juices, which lessened as the encounters reached a crescendo; following the contact, the men fell into a profound torpor, from which they only emerged with the arrival of another woman. In the illustrations, the latter appear atop the travelers like spiders stretched out to their fullest span; Bruun notes that “the ladies of the island allowed only minimal periods of resistance,” until after semen, then water and subsequently slender threads of blood were emitted, accompanied by pain and urea; incapable of offering any resistance, the men let themselves be swallowed up in the darkness of the grottos for days at a time. At a distance (or perhaps in the neighboring cave; it was dark and they almost could not see) could be heard
the murmurings of the other members of the village, probably male
natives; from this side, the explorers abandoned themselves to the frank
request of a Nature that emphatically demanded communion between
cultures.

In another series of documents, Leopold Bruun saw the island of
Juba emerging like a column of fire from the depths of the sea, an ancient
volcano that rose from the depths in a whirlpool of power and speed:
the sea rose until it reached the sky and the tide revealed a breakwater
of corals, algae, and trapped fish which swiftly dried up, forming skeletons
that the mist, advancing implacably over the new surface of the island,
unhesitatingly devoured. Brunn also described the ritual meal of soft-
body white butterflies, with a slight savor of coconut milk: these
were decapitated and then brought to the mouth where their insides were
sucked out until they were empty; he added a brief elegy about its protein
value, and that this was their nourishment during their stay on the island.
There is a consensus among the commentators that most likely they never
left the grottos. The Daily Telegraph, the first disseminator of the satires of
these reports, spread conflicting versions, colorfully founded on a story of
natives contacted by a mysterious Guanche individual living in London.
These Guanche testimonials are as emphatic as they are contradictory:
that the Guanches never inhabited that part of the island, which was
reserved for the demoniacal creatures of the volcano; that in a culture so
jealous of its women (it was forbidden to speak to a woman alone in the
forest, unless she spoke first), the explorers’ story is really the Guanches’
boasting of the tribe’s magical powers, because the white butterflies that
sleep in the grottoes are actually a delicacy highly prized by the Guanche
men and women, who had already resisted the Spaniards and the French,
and would have administered near-lethal potions to guarantee their
freedom (although this time the invaders were voyaging under another
flag, the flag of Science). That not a single live specimen collected ever left
the island, and that nobody ever explained what they were doing there.
That the “ladies of the island” never existed. That the ladies of the island
preserved the foreign semen in their corporeal reservoirs in order to
discharge it later, surreptitiously, into an earthenware bowl, and that
the village lived for months on the concoction of those vital juices from
foreign lands, and that the adventure coincided with the height of the
insects’ reproductive stage.

Of the men who descended the slope of the crater and swarmed
earnestly among the holes the native women offered—penetrated by force
or impelled by a fascination so persistent as to appear mutual—the young
naturalist Leopold Bruun would reach immortality more swiftly than the
rest. A trader in exotic species of insects and lepidopterae, a dropout from
Fine Arts, he was seventeen years old at the time of the expedition—a fact
that his prominent height and his explorers’ clothing appeared capable of
concealing.
His memories of what happened in the lands of the Transit of Venus spread like wildfire through the sensationalist press of the age; so that when his adventures on the Famara expedition spread among the most scholarly botanic circles, young Bruun was already quite the celebrity. In the satires published by the Daily Telegraph, acerbic caricatures abound: in one may be seen the Duke of Cavendish himself, who lavishly financed the expedition, providing it with first-rate instruments and slave labor, examining, loupe in hand, a small folder with pornographic drawings; in the filigree waving above his head can be read “Ex Labia, Scientia.” In another, the features of Zacharias Loyd, with his captain’s hat, crown the body of a bumblebee unblushingly fecundating a hypothetical queen bee; seated in an informal semicircle, the members of the expedition are diligently taking notes. Several decades earlier, Carl von Linnaeus introduced a system of botanical classifications that had fired the public imagination with its indecent connotations, under the title and program of classifying flowers according to their numerical sexual appetites; kindled by the romantic poem on the loves of flowers that Erasmus Darwin would dedicate to it, the scandal had popularized the discipline beyond all expectations, and the passage of years only seemed to accentuate this fascination. Back then, science was a field that directly involved the pursuit of glory; despite the destruction of their reputations, and of the implicit critique their behavior gave of science’s status, the field never ceased to acquire, slowly, like bronzes awaiting the appropriate level of heat to be tempered, the distinction normally conferred upon heroes. Leopold’s drawings were published amidst an uproar, with great success, but until the great exposition of the Royal Horticultural Society, nobody had ever seen him. Leopold appears somewhat uncomfortable in a photograph, dressed in a blue velvet jacket, and his latest find, a Psychopsis papilium, in his boutonniere; several feet away, some ladies decked out in feathered hats are observing him.

We should be cautious with him, since he cannot be judged according to the normal scientific labels. His delicately distant demeanor did not go unnoticed in the feminine zone: if the rumors were true, and the encounters were the fruit of an isolated island species’ interest to avoid inbreeding, then the youth had been sexually initiated in the Famara crater; this initiation would be the emblem of his distinction, which the Psychopsis papilium seemed to propagate as an amulet that allied him to an exotic and sweetly terrifying—because unknown—caste. The velvet barely managed to conceal Leopold’s true vestment from feminine eyes; with his pale complexion and romantically dark hair, they saw him surrounded by gigantic serpents hanging, jaws agape, from bony trees, stalked by jaguars and a troop of primitive beings on the verge of tearing him to pieces, enveloped in a jungle aura that proved impervious to the elegant salons of iron and glass where social encounters took place. Despite the negative press, everything pointed toward the birth of a
new star in botany’s competitive firmament that would be projected arrow-like toward the gilded heights that the discipline had long destined for him; his mentors, Cavendish among them, could not have been prouder. As for his own plans, he had no compunction admitting that for him, any other occupation was simply impossible; he knew a part of the secret life of insects that, owing to arrangements beyond his control, could be perfectly connected to his own life. Meanwhile, the secret of *Crissia pallida* remained hidden from the appetite of the aristocracy, like a power capable of forever dethroning the derivatives of the opium of men’s illegal dreams.