



POSO WELLS

GABRIELA ALEMÁN

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY DICK CLUSTER

CITY LIGHTS

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Gabriela Alemán

Translated from the Spanish by Dick Cluster



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CITY LIGHTS

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For three hours now, he's been sitting on one of the four benches that face the statue of García Moreno in the park between the Basilica and Calle Vargas in the center of the capital city, waiting for Salém's call. Meanwhile, he's been slowly eating his way through the bag of mangoes he bought for a dollar on the corner, watching the people come and go, reminding him of ants. By now, he's sucked the juice from half of the mangoes. He's saturated with the cloying sweetness of the fruit, his hands are sticky, and he's desperately tired. He hasn't slept in two weeks, ever since he promised his mother on her deathbed he'd stop drinking. Maybe he's been waiting for the call here rather than in the streets by the courthouse because, close to the church, something might come along to solve his problems, some divine intervention perhaps. In his shirt pocket he's got an image of St. Expeditus right next to his cell. When the phone finally rings he ignores the sound and continues sucking. With four dead bodies and no arrest, Salém ought to build him a monument. He didn't want to kill her, the judge, not over a land dispute with a drug kingpin rotting in jail. During one of his sleepless nights he'd heard a psychoanalyst on the radio talking about how men who mistreat women have homosexual tendencies. He doesn't want to be remembered as a faggot as well as a murderer. He stands up and walks toward the door of the Basilica, which is unusually packed.

"What's going on here?" he asks a shoeshine boy. He's short of breath and sounds like an asthmatic dog.

"The Jericho pilgrimage," the boy says, knocking twice on the tip of the man's shoe.

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Richard Zambrano looks at the boy. He puts one foot on top of the case full of cans of polish and dirty flannel cloths, while drying his sticky hands on his pants. On a flat sheet of rusted steel, the boy mixes some brown polish with a mustard-colored one.

“The what?” Richard asks.

“It starts here and ends there.” The shoeshine boy points toward El Panecillo, the breadloaf-shaped hill topped with a statue of the Virgin. “They say you get two wishes if you make it all the way up.”

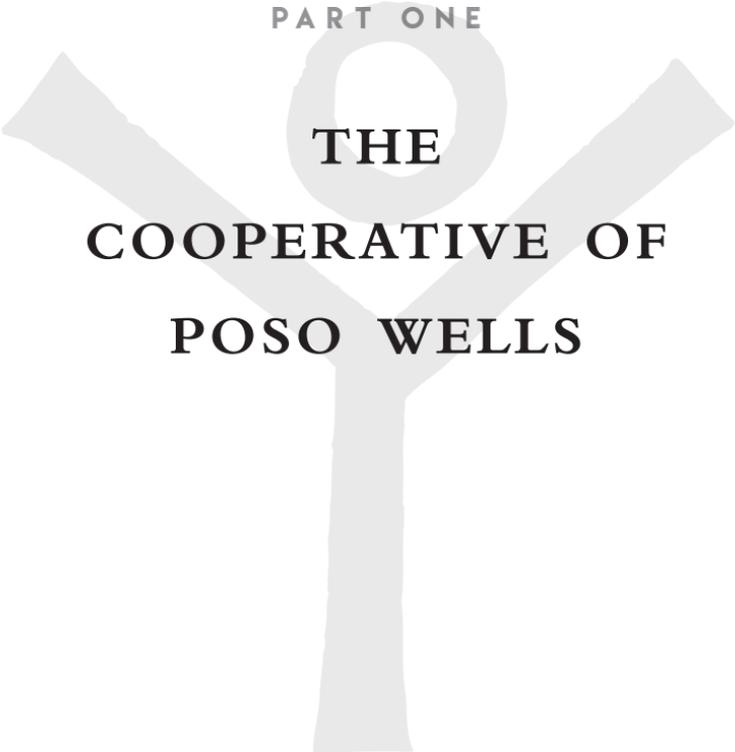
“Yeah?” the man says, interested.

The boy nods and taps the tip of the shoe again. The man switches feet. When the boy is done, Richard tosses a fifty-centavo coin in the air and takes off running after the pilgrims.

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CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

PART ONE



THE
COOPERATIVE OF
POSO WELLS

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CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

The Candidate

Poso Wells does not appear on any map. How could it? The last time anyone did a topographical survey, that huge mass of mud dredged from the estuary was still part of the river. And water flows. It's not subdivided into lots. But there lies Poso Wells, objections be damned. If you were to ask any of its residents for a precise description of its location, they might tell you it's the most stinking, forgotten hole on this side of the Pacific. Kilometers and kilometers of houses built of sticks and reeds held together by a mix of mud and stones, all resting on a suspension of sewage and moldy clay. Mangrove posts sunk into soft, unstable soil that cracks open in new places with every tide or current sweeping the high-tonnage ships toward the port of Guayaquil. But if that answer didn't satisfy you, and you were to press on with, "But what street do I take, what corner do I turn, from the Beltway do I head north or south?" then most likely you'd be told to go to hell, and your respondent might mutter under her breath that anyone's idea of hell on a bad day would look a lot like Poso Wells. It's in the mouth of the fucking devil, if you really want to know.

And yet, though no one who didn't live there would venture within a hundred yards of that place, when campaign time rolls around it suddenly turns into an electoral battlefield—because there are hundreds of thousands of votes to be had. Every inhabitant needs something, and offers come raining down. Especially housing. Houses are promised in exchange for votes, as are construction materials and building loans. Stages are erected, loudspeakers are hung, and along come the girls, immodestly clothed teenagers who have to be escorted by bodyguards because everyone wants a piece of them. Hundreds of thousands of hands, like tentacles, try to touch them on their way in. But once on stage, that sensation of being mauled fades away. The plaza is electrifying. The girls quickly forget that without the bodyguards, if the stage were to collapse, none of them would survive. They'd be lost in the labyrinthine twist and turns of the barrio, destroyed, only bits and pieces of them to be found. But not this time. Every four years, or sometimes every two, television crews descend on the barrio. Trucks full of cables and satellite dishes arrive. An entire brigade of national police is deployed while a city tractor fixes the roads, or at least fills them with enough dirt from the nearby Santa Elena peninsula to allow the entry of the candidates and their vehicles full of political party boosters and functionaries. In Poso Wells such gatherings always take place on a particular vacant lot, an enormous abandoned rectangle situated in the third phase of the Co-operative, that is, the third part, historically speaking, to be occupied by a wave of settlers. Nobody, in twenty-some years of democracy enacted via repeated election campaigns, has stopped to ask why no houses have been built on this lot, why it doesn't even serve as a sandlot for sports,

while elsewhere in the barrio any vacant expanse is invaded by squatters, one lot after another, by settlers who risk their lives to build on top of garbage that has only achieved the flimsiest hold on the riverbed. Why, even though this lot is surrounded by the only lampposts in all of Poso Wells, does no one ever gather there except at campaign time?

The answer is not very interesting—and even less so for those who are charged with the task of covering the news. Those who live in the Cooperative know that something isn't right, but they are not likely to explain. If forced to say what it is about this particular patch of sterile and cursed ground, they couldn't. They simply know, everyone knows, that certain parcels must be avoided. Because all over the barrio, things disappear. A bunch of bananas can't be left outside the door, because it will vanish. It has to be safeguarded inside the house, though padlocks are not much use either. Something crouches in the streets of Poso Wells, and it attacks the nerves like a persistent drumbeat. Whatever it is haunts the dreams of the residents, panting in their faces, slobbering them with noxious saliva and septic-tank breath, leaving their bodies sticky and dirty when they wake up. This sensation of danger cannot be shaken off by a mere act of will. The residents live with it all day long. In the evening it just becomes more palpable, because what vanishes then is not just food. People disappear, too.

At campaign time, the threat diminishes. There are too many electric wires, too many workers, too much equipment turning everything upside down. The music reverberates as the girls dance their way through choreographed moves again and again, though they've been selected for their looks, not their skill. They put on their best faces for the cameras and smile.

In 2006, the campaign in Poso Wells has picked up steam. The first round is over and the winner, who has edged ahead of his opponent by four percentage points, needs to make the next encounter with the electorate more spectacular than the one before. He arrives in a chartered helicopter under the last rays of the late-afternoon sun. The light is diaphanous, ethereal, seemingly infinite as it reflects off the shell of the aircraft. The occupant is as eye-catching as the machine that bears him: Chinese silk guayabera, creamy linen pants that flutter around his gym-toned legs, iguana-skin shoes custom-made in Italy. Long, curly hair falls to his shoulders and down his back, while prominent cheekbones accent his rugged face. His movements are graceful, in the way of those favored by divine Providence or an overstuffed bank account. He isn't tall, but on the stage he'll look enormous. He'll offer to fulfill desires and confer salvation. This time, like every time, he has ordered sacks of cornmeal and flour to be distributed, along with containers filled with lard. While he's still hovering over the cityscape, his boosters distribute these gifts in the plaza. That's why a crowd has piled into the space that had been cleared for the helicopter to land, and now the pilot doesn't know what to do. The candidate sweats, prodigiously, soaking his clothes and tracing a design of wispy wings down the back of his guayabera while he wipes his face with an impeccable handkerchief. He has six more of these waiting in the back pocket of his trousers. Before boarding the copter, he fortified himself with two large bottles of beer and five glasses of whiskey, one after another, at the headquarters of his political party. Now he needs to urinate. Desperately. But, flying over the vast spread of the barrio, he tries to forbear.

“Motherfucker, I can’t hold it any more. Get those people out of the way!”

“How?” the pilot asks.

“Get down lower and give it a try,” the candidate responds, barely moving his lips and blinded by sweat. “Where there’s a will there’s way.” He takes a deep breath and repeats the adage like a mantra—“Where there’s a will, there’s a way”—while the pilot nods and attacks the sea of bodies.

But try as he might, no one moves. What do they care if the rotor blades cut off their heads? In the whirlwind, matchbook houses tremble and threaten to fall. The blades cut through TV antennas and pirate electrical wires. On the fourth try, the pilot swoops down close to the designated rectangle while lowering an aluminum ladder, the only way to deposit the candidate on the ground. Under the continuous rush of wind, seven houses perched on rotten posts collapse, accompanied by the crying of children and the screams of women, while husbands and boyfriends try to pull themselves and the women and children from the rubble. But all of this can barely be heard as the loudspeakers saturate the atmosphere with decibels. It’s as if the doors of heaven had opened for celestial choirs and trumpet blasts, for all the angels of heaven to proclaim the second coming of the Lord. On stage, the girls shake their hips with frenetic, hypnotizing rhythm. The people shout, jump, sway, swing. No one can hear the protests of those who have just lost their homes. The candidate, his hands spread like a man on the cross, descends through space—the crush around him acts in his favor now—until he touches the earth where his waiting bodyguards surround him. From the viewpoint of the great mass of people, he seems

to levitate as the bodyguards lift him bodily to the stage. That's when he realizes he has no place to discharge his bladder in peace. He sweats and sweats, with few options left. He is going to pee, and he's going to do it in front of the hundreds of inhabitants of Poso Wells. He'll be discreet, he'll allow a stream of urine to slide down his linen pants while he moves about the stage to avoid forming a puddle under his feet. In the heat, what his clothes absorb will evaporate quickly. The rest will slip through the gaps in the stage. While he struts about and waves to the clamoring crowd, he puts this plan into action, until his party loyalists close around him in a great human chain and someone hands him a microphone. The electricity can be felt in the air. At this moment, he stops moving and the puddle at his feet takes on a certain depth. It wouldn't bother him, no one would notice it, really, except that he is holding a cable connected directly to one of the high-voltage streetlights, and he's standing in a pool of liquid.

Bad combination.

Before the wires explode and the lights go out—the lights that the organizers of the event have stolen from the lampposts erected by the municipality a few months before—the people see the candidate rise above the stage, encircled by a celestial halo. The glow shoots like lightning through all of his entourage.

Really, it's a sight to behold. Of a strange, extreme beauty. Extraordinarily so.

And then, a smell of meat on the grill. A stench of scorched flesh that permeates every square inch of the usually vacant lot.

And then, finally, pitch black.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

Yesterday's papers

He came in search of clues for an article about the disappearances, which had happened months before he arrived. When he realized what a large and difficult task it was going to be, he decided to meet with his editors to ask for more time to investigate and more column inches for his story. The answer was no to both requests. All that had been reported on TV so far was that three or four people, all of them women, had disappeared near the island called Trinitaria in the so-called Cooperative of Poso Wells. It didn't take long for him to discover a lot more: that there was a pattern dating back at least fifteen years, and the number of women who had disappeared was not four but nearly fifty. All this was buried in a tangle of half-finished legal procedures and official neglect: cases never filed, no money to pursue them, dead ends, leads never followed, no clear priorities established, migrants who went back to where they had come from, leaving the names of daughters, wives, and nieces forgotten on the shores of the saltwater estuary. But now, in light of the most recent events, everything that went on in Wells needed to be reevaluated.

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Varas had managed to reconstruct those events, in a rudimentary way at least: The candidate who'd won the first round of the elections had been incinerated in a flash, along with all of his possible replacements except one, the lone survivor, who had either been kidnapped or disappeared in the confusion and chaos that ensued. Thus, Varas had the story of the year in his hands. Because of the blackout, the TV cameras had no footage, while Varas—who had asked to cover the rally—had been right there on the stage. He sold the article under any number of pen names to whatever media outlets wanted to buy it, and he proposed to his own paper that they allow him to investigate the disappearance of the late candidate's only possible successor. This time, the owners of the paper did not hesitate to offer him whatever he needed. The story was not missing women, but the country's future. The opposing candidate was already proclaiming his victory, while the Congress met with a slew of legal advisors to try and figure out what procedures to follow. Meanwhile, the charbroiled candidate's backers had thrown their unconditional support behind the missing man—whom, furthermore, they considered anointed by fate. Having narrowly cheated death, he was destined to chart the country's future. At this point, his image was for sale at every stoplight in every city, on every corner throughout the land.

If only people knew what's hidden behind the image of a saint.

Gonzalo Varas had engaged in a bit of distortion, or to put it another way, he had allowed himself certain liberties in the articles he wrote for the nation's serious papers. Serious in the sense that no one dared to impugn anyone's honor, much less that of a dead man. A man who, furthermore,

had won the first round of the elections and, even after death, enjoyed political power and connections. But, for the popular daily of the country's principal port, he had described the events that led to the death of eleven people and the disappearance of the twelfth in absolute detail:

MEN WITHOUT EYES

On the night of October 16, to the astonishment of the thousands gathered for a political rally held to celebrate the winning candidate's victory in the first round of the elections, a series of gruesome events resulted in the death of eleven individuals in an unprecedented case of spontaneous combustion. The confusion that followed was rendered even more strange by the appearance of a group of three to five eyeless men who carried off the lone survivor of the electrical short-circuit. When the candidate took to the stage—after nine p.m., with a splendid full moon illuminating the night of our Pearl of the Pacific, also dubbed by the incomparable Daniel Santos the balmy Carribean's farthest port—all those present onstage, the author of this article included, opened a circle to make room for him to, presumably, place himself in the center. The truth is that we did so, without any spoken agreement, because the candidate was sweating like a condemned man and the stench from his armpits could be discerned from some distance away. One could confidently claim that he smelled of death and that his perspiration was mixed with the stink of fear. What could the candidate have been afraid of? This we will never know. What we do know, because I could smell it and see it, is that the candidate began to wet himself in full public view while the organizers introduced him to the public and the dancers performed pirouettes that exposed their nubile, luscious legs. He did not do so like any ordinary man of the people, opening his fly and holding his organ while emptying his bladder; no, what he did

was use his leg as a urinal and the stage as a drain—leaving his respect for the noble electorate in some doubt. But, in any case, he walked about the stage while he peed. And let me testify that he peed a lot. And continued sweating. The ensuing vapors caused me to retreat to the farthest corner of the stage, for which I should thank him, because otherwise I might not be here to write these lines. At this point, I must also explain that the candidate did not bring a generator with him, but rather stole the current from some lampposts located about fifteen meters from the stage, by means of two thick cables connected directly to the spotlights and the sixteen loudspeakers which would, in normal circumstances, have left us hypnotized and deaf.

At a certain moment, the rally's announcer went silent, and so did the music—think (because advertisement of commercial recordings is not permitted in this space) of a prime example of reggaeton, of the song most heard today on the airwaves, the one that ironically refers to a highly explosive product that is not diesel fuel—and the announcer approached the candidate, requiring him to interrupt his pilgrimage around the stage. Just for an instant, shall we say, but that was long enough for a puddle of urine to form at his feet. In that instant, there was a sudden loss of current, a drop in voltage. A circuit within the microphone being passed from announcer to candidate let loose a spark. Remember that the candidate was sweating copiously and that salt water is a superb conductor of electricity. It should also be clarified that the spectacle was especially dazzling because current taken from a streetlight is 220 volts, not 110, and because the electricity not only flowed through the drops of sweat on his hand but also rose up like a charmed cobra along the thread of urine running down his leg. According to the coroner's report, the candidate was not just electrocuted but incinerated. When he collapsed, smoke rose from his body. According to the same report, he had a hole in his stomach.

I would speculate that an electrical charge came snaking up from his penis to his other vital organs, causing them to burn to a crisp. What a spectacular departure! The rest of the event was less electrifying. The other members of his party had only a few seconds, as could be seen from the look of terror in their eyes, to realize that death awaited them too. Some tried to let go of each others' hands, to save themselves from an end that would show solidarity, yes, but would otherwise be foolish. But the current was already whisking them off, each one passing it along to the next.

At this point you must be asking, but what about the man who managed to save himself? This man—a chubby man with scarcely any neck, with the face of a frog and the arms of a child—had never joined hands with the others. He was behind a loud-speaker, not very far from me, holding a gold credit card near one of his nostrils. He did not even know what had occurred. When he turned around and saw his comrades, still holding hands, collapsed on the floor among bolts of electricity that snaked around the stage, he managed only to open his mouth and then to cover it with his childlike hand before a group of men, either with no eyes at all or with deeply sunken eyelids, took hold of him and carried him off before he could protest. How did I see this? Thanks to the light of the magnificent full moon shining down on the stage at that moment, only to, lamentably, disappear behind a cloud within an instant.

That was all that was known. And, despite entire battalions of the national army that descended on Poso Wells, nothing more had been found. Not a trace of the missing man. As if he had never existed. Meanwhile, Varas asked questions, walked the streets, and although he did not find anything to lead him to the politician, he continued to accumulate information for his other story, the one about

the missing women. He kept finding someone who knew someone who had lost a daughter or a niece. The women vanished like smoke, and no one with the power to do anything seemed to care. Varas decided that his best bet was to find someplace in the barrio to stay, so as not to miss any detail. In his wanderings he met a man named Jaime Montenegro who proved welcoming. Montenegro was an elderly resident with a friendly face, a short, small man who lived alone and had an extra room that he offered to rent to Varas when the reporter told him what he was doing. So he moved in. In the evening, when Varas returned because it was no longer advisable to be walking the dirt streets of Wells, his host would set out two chairs at the entrance to the house and they would talk till nightfall. In these conversations, Jaime told Varas he could no longer even remember when he'd first come to this part of the city, but he did remember that he'd had no neighbors at the time. There'd been no one around but himself and his dog. As a curious note, he remembered a journalist who had showed up around that time to ask strange questions about blind men who came from a valley in the sierra. Jaime had been barely twenty, and so his memory of this was vague. That was the first time, though, that he heard the name of Wells, from the mouth of this same journalist, and he also remembered vaguely that something or other had happened which led to the barrio taking on that name, Poso Wells—or Wells' Sediment in less poetic terms. The "Cooperative" came later, when a savings bank opened and the name appeared on a sign. Later, at the time of the squatters' invasions amidst a clamor for land, a lawyer saw that sign, which was how the name became known outside the neighborhood. Jaime also told Varas that at this

time—maybe a decade after his arrival—the first of the women disappeared without leaving a trace. He had lost all track of how many disappearances had occurred since. Everything Montenegro told Varas was invaluable, though it was also clear the old man's memory was a minefield. Varas felt his way through that territory little by little, seeking a path along which Jaime could move forward without his memories exploding in mid-sentence.

“What did that newspaperman want to know?”

“The one from years ago, or the one who showed up here the day before yesterday?”

“The one from when you had just recently come to Wells.”

“I told you, he wanted to know if I'd seen a bunch of blind men around here anywhere.”

“And had you?”

“No. Really, I hadn't.”

“What was the newspaperman's name?”

“He didn't tell me and I didn't ask, but he said a lot of words in another language, and he had a strange accent too. And, like I told you, he was the first one to mention this Wells.”

“Who was he?”

“The newspaperman?”

“No, the other guy, Wells.”

“A historian, I think. He'd written I-don't-know-what about Ecuador, something that the newspaperman was interested in.”

Since Varas wasn't making much progress in the rest of his investigations, he decided to follow the trail of Wells. In the Rolando library, in the center of Guayaquil, he found what he was looking for. It was a book of travel writings by

an Englishman who had been in Ecuador toward the end of the nineteenth century. They were impressions, rich in detail, mostly about the central valley of the Andes. They mentioned Guayaquil only as the port where the author landed, but they did discuss a village of blind men and a mysterious encounter with them. Varas made a copy of this chronicle and continued to search for any trace of the other writer, presumably British as well, in papers from the 1950s, when Montenegro had arrived. After three fruitless days in the library, he found an article in the daily *El Telégrafo* signed by someone called Binns. It was neither a news article nor an opinion column, exactly, but more of a collection of fragmentary facts that gave the impression of having been written in the hope that some reader would come forward with more information, which the last paragraph of the article, in fact, openly requested. In the meantime, what Binns said began to give shape to the few things that Varas knew. As if Binns had written the article expressly for him to read fifty years later.

THE END OF A CIVILIZATION?

The first conjectures about the population of the Valley of the Fallen date from the sixteenth century and the alliances that certain Andean potentates sought with the Spaniards, especially the chief called Sancho Hacho, from Latacunga. In spite of his attempts to avail himself of an alliance with the invaders, they came to exercise military control over most of that territory between 1573 and 1597. However, some indigenous groups decided to withdraw to areas still unbeknownst to the new conquerors, areas that were extremely difficult to reach. In this regard, all credit is due to the honorable Mr. Wells, who describes so well the sufferings to be endured by anyone daring to venture into the fertile lands of the Valley of

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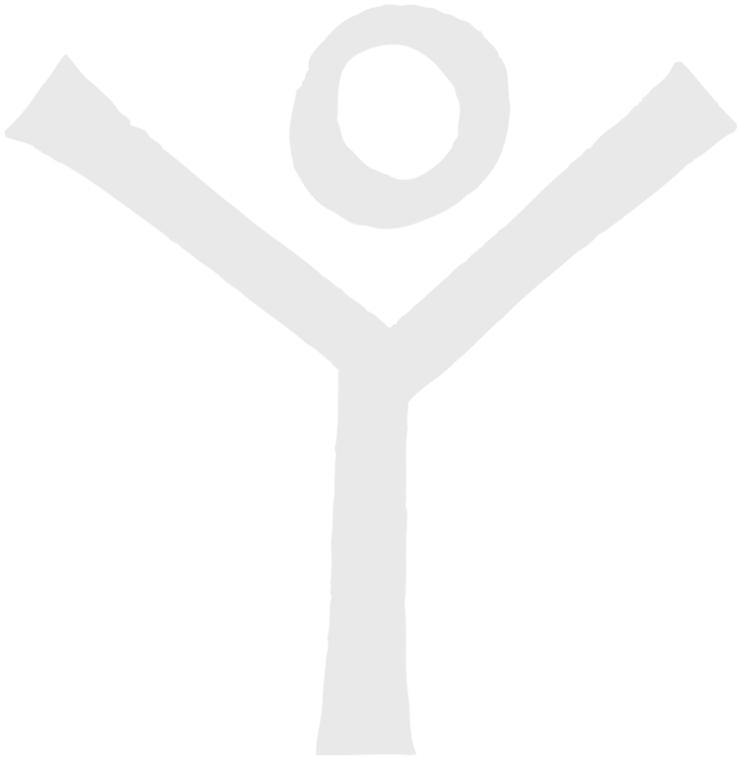
the Fallen. If the dangers of access were many, they were well repaid by the fecundity of its soil. Wells's writing has a singular beauty and there would be little merit in trying to emulate it, so I will instead transcribe, for the benefit of the reader, the entire passage in question: "The valley, he said, had in it all that the heart of man could desire—sweet water, pasture, a good climate, slopes of rich brown soil with tangles of a shrub that bore an excellent fruit, and on one side great hanging forests of pine that held the avalanches high. Far overhead, on three sides, vast cliffs of grey-green rock were capped by cliffs of ice; but the glacier stream came not to them, but flowed away by the farther slopes, and only now and then huge ice masses fell on the valley side. In this valley it neither rained nor snowed, but the abundant springs gave a rich green pasture, that irrigation would spread over all the valley space."

The next traces we find, closer to us in time than the era of Sancho Hacho, date from the eighteenth century and are related to the indigenous uprisings of San Miguel de Molleambato in 1766, provoked by the ruinous taxes imposed by the Marqués of Miraflores; and of San Phelipe in 1777, provoked by the Corregidor of Latacunga's insistence on undertaking a census of the natives. For centuries, it appears, the descendants of the men and women who had made their way along unknown paths to this valley in the shadow of the Cotopaxi volcano had lived a peaceful and isolated life, until one or the other of those eighteenth-century events led fifteen Spanish officers to flee from the fury of Indian rebels pursuing them with spears and shovels—and they fell into what may have been this same abyss. I found that information in a chronicle hidden within the pages of an agricultural manual that came by a circuitous path into the municipal archives of the city of Riobamba, though the report does not make clear whether this occurred before or after the volcano's minor eruption of 1766 or its major one in 1768.

What happened over the next hundred years is summarized in a few brief lines by Wells: "A strange disease had come upon them and had made all the children born to them there—and, indeed, several older children also—blind. And amidst the little population of that now isolated and forgotten valley the disease ran its course. The old became groping, the young saw but dimly, and the children that were born to them never saw at all." It is well known, from contemporary chronicles, that eruptions of the eighteenth century brought temporary blindness to nearby inhabitants and made it impossible, as far away as Quito, to see one's hand in front of one's face. Could this be cause of the initial blindness later prolonged by the genetic deterioration of the Valley's inbred population? Let us assume that Wells found the village in 1880. As I write these words in 1950, based on my recent research, I think that sometime after his visit the last descendants of that ancient pseudo-civilization based on what he called "the rudiments of a lost philosophy, the tradition of the greater world they came from, converted into something mythical and uncertain" must have finally left their valley for fear of another eruption that would sweep them from the earth, or perhaps because of other fears still unknown, and made their way to Guayaquil. I write these notes after having spent some weeks in that major port, pursuing certain clues to the south of the city on the banks of the salt-water estuary. Any information about this group of human beings that could be useful to men engaged in scientific endeavor would be welcome. My contact information will remain in the possession of the editors of this distinguished newspaper, the paragon of the national press. —Niall Binns

That was all. Varas continued searching in the papers of the time, but there was no response to this article-letter, nor any sequel to it. Binns disappeared, but that did not close

the door that his article on the blind men had opened. For Varas, it was impossible to think that the figures who carried off the man on the stage were unrelated to those mentioned in the writings of Binns and Wells. But that left a lot of holes to fill. What happened between 1880 and 1950? What happened between then and 2006?



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