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Measuring the World

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Extract

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The Mountain

By the light of a guttering oil lamp, while the wind blew past carrying more and more snowflakes, Aimé Bonpland was trying to write a letter home. If he thought about the preceding months, it was as if he'd lived dozens of lives, all of them similar to one another and none of them worth repeating. The journey up the Orinoco seemed like something one read about in books, New Andalusia was a prehistoric legend, Spain no more than a mere word. He had begun to feel better meanwhile, some days he was already free of fever, and even the dreams, in which he strangled, dismembered, shot, burned, poisoned, or buried Baron Humboldt under stones, were becoming less frequent.

He paused for thought, and chewed the end of his quill. Somewhat higher up the mountain, surrounded by sleeping mules, his hair covered with hoarfrost and a little snow, Humboldt was working out their position using the moons of Jupiter. He had the glass cylinder of the barometer balanced on his knees. Beside him, wrapped in blankets, their three mountain guides were asleep.

Next day, wrote Bonpland, they wanted to conquer Chimborazo. In case they didn't survive, Baron Humboldt had advised him most insistently to write a letter of farewell,

because it was beneath a man to die just like that, without a final word to anyone. On the mountain they would collect rocks and plants, even up here there were unknown plants, he had harvested far too many of them these last months. The baron maintained there were only sixteen underlying species, but the baron was good at recognizing species whereas he, Bonpland, couldn't care less. The majority of their specimens, including three very ancient corpses, had been loaded in Havana onto a ship bound for France, and in a second ship they had sent the herb collections and all their written records to Baron Humboldt's brother. Three weeks ago, or maybe it was six, the days went by so quickly and he had lost all perspective, they had learned that one of the ships had sunk. That had cost Baron Humboldt some bad days, but then he'd said they were only just starting. He, Bonpland, had been less upset by the loss, as he was running such a fever at the time that he hardly knew where and why and who he was. Most of the time he had been fighting flies and mechanical spiders in his nightmares. He was trying not to think about it, and hoped the ship that sank hadn't been the one with the corpses. He had spent so much time with them that by the time they got back to the mouth of the river, he felt they weren't just ballast, but silent companions.

Bonpland wiped his brow and took a deep mouthful from his brass flask. Earlier on he had had a silver one, but he'd lost it under circumstances he could no longer remember. They were only just starting, he wrote. Then he noticed that he'd used this same sentence twice, and crossed it out. They were only just starting! He blinked and crossed it out again. Unfortunately he couldn't describe the details of their route, everything was a blur, all he had was a couple of images which seemed, if he really tried, to have some connection. In Havana,

for example, the baron had had two crocodiles captured and shut in with a pack of dogs to study their hunting behavior. The screaming of the dogs had been almost unbearable, it sounded like children crying. And afterwards the walls had been so bloody that the room had had to be repainted at Baron Humboldt's expense.

He closed his eyes, then snapped them open again and looked all round him in surprise, as if he had forgotten for a moment where he was. He coughed and took another large mouthful. Off Cartagena their ship had almost capsized, and on the river Magdalena the mosquitoes had plagued them even more determinedly than on the Orinoco; finally they had climbed thousands of steps once laid by the long-lost Incas to the freezing heights of the Cordilleras. Normally people would have been carried up by porters but Baron Humboldt had refused. Because of human dignity. The porters had been so insulted they had almost beaten them to a pulp. Bonpland took a deep breath; then, involuntarily, he sighed quietly. Outside Santa Fé de Bogotá the town dignitaries had been gathered to greet them, their fame had already gone before them, at least that of the baron, whereas strangely enough, nobody seemed to have heard of Aimé Bonpland. Maybe this had to do with the fever. He stopped: the last sentence struck him as illogical. He considered whether to cross it out, but then decided against it. Their hosts had been noble people, there was laughter when the baron had refused to let go of his barometer, and they seemed amazed that so famous a man could be so short. They had been given hospitality by Mutis, the biologist. The baron had always kept trying to talk about plants, but Mutis's invariable response was that one did not discuss such subjects in society. Nonetheless, he, Bonpland, had succeeded in reducing his fever thanks to Mutis's herbs.

Mutis had employed a young chambermaid, an Indian from the highlands, with whom, here he paused, took a large gulp, and peered up at Humboldt's figure, now almost invisible in the darkness, he could have excellent social intercourse of this, that, and indeed every other kind. Meanwhile the baron had inspected mines and drawn maps. Outstanding maps. Of that he had no doubt.

He nodded several times unconsciously, then continued. They had advanced with eleven mules across the river and up the route to the pass. Pouring rain. The ground boggy and full of thorns. And because Baron Humboldt also refused to allow himself to be carried, they had had to go barefoot to spare their boots. They had walked their feet to a bloody mess. And the mules had been obstreperous. They had had to stop climbing Pichincha when he was overcome with dizziness and nausea. At first Baron Humboldt had wanted to carry on alone, but then he too had passed out. Somehow they had made it back down into the valley. The baron had then tried it again with a guide who of course had never been up there in his life, in these parts nobody went climbing mountains unless someone forced them to. It took three tries before they were successful, and now they knew exactly how high the mountain was, the temperature of its smoke, and the identity of the lichens on its stones. Baron Humboldt was exceedingly interested in volcanoes, more than anything else, it all had to do with his teachers in Germany and a man in Weimar he revered like a god. Now they were facing their crowning enterprise. Chimborazo. Bonpland took a last swallow, wrapped himself tighter in his coverlet, and looked out at Humboldt, who, as he could just still make out, was listening to the ground with a brass cone.

He had heard a rumbling, Humboldt called. Movements

in the earth's crust! With any luck they could hope for an eruption.

That would be wonderful, said Bonpland, folded the letter, and stretched out on the floor. He felt the chill of the frozen earth against his cheek. It seemed to ease his fever.

As always, he went to sleep at once, and as he almost always did, he dreamed that he was in Paris, it was morning sometime in the fall, and rain was pattering gently against the windowpane. A woman he couldn't see clearly asked if he really did believe he'd traveled through the tropics and he answered not really, and if he had, then it was only for a moment. Then he woke up because Humboldt was shaking his shoulder and asking what he was waiting for, it was already past four o'clock. Bonpland stood up and as Humboldt turned away, he seized him, pushed him toward the ravine, and threw him with all his strength over the edge of the cliff. Someone shook his shoulder and asked what he was waiting for, it was four o'clock, they had to leave. Bonpland rubbed his eyes, brushed the snow out of his hair, and stood up.

The Indian guides looked at him sleepily, and Humboldt handed them a sealed envelope. His farewell letter to his brother. He had spent a long time polishing it. In case he should not return, he asked their assurance that they would bring it to the nearest Jesuit mission.

The guides yawned and said yes.

And this was his, said Bonpland. It wasn't sealed, they could read it if they wished, and if they didn't deliver it, he really didn't care.

Humboldt ordered the guides to wait for them for at least three days. They nodded, bored, and twitched their woolen ponchos straight. Meticulously he checked over the chronometer and the telescope, then crossed his arms and stared into

space for a time. Suddenly, he left. Hastily Bonpland seized specimen boxes and stick and ran after him.

More at ease than he'd been for a long time, Humboldt talked about his childhood, working on the lightning conductor, the lonely excursions through the woods, and afterwards arranging his first beetles in collections, and Henriette Herz's salon. He pitied anyone who had not been graced with such a sentimental education.

His sentimental education, said Bonpland, had taken place with a farm girl from the neighborhood. She had allowed just about everything. He'd had to protect himself from her brothers, that was all.

He kept thinking about the dog, said Humboldt suddenly. He still couldn't get rid of his sense of guilt. He had been responsible for the beast!

The farm girl had been astonishing. Not even fourteen, and she had mastered things you wouldn't believe.

The dogs in Havana had been another matter. Of course he had been sorry about them. But science demanded it, and now one knew more about the hunting habits of crocodiles. Besides which, they'd been mongrels, no pedigrees, and very mangy.

Where they were going now, there were no more plants, only brownish yellow lichens on the stones poking up out of the snow. Bonpland heard his own heart beating very loud and the hissing of the wind as it swept over the surfaces of the snow. When a little butterfly flew up in front of him, he felt a shock.

Panting, Humboldt came to the topic of Urquijo's fall from grace. A bad business. It was still a rumor, but gradually the signs were accumulating that the minister had lost the favor of the queen. Which meant more decades of slavery. When they

got back, he intended to write some things that these people were not going to like.

The snow piled higher. Bonpland lost his footing and slid downhill, followed shortly afterwards by Humboldt. To protect the scrapes on their hands from the cold, they wrapped them in scarves. Humboldt examined the leather soles of his shoes. Nails, he said thoughtfully. Driven through the soles from the inside out. That's what they needed now.

Soon the snow was up to their knees and a sudden mist enveloped them. Humboldt measured the dips in the magnetic needle and established their altitude with the barometer. If he wasn't mistaken, the shortest route to the summit led northeast over the flattened slope, then a bit to the left, then steep uphill.

Northeast, Bonpland repeated. In this mist you couldn't even tell where the summit and the valley were!

There, said Humboldt, and pointed off somewhere with absolute assurance.

Bent over, they trudged past walls of cliff that had cracked and weathered into columns. High above them, visible for seconds then hidden again, a snow-covered ridge led up to the top. Instinctively, they bore to the left as they walked, where the land fell away steeply in sheets of frost. To their right, it was a straight drop into the abyss. At first Bonpland was oblivious to the gentleman in dark clothes trudging sadly at their side. Only when the figure transformed itself into a geometrical shape, a kind of pulsating honeycomb, did he feel uneasy.

Left, over there, he asked, was that something?

Humboldt glanced to the side. No.

Good, said Bonpland.

They paused for a rest on a narrow platform because Bonpland's nose was bleeding. Uneasily he looked around at the

honeycomb, which was swaying slowly toward them. He coughed and took a mouthful from his brass flask. When the bleeding let up and they were able to continue, he felt relieved. Humboldt's timepiece told them that they had only been climbing for a few hours. The mist was so thick that there was no way to tell up from down: wherever one looked, there was a single unbroken expanse of white.

The snow was now up to their hips. Humboldt cried out and vanished into a drift. Bonpland dug with his hands until he got hold of his coat, and pulled him out. Humboldt thumped the snow off his clothes and satisfied himself that none of the instruments were damaged. They found an outcrop of rock where they waited for the mists to thin and brighten. Soon the sun would break through.

Old friend, said Humboldt. He didn't want to turn sentimental, but after the long way they'd come, at a great moment like this, there was something he wanted to say.

Bonpland listened. But nothing came out. Humboldt seemed to have forgotten already.

He didn't wish to be a spoilsport, said Bonpland, but something was wrong. There, to the right, no, a bit further on, no, left, yes, that was it. That thing that looked like a star made of cotton wool. Or like a house. Was he right to assume that he was the only one who could see it?

Humboldt nodded.

Bonpland asked if he should be worried.

Matter of opinion, said Humboldt. It was probably the result of reduced pressure and the altered composition of the air. Noxious gases could be excluded. But besides, he wasn't the doctor here.

So who else was?

Intriguing, said Humboldt, how constantly the density of

the atmosphere lessened as one went up. If one did the math, one could deduce at what point the void began. Or at what point, because of the drop in boiling point, the blood began to bubble in the veins. As for himself, for example, he'd been seeing the lost dog for quite some time. He looked completely ragged, and he was missing a leg and an ear. Aside from that, he didn't sink into the snow at all, and his eyes were black and dead. It wasn't a pretty sight, and he was having to keep a tight hold on himself to keep from screaming. Nor could he stop thinking about the fact that they'd failed to give the dog a name. But maybe that hadn't been necessary, they'd only had the one dog, right?

He didn't know of any other, said Bonpland.

Humboldt, comforted, gave a nod and they kept climbing. They had to move slowly because of the crevasses under the snow. Once the mist lightened for a few seconds and there was a ravine right there, then the mist covered it again. Bleeding from the gums, Humboldt said to himself reproachfully, no fit condition, should be ashamed of himself.

Bonpland's nose was also bleeding again, and despite the wrappings he had no feeling in his hands any more. He excused himself, then sank to his knees and vomited.

Cautiously they clambered up a steep wall of rock. Bonpland thought of the day on the island in the Orinoco when they had been trapped by the rain. How had they actually got away? He couldn't remember. Just as he was about to ask Humboldt, the latter's foot dislodged a stone which hit him on the shoulder. It hurt so much that he almost lost his handholds. He closed his eyes tight and rubbed snow into his face. After that he felt better, except that the pulsing honeycomb still hung beside him and, even more unpleasant, every time he tried to grip on to the rock face, it pulled away from him a

little. Now and again, weathered faces peered at him out of the cliff, looking half-decomposed, or bored. Luckily the mist made it impossible to see down.

That time on the island, in the river, he called. How did they actually get away?

The answer was so long in coming that Bonpland had completely forgotten the question when Humboldt eventually turned his head toward him. He couldn't remember for the life of him. So how did they?

At the top of the rock face the mist parted. They saw some snatches of blue sky and the cone of the summit. The cold air was very thin: no matter how deeply they breathed, almost nothing entered their lungs. Bonpland tried to take his pulse, but kept miscounting until eventually he gave up. They found a narrow bridge of rock covered with snow that led over a crevasse.

Look ahead, said Humboldt, never look down!

Bonpland immediately looked down. He felt the whole perspective shift as the floor of the ravine came hurtling up toward him and the bridge plunged downwards. Terrified, he clung to his stick. The bridge, he stuttered.

Keep moving, said Humboldt.

No rock, said Bonpland.

Humboldt stopped. It was true: there was no stone beneath them. They were on a freestanding bridge of snow. He stared down.

Don't think, said Bonpland. Keep moving.

Keep moving, repeated Humboldt, not moving an inch.

Just go, said Bonpland.

Humboldt set off again.

Bonpland set one foot in front of the other. For what seemed hours he heard the snow crunching and knew that

the only thing between him and the abyss was water crystals. Right until the very end of his life, destitute and a prisoner in the loneliness of Paraguay, he would be able to recall these images in the smallest detail: the little clouds of mist dispersing, the bright air, the ravine at the bottom of his field of vision. He tried to hum a song, but the voice he heard wasn't his, and so he let it go. Ravine, summit, sky, and crunching snow, and they still hadn't reached the other side. And still not. Until at some point, Humboldt was already waiting and reached out a hand toward him. And he made it.

Bonpland, said Humboldt. He looked small and gray and suddenly old.

Humboldt, said Bonpland.

For a while they stood side by side, saying nothing. Bonpland pressed a handkerchief against his bleeding nose. Gradually, transparent at first but then more and more clearly, the pulsating honeycomb retreated. The snow bridge was ten feet long, fifteen at the most, and crossing it could only have taken a matter of seconds.

Testing every step, they moved along the ridge. Bonpland worked out that he was apparently three people: one who was walking, one who was watching the first one walking, and one who kept up a running commentary in a totally incomprehensible language. By way of an experiment, he slapped his own face. That helped a little and for a few minutes he was thinking more clearly. It just didn't change the fact that where the sky ought to be, there was ground, and that they were climbing downhill upside down.

But it did make sense, said Bonpland loudly. After all, they were on the other side of the earth.

He couldn't understand Humboldt's answer, because it was drowned out by the babbling commentary of the man

accompanying him. Bonpland began to sing. First one, then the other of the men accompanying them joined in. Bonpland had learned the song at school, and was pretty sure that no one else in this hemisphere would know it. A proof that the two men at his side were real and not swindlers, because who could have taught it to them? Admittedly something in this thought wasn't quite logical, but he couldn't work out what. And finally it didn't matter, as there was no guarantee that he was the person having these thoughts, and not one of the other two. His breath came short and loud, and his heart was pounding.

Humboldt all of a sudden stopped dead.

Now what, called Bonpland, furious.

Humboldt asked if he could see it too.

Of course he could, said Bonpland, who had no idea what Humboldt was talking about.

He had to ask, said Humboldt. He couldn't trust his own senses. The dog kept mixing itself in.

Bonpland said he'd never been able to stand the dog.

This ravine here, said Humboldt, was a real ravine, wasn't it?

Bonpland looked down. In front of their feet a crack opened a good four hundred feet down into the deep. The track continued on the other side and the peak didn't seem to be that much further.

They would never manage to cross!

Bonpland had a shock, because he wasn't the one who'd spoken, it was the man to his right. But to be sure of its validity, he said it again himself. They would never manage to cross!

Never, said the man to his left. Unless they could fly.

Slowly, as if pushing against some resistance, Humboldt knelt and opened the container with the barometer. His hands

were trembling so hard that he almost dropped it. Blood was running from his nose now too and dripping down onto his coat. No mistakes now, he said imploringly.

Gladly, said Bonpland.

Somehow Humboldt managed to light a fire and heat a little pot of water. He couldn't rely on the barometer, he explained, and not on his brain either, he had to calculate their altitude by establishing the boiling point. His eyes were narrowed and his lips trembled with the effort of concentration. When the water boiled, he measured the temperature and read off the clock. Then he pulled out his writing pad. He crumpled half a dozen sheets before his hand obeyed him sufficiently to allow him to write numbers.

Bonpland stared mistrustfully down into the ravine. The sky hung there far below them, rough-coated in frost. It seemed possible to adapt somewhat to standing on your head. But not to Humboldt taking so long to do his sums. Bonpland asked if they'd have the answer today.

Please excuse him, said Humboldt, he was having difficulty pulling himself together. Please could someone put the dog on the lead!

He'd never been able to stand the dog, said Bonpland. And then immediately was ashamed because he'd said it already. He was so embarrassed that he felt sick. He bent forward and vomited again.

Finished, asked Humboldt. Then he could tell him that they were now at an altitude of eighteen thousand six hundred and ninety feet.

Oh hallelujah, said Bonpland.

This made them the people who had climbed higher than anyone in history. No one had ever gone so far above sea level.

But the summit?

With or without the summit, it was a world record.

He wanted to get to the summit, said Bonpland.

Didn't he see the ravine, screamed Humboldt. They were neither of them in their right minds any more. If they didn't start down now, they'd never return at all.

One could always, said Bonpland, just say one had been up to the top.

Humboldt said he didn't want to have heard that.

He hadn't said it. It was the other one who'd said it.

Nobody could check, said Humboldt thoughtfully.

Quite, said Bonpland.

He hadn't said that, cried Humboldt.

Said what, said Bonpland.

They stared at each other, baffled.

The altitude had been established, said Humboldt finally. And the rock samples gathered. Now down, as fast as possible!

The descent took a long time. They had to make a wide detour round the ravine they had crossed on the snow bridge. But they had a clear view now, and Humboldt had no difficulty finding the path. Bonpland stumbled after him. His knees felt treacherous. He kept having the sensation that he was walking in running water, and an optical refraction displaced his legs in a most difficult way. And the stick in his hand was misbehaving: it swung outward, stabbed itself into the snow, tapped against fragments of rock, without Bonpland being able to do anything except follow it. The sun was already low. Humboldt slid down a scree slope. His hands and face were scraped bloody, and his coat torn, but the barometer didn't break.

Pain had its uses, he said through clenched teeth. For the moment, he could see clearly again. The dog had vanished.

He'd never been able to stand the dog, said Bonpland.

They had to make it down today, said Humboldt. The

night would turn cold. They were confused. They wouldn't survive. He spat blood. He was sorry about the dog. He had loved it.

Since they were being candid right now, said Bonpland, and tomorrow everything could be blamed on altitude sickness, he wanted to know what Humboldt had been thinking up there on the snow bridge.

He had ordered himself not to think, said Humboldt. And so he hadn't thought anything.

Really nothing at all?

Absolutely nothing.

Bonpland blinked in the direction of the slowly fading honeycomb. Two of his companions were gone. He still had one to get rid of. But perhaps that wasn't even necessary. He had the suspicion that it might be himself.

The two of them, said Humboldt, had climbed the highest mountain in the world. That would remain a fact, whatever else happened in their lives.

Not all the way, said Bonpland.

Rubbish!

A person who climbed a mountain reached the peak. A person who didn't reach the peak hadn't climbed the mountain.

Humboldt stared at his bleeding hands and said nothing.

Up there on the bridge, said Bonpland, he had suddenly regretted that he had to go second.

That was only human, said Humboldt.

Not just because the one who went first would reach safety earlier. He had had strange fantasies. If he had been going first, something inside him would have liked to give the bridge a kick as soon as he was over on the other side. The wish had been strong.

Humboldt didn't reply. He seemed to be sunk in his own thoughts.

Bonpland's head hurt, and he felt feverish again. He was deadly tired. It would be a long time before he recovered from today. A man who traveled far, he said, learned many things. Some of them about himself.

Humboldt begged his pardon. Unfortunately he hadn't understood a word. The wind!

Bonpland said nothing for several seconds. Nothing important, he said, thankfully. Chatter. Just talk.

Well then, said Humboldt expressionlessly. No reason to dawdle!

Two hours later they came upon their waiting guides. Humboldt demanded the return of his letter and immediately tore it up. One could not be neglectful about these things. Nothing was more embarrassing than a farewell letter whose writer was still alive.

He didn't care, said Bonpland, holding his pounding head. They could keep his or throw it away. They could also send it if they wanted.

That night, huddled under a blanket against the driving snow, Humboldt wrote two dozen letters, in which he made Europe party to the news that he had climbed higher than any mortal who had ever existed. Carefully he sealed each one. Only then did he lose consciousness.