

ARRIVALS / ARRIBOS



Andrés Pablo Vaccari

They came with a dim notion of what awaited. During the eleven long months that preceded the journey, they tried each in their own way to envision the new country; it was like trying to conceive Greenland or Uzbekistan, and even the surface of the moon managed to evoke a clearer and more familiar image. The photos, documentaries and brochures only aggravated the uncertainty; the pictures showed blazing sand beaches, vivid seas, clean and ultramodern cities, red deserts so vast you could see the Earth's curvature. The distinctive fauna (the kangaroo, the lethargic koala, the unlikely platypus) seemed as unreal like the scribbles of a god in kindergarten. Every culture cherishes its own imaginary geography of the world in which certain names occasion prompt answers, mixtures of prejudice and folklore. But Australia was a lacunae in the imaginary of Argentina, a place that appeared as a combination of all possible places. And I wonder if this was not one of the reasons they chose to go there.

They follow the herd of travellers headed for the baggage carousels. Sleepwalker legs carry them through the network of corridors, of garish light and spaces without shadows. Valeria drags the child by the hand. The child walks with short, feeble steps, watching the people and the adverts askance.

“Everything seems very modern,” she says to her husband. “They have escalators.”

Ernesto searches for the local time on the arrivals screen. It is 2:39 pm; that is (he calculates with difficulty) twenty to two in the morning in Argentina. He needs to reset his watch, but there will be time for that. Modern? It looks new, that’s for certain, as if it had all been built yesterday; and probably it *has* been, there is no way of knowing. Everything just for them, like a model or stage. The floors, carpets, columns ... Nothing can cling to these surfaces and these materials, not the exhaustion, nor the fear, nor the anger. Everything has been designed for a perpetual transit that leaves no traces.



Bernard Palissy was the first to come. We know he was born in 1747 in Limoux, France, in a family of provincial nobility who had won, after the efforts of three generations, a place in the military aristocracy. In 1770 Palissy was appointed captain in the Spanish navy, after Spain and France agreed to share their military forces. It was during this time that Bernard first heard of the Enchanted City from the mouth of the officers who had served in the American colonies.

Trapalanda, The White King, the City of the Caesars, El Dorado: All these stories seem to have common origins, and for more than two centuries they led adventurers, priests and fortune hunters deep into the inhospitable lands of the south in search of gold, silver and souls to save. Since its very beginning, legends and imaginary geographies inherited from the Middle Ages propelled the ‘discovery’ and looting of the continent. Columbus wanted to reach Cipangu and Cathay, the lands Marco Polo and Mandeville had described, overflowing with spices, gold and precious jewels; home for dragons, devils, amazons, unicorns and mermaids. Soon after, Amerigo Vespucci described a fantastic trip in which he had seen mountains of gold and emeralds, and history rewarded him by giving his name to the new continent. Argentina was colonized because of these stories and its very name derives from them. The survivors of the expedition of

Solís, the first to enter the Río de la Plata, returned to Spain carrying rumours of a fabulous civilization where there were mountains of solid silver and a city ruled by a monarch covered in shining ornaments of precious metal: the *Rey Blanco*.

Over time, the legend grew with a life of its own and spread across the region. It was said that the abundance of precious minerals in these kingdoms was so formidable that their inhabitants dined with utensils and dishes of gold and silver. They lived in sumptuous buildings of carved mineral, encrusted with precious stones. Some said that the City was in the middle of two mountains, one of gold and one of diamond; the effulgence of its towers and roofs could be spotted from a long distance. The people of the City were white, blond and blue eyed. They spoke a language unintelligible to Spaniards and Indians alike. They were immortal and immune to disease. It was believed that the City was invisible to those who were not natives, but could be seen momentarily at dusk and on Holy Fridays. Others said it was a wandering city that continually changed position; those who wished to find it had to remain in one place long enough. The legend inspired a steady stream of failed expeditions, of which Palissy's was the last that has been documented.



Time flows as in a feverish dream. The English language (spoken, whispered in passing, written, announced, flickering on screens) is a constant reminder that they are elsewhere. The signs enumerate a profusion of non-places: exits, bathrooms, doors; terminals, escalators, information. The child's hand is heavy and wet. She drags him, entranced by the ads that occupy entire walls and sell all kinds of seductive strange products.

“Sure! Here everything is imported,” Valeria says to the walls.

Ernesto stares at the images of peach-skinned models jumping at him, offering beer, underwear, credit cards; officious subalterns of an ethereal and well lit Hell.

They reach the collection area and remain standing, lurking like fishermen at the waters, watching the suitcases, boxes and bags that swim by. Ernest observes that there are no two identical pieces of luggage and wonders how that's possible. One by one they identify theirs and stack them precariously

on the cart. These four suitcases and two canvas bags is all that remains; they can hardly recognize them against the background of this alien landscape. ¿What is it doing here, our stuff? What are *we* doing here? At any moment a demonic hand will plunge into the bath of the world and pull out the plug.



In November 1776, Palissy went to Argentina under the command of Pedro de Cevallos, the new governor and supreme military commander of the brand new Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata; this comprised present-day Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and Perú. Over the next year, Palissy served under Cevallos in campaigns across the eastern shore, regaining Portuguese positions. Then, as they moved across Río Grande, news came that the king of Portugal had died. His widow, sister of the King of Spain, took the throne. A treaty was signed that assigned the Eastern band to the Spanish, ending the campaign.

Palissy followed Cevallos to Buenos Aires. The city was establishing itself as the main access point from Spain, and the most important commercial and political centre in the American colonies. The harbour was also a frantic nest of smuggling with the Dutch, English, French, Portuguese and Americans.

Promoted to General, Palissy created his own regiment and lead raids across the interior of the country to defend its borders against Indian attacks. Meanwhile, he gathered information, talking to the settlers and wanderers he could find. He befriended José de Vértiz, the successor to Cevallos, who recognized the importance of exploring Patagonia. So the expedition was proposed with the aim of mapping the western regions, the strip at the foot of the Andes; and find the city of the White King on the way.

In his head, night after night, brick by brick, invisible hands built the houses of silver and gold. They shone so intensely in his dreams that the glare would often wake him up; he sat in the dark, watching the afterglow of the city vanish on the horizon of his quarters. During the day he trained his men, preparing them for the savage vicissitudes of the pampas, the ice and the heights. Perhaps the dream had started as a delirium of fame, fortune or royal titles; but now the vision was dragging him with its own momentum like the rapids of a river yet without name.



Waiting in the customs line, a distant anxiety wraps itself around them. Valeria shakes the boy's shoulder.

“Are you all right, dear?”

The child nods dimly. Who knows, the mother thinks, what's going on in that little head of his. They watch the officials opening bags and grappling with the latches of suitcases. They finger the contents on long tables, sticking their hands in like dissectors examining internal organs. One of them takes a donkey toy, souvenir of the Andean region, to his ear and shakes it. Valeria notices that some staff are letting people through without even touching their luggage; then she directs the family to one of the officers who seem more sympathetic.

The gaze of the officer examines them until finally landing on Sebastian. Something fleeting crosses below his face.

“Nothing to declare?”

Valeria and Ernesto and think for a moment, then shake their heads unanimously. The official glances wearily at the luggage. He moves his hand, indicating the exit.

“Thank you, thank you,” sings Valeria.

Ernesto lets his wife take care of the natives; so far they look nice. Valeria speaks English measuredly, with exaggerated movements of her lips. For many months she has been practicing and has developed a list of phrases to cover all eventualities. *Excuse me, how do I get to the city? We are looking for a hotel to stay in. We want it not to be too expensive.* They change money, get the name of a hotel, and collect free maps of Sydney.



After studying reports and several maps of the territories of the Viceroyalty, General Palissy concluded that the city should be on the edge of the Andean Patagonia, in today's province of Santa Cruz. The cartographer of the group, a certain Lieutenant Horacio Sánchez Donofrio, recorded in a chronicle the hardships that gradually undermined the expedition. The horses were the first to die and the men had to eat the raw meat quickly before it froze. Palissy is portrayed as a good military leader, inspiring the loyalty of his men even if it meant the doom of all. Day after day, watching the thickets and horizons, the

gaze of the General acquired an intolerable deepness that pierced mountain, wind and the souls of men.

Donofrio recounts an anecdote that suggests something of the personality of my distant ancestor. When they were marching, Palissy used to look over his back. He watched the dust trails that men, horses and carts left in their wake. At night, after his men went to sleep, he stayed staring at the smoke from the fires tickling the dark. The General told his subordinate that these things made him remember the white trail of ships cutting the surface of the waters. After that, Donofrio could not see the dust or smoke without thinking about water; the association was comforting and carried his mind away from the cold and exhaustion.

Of the seventy-two who parted, only five returned. And not much more is known about Bernard Palissy. Our surname is the most present legacy of all those dead who accompany us. Bernard Palissy is merely a corridor in a basement that fades into an abyss of time. Here the names are lost but the universal memory subsists. We know that Palissy then married Amelié Bergsonier, the granddaughter of French settlers belonging to another military family. Vertíz assigned him a comfortable position in Customs. And at that point he disappears from history.



Valeria inhales deeply the air of the new world, a damp and fresh air announcing rain. They move along the path aimlessly. Their gazes search for the city. In front of them there is a parking lot: a cement structure of four levels that appears to be as large as the terminal itself. On either side are sky and plain.

Ernesto pushes the cart along the crosswalk; it seems heavier by the second. He cannot recognize any of the cars. He has read that Australians like Japanese cars, which makes sense, considering the geographical proximity. The taxis are also Japanese; in comparison, the black and yellow taxis in Buenos Aires seem like funeral hearses. But remembering is a luxury. You have to find a taxi. No dictatorship lasts forever.

Valeria checks the slip of paper with the information about the hotel. The letters slide on the paper in front of her eyes, their meaning slipping out of reach; but she must be strong. She must be strong for him, Sebastian, who is

now looking fascinated at a group of people dressed in traditional African attire: the first black people he has seen outside of a TV. Valeria squeezes his hand and pulls forward.

“You're sweating,” she says to her husband. “Take off that jacket.”

It looks like it is the cart who is leading him. No wealth, no titles nor fame; just a decent life away from the past. He turns his head, contemplates his wife for a second and starts to squirm, trying to take off his jacket while pushing the pile of luggage.

“Aren't you hot, Sebastian? It is hot, right?”

“Where are the kangaroos, Dad?”

“Soon. Soon we will see them. They don't like to mingle with people.”

They join a queue of people pushing carts, carrying suitcases and sports bags. The taxis form another queue. Sebastian points to a cab waiting at the curb.

“Are these police cars, Mom?”

A breathless chuckle escapes from his mother; she taps him lightly on the neck. “No, of course not. They are taxis, see? Taxis.” The taxis swallow people and luggage, and one by one they tear off from the curb and disappear. Get a house, find a job Sebastián has to go to school, he is already going to miss one year.

When their turn comes, the cabdriver gets out to help with the luggage. He wears a uniform: short-sleeve shirt with shoulder flaps and black pants. He has dark skin, a thick beard and a funny hat: like a cloth wrapping his head. They look at him, motionless.

“Do you want a ride or not?” the driver asks, pointing to the car, and the Palissys come back to life. Ernesto lifts a bag, but his arm fails and the bag falls on one side, making a metallic noise like the hitting of pots. Valeria's face shrinks: it sounds like it was her ornaments? She tries to remember the name of the country where people wear turbans.

A roar in the sky and Sebastian looks up. A Boeing 747 rises in the air like a stuffed bird and is lit on fire as it receives the sun. They have come like this, in the stomach of a bird that now watches him from above, as though he was an ant.

Mom squeezes his shoulder: “Let's go.”

Dad helps him onto the back seat; Sebastian can do it alone and does not need help, but Dad is always in a hurry. Mom shows him a shaky smile and her eyes do not smile; she pushes her soft and immense body against his, wedging him against Dad's sharp hip.

The door slams and Mom hands the driver the crumpled up bit of paper.

My parents came to Australia to escape history. But history insisted on following them across oceans and continents. Now, here, I am still pursued by its insomniac spectra for whom time and space are one single moment and place.