

READINGS

[Diary]

THE JUNGLE IS OBSCENE

By Werner Herzog, from a selection of his journals in the Spring issue of The Paris Review. Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo will be published this month by Ecco. Fitzcarraldo, which starred Klaus Kinski, was released in 1982. Translated from the German by Krishna Winston.

IQUITOS, DECEMBER 8, 1980

A still day, sultry. Inactivity piled on inactivity, clouds staring down from the sky, pregnant with rain; fever reigns; insects taking on massive proportions. The jungle is obscene. Everything about it is sinful, for which reason the sin does not stand out as sin. The voices in the jungle are silent; nothing is stirring, and a languid, immobile anger hovers over everything. The laundry on the line refuses to dry. As part of a conspiracy, flies suddenly descend on the table, their stomachs taut and iridescent. Our little monkey was wailing in his cage, and when I approached, he looked and wailed right through me to some distant spot outside where his little heart hoped to find an echo. I let him out, but he went back into his cage, and now he is continuing to wail there.

IQUITOS, DECEMBER 18

I have a snake on my roof again. A little while ago I heard something rustling up there, and then something dark fell into the banana fronds with

a thwack. I took a look, and it was a poisonous brownish snake that had caught a bird, which was still peeping. I tried hitting the snake with a stick, but it disappeared like lightning into the grass. Only now and then did a blade quiver, and from the piteous cries of the bird I could tell where the snake was. I did not follow it into the grass, because I discovered that another snake was on the thatched roof, and directly above me a third snake was trying to get from a banana frond onto the platform of my hut. I tried to strike it with the machete, but the snake was too fast for me.

The power is still out. Evening descended on the countryside. What would happen if the rain forest wilted like a bouquet of flowers? Around me insects are dying, for which they lie on their backs. A woman in the neighborhood is suckling a newborn puppy after her baby died from parasites; I have seen this done before with piglets. Outside a bright moon is floating now above the treetops. The frogs, thousands of them, suddenly pause, as if they were following an invisible conductor, and start up again all at the same time. Their conversations come and go in curious waves. Waxy moonlight, as bright as neon, is shimmering on the banana fronds. I was called to the telephone in the house and fell off the ladder that leads to my platform. It was one of very few phone calls that ever get through to us, and a stranger on the line was trying to make it clear to me that I was a madman, a menace to society.

CAMISEA, FEBRUARY 7, 1981

At night I had first the feeling and then the certainty that I was caught in a twilit prehistoric age, without speech or time.

Afternoon: the camp seems dead. The rain pours and subsides. The river's sluggish whirlpools pass by, following the bidding of a distant fate. In the forest behind me the birds are cursing each

[Permission]

REASONABLE PEOPLE

From an August 1, 2002, memorandum by Assistant Attorney General Jay S. Bybee to CIA Acting General Counsel John A. Rizzo, concerning the interrogation of detained Al Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah. According to the memo, which was released to the American Civil Liberties Union in April, an interrogation technique was considered torture if "severe mental pain or suffering" resulted from a "predicate act," such as "a threat of severe physical pain or suffering, a procedure designed to disrupt profoundly the senses, or a threat of imminent death." Since 2003, Bybee has served as a federal judge on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

You would like to place Zubaydah in a cramped box with an insect. You informed us that he appears to have a fear of insects. You would like to tell Zubaydah that you intend to place a stinging insect in the box with him. You would, however, place a harmless insect in the box. You informed us that you would in fact place a harmless insect such as a caterpillar in the box with him. If you do so, to ensure that you are outside the predicate-act requirement, you must inform him that the insects will not have a sting that would produce death or severe pain. If, however, you were to place the insect in the box without informing him that you are doing so, then, in order to not commit a predicate act, you would not affirmatively lead him to believe that any insect is present that has a sting that could produce severe pain or suffering or even cause his death. So long as you take either of these approaches, the insect's placement in the box would not constitute a threat of severe physical pain or suffering to a reasonable person in his position. An individual placed in a box, even an individual with a fear of insects, would not reasonably feel threatened with severe physical pain or suffering if a caterpillar were placed in the box. Further, you informed us that you are not aware that Zubaydah has any allergies to insects, and you have not informed us of any other factors that would cause a reasonable person in that same situation to believe that an unknown insect would cause him severe physical pain or death. Thus, we conclude that the placement of the insect in the box with Zubaydah would not constitute a predicate act.

other. Nothing ever gets properly dry here, shoes or clothing. Anything made of leather gets mildewed, and electric clocks stop. The leaves in the forest gleam and drip, and from time to time very large fish break through the surface of the river and leave widening rings behind, as mighty as if a dinosaur had dived in, smacking its lips after a good meal. When the rain lets up and there is just a gentle dripping from the trees, something resembling peace descends on one's soul for a few moments. A bug comes toward me, of terrifying size. Far off in the forest chain saws are working at some job I don't know about.

An unbelievably powerful and steady rain comes down over the jungle; language itself resists calling it rain. Foamy white brooks form in the sand along the riverbank below my cabin and stream into the brown river, which pulls everything to it and carries everything away: tree trunks, broken-off limbs, the drowned man, earth, pebbles. The pebbles clunk and roll and bang against each other, as if the entire base of the earth were washing away. In the meantime an immeasurable misty vapor spreads among the treetops, which stand there rigid and patient, from time immemorial. All the birds are silent; the rain is having the last say. On a branch floating downstream, many ants; the rain forest has such an extraordinary surfeit of life. On the swaying liana suspension bridge wet leaves are lying, stuck on after being ripped from the trees by the rain. Little reservoirs form on the slope side of the path, next to rounds cut from trees and placed next to each other, and overflow between them. These round stepping-stones are partially submerged, the rest poking out as if they were drowning.

Nature has come to her senses again; only the forest is still menacing, motionless. The river rolls along without a sound, a monster. Night falls very fast, with the last birds scolding the evening, as always at this hour. Rough cawing, malevolent sounds, punctuated by the even chirping of the first cicadas. From all this working in the rain my fingers are wrinkly, like those of the laundresses. I must have a hundred bites on my back from some insect I never did see; all of me is rotting with moisture. I would be grateful if it were only dreams tormenting me. Across the table comes a strange primeval insect, with a thin, lancelike, excessively long proboscis and feelers on both sides. I cannot make out any eyes. It is dragging a dead insect of the same species, and it disappears through the cracks in the bark floor. Then caterpillars crawl toward me from all directions, brainless but unstoppable. I think intently of the great moment when I showed my son, five at the time, the mountains of the moon through a telescope.

IQUITOS, MARCH 31

Yellow birds laid siege to me. Last night I had to combat a fresh invasion of army ants in my cab-



Polar, by Barbara Navi, whose work was on exhibit last winter at Fat Galerie, in Paris.

in; they overran me with their larvae, but they were easier to fight because they were so unusually large. First I tried spraying Baygon, but that did not work, and finally I swept the raving warriors off my platform into the swamp. Our work is not compatible with nature Amazon-style. The weather is bad, the chickens are not doing well, ditto the rabbit. The vermin in the earth are thriving. They are happy. The Chinese wok was filled with a jellylike, almost transparent mass, sticky and tough, and in its midst was a broken-off lizard tail, as if the poisonous bite of some nasty creature had melted the lizard into a tough, gluey mass. I set the wok to soak overnight, but even with scouring powder and a wooden stick for scraping I cannot get the disgusting stuff out. Tumors form on the trees. Roots writhe in the air. The jungle revels in debauched lewdness.

CAMISEA, APRIL 6

This morning I woke up to terror such as I have never experienced before: I was entirely stripped of feeling. Everything was gone; it was as if I had lost something that had been entrusted to me the

previous evening, something I was supposed to take special care of overnight. I was in the position of someone who has been assigned to guard an entire sleeping army but suddenly finds himself mysteriously blinded, deaf, and effaced. Everything was gone. I was completely empty, without pain, without pleasure, without longing, without love, without warmth and friendship, without anger, without hate. Nothing, nothing was there anymore, and I was left like a suit of armor with no knight inside. It took a long time before I even felt alarmed.

CAMISEA, APRIL 15

Hunters had gone out and brought back rodents the size of guinea pigs, which the women roasted on a wooden spit, fur and all. They looked like rats but were tasty. During shooting yesterday the Campas were distracted, shooting with arrows at something on the slope. I ran over and saw that they had shot a snake. It was pinned to the ground by several arrows, which it snapped at. We quickly filmed the scene, and once the poisonous animal had been killed we went back to work.

A Japanese doctor operated on his own appendix.

CAMISEA, APRIL 26

Walter arrived yesterday, bringing word that the *Huallaga* was stuck even worse than before. His plane was loaded almost to capacity with two hogs, which I assume were brought alive, but I did not ask for details because I did not want to have my mental image taken away: of the little *Cessna* with two massive hogs belted into the passenger seats. The freight also included three large turkeys, one of which keeps spreading its tail for me, gobbling, and putting on a great show of agitation. This turkey, this bird of ill omen, is a pure albino, so it is quite a sight when it fans its great white wheel, spreads its wings with tips trailing on the ground, and puffs up its feathers. Snorting in bursts, it launched several feigned attacks on me and gazed at me with such intense stupidity emanating from its ugly face, which took on a bluish-purple coloration and had tumorlike wattles, that without more ado I pulled a feather out of its spreading rear end. Now the turkey's sulking.

CAMISEA, APRIL 27

Little Michaela was riding the albino turkey today, with her mother, Gloria, holding her on, and the turkey played along good-naturedly. In a tree near me there is a spiderweb, so sturdy and close-meshed that it is filled up with heavy rotting leaves like a shopping net, and all the time I have been here it has not been torn off, even by wind and rain. In the woods I found a fleshy plant that keeps its upper leaves rolled up and pointing skyward, as if praying. There is a delicate vine, resembling a fern, that spreads so flat over the bark of the trees up which it climbs, wafer-thin, lovely, and deadly, that I often thought it was only painted on in dull enamel. Moss grows on lianas, and in the knobby places where the moss is thicker, a leafy plant like slender hare's ear grows out of the moss: a parasite on a parasite on a parasite.

CAMISEA, MAY 3

An old man, who had been the last person living on a windswept island far from the stormy coast, with the mail boat bringing him onions and flour only now and then, died one evening with the natural casualness of all things out here. Days later a very large fish was caught on the dead man's fishing pole, still in the water.

CAMISEA, MAY 8

Last night Kinski got little sleep because on the big, swaying liana suspension bridge near his cabin a lot of fornicating was going on. One of the ladies from Iquitos had selected the swinging bridge as a particularly suitable spot, where she laughed and joked with her suitors before the

panting and groaning began, and the bridge swayed and creaked an accompaniment. Apparently she promptly gave H.P. a social disease. Reverend Father, my fat Dominican, thou who so firmly vouched for these ladies, I would gladly do without the globs of fat in my soup and without the bread for breaking, but please restore my lack of faith! I did not see God today. According to the statistics, 85 percent of all existing species are beetles and insects of various sorts, so where are we on the scale of God's favorites?

CAMISEA, JUNE 2

Something must be said about the majestic misery of the jungle. I was awakened by a strange, cackling bird I had never heard before and was annoyed that Dagoberto had not recorded it, even though I had no way of knowing whether he might not have done so after all.

Our kitchen crew slaughtered our last four ducks. While they were still alive, Julian plucked their neck feathers, before chopping off their heads on the execution block. The white turkey, that vain creature, the survivor of so many roast chickens and ducks transformed into soup, came over to inspect, gobbling and displaying, and used his ugly feet to push one of the beheaded ducks, as it lay there on the ground bleeding and flapping its wings, into what he thought was a proper position and, making gurgling sounds while his bluish-red wattles swelled, he mounted the dying duck and copulated with it.

CAMISEA, JUNE 4

The camp is silent with resignation; only the turkey is making a racket. It attacked me, overestimating its own strength, and I quickly grabbed its neck, which squirmed and tried to swallow, slapped him left-right with the casual elegance of the arrogant cavaliers I had seen in French *Three Musketeers* films who go on to prettily cross swords, and then let the vain albino go. His feelings hurt, he trotted away, wiggling his rump but with his wings still spread in conceited display. On a sandbank by the Pongo that the river had uncovered, a petrified turtle was found, but it must be so immensely large and heavy that it is impossible to transport. Segundo gave me a big insect, quite unusual. I heard it had been caught in Shivankoreni and nailed to a board. It has a bulge on its head like that of a crocodile, and allegedly its bite is lethal, as Segundo reveals in a whisper. During the rubber era there were many more of them, and the only way to prevent certain death was allegedly to make love to a woman right away, but a hundred years ago, when there were so many woodsmen but hardly any women, a silent understanding developed that in such a situation a woman would be lent out by her husband, and thus quite a few men who were bitten managed to survive.