La Bruja, Immovable Tropics by Philippe Lançon

The wide road that passes by the village of La Bruja (about 60 houses and 358 inhabitants) draws a line between land and sea, in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra. It links Santiago de Cuba to Manzanillo, and probably is Cuba's best road. Nevertheless, it is empty. In order to reach the village, about 100 km from Santiago, Alexis Cordesse did as the locals do – take a hypothetical bus which, more often than not is so full that "you only see the dust around it", as the locals say, or hop in one of the rare trucks passing by. The journey often takes a whole day. Luck is irrelevant. So is impatience. The end of the world is perfectly tarmacked, but it remains the end of the world. This south-eastern coast of the island is a magnificent place to which virtually no one travels. One drifts towards it, like a lost insect, between the water and the mountains with clouds floating up and down their slopes, sometimes at great speed, brushing against silhouettes. The end of the world is tarmacked except for two bends where the road becomes dirt, covered in stones fallen from the cliff and so near the water that it cannot be used in rough weather. The neat 200-km highway is interrupted by the ocean's whims. The Cuban authorities started building two bypassing tunnels. But at the fall of Communism in the USSR, the money ran out and the work was stopped. The tunnels are now gaping open in the rock, with bushes growing inside them. They look like they could be shelters. When reaching these bends, travellers are suddenly reminded they are at the end of the world, as the road seems to whisper: "Beware of appearances! You see farmers going about their daily business, smiling at strangers and wearing American T-shirts, but in fact, it is isolation and poverty that rule here. Two impassable twists of the road have rendered 200 km of impeccable tarmac obsolete!"

The second bend is not far from La Bruja. It seems to announce your arrival. By night, when the sky is clear, they say it is possible to see the lights of Jamaica in the distance from the village, located 200 metres up the road, in the hills. It is probably a better idea to close your eyes and picture them. Those lights must be carried by the wind, or by flying fish, or by the desire to travel, or more likely by Cuban saints or even by the legend of this ghostly bird-woman after whom the village was named ("the witch").

No one knows exactly how far the story dates back – the beginning of the 20th century, most probably. The village was still located a lot higher up in the mountains. There was no road. Peasants would farm the land which, at high altitude, did not belong to anyone. They would travel down to the sea only to sell their crops to rich landlords – who owned the lower farmland, first breeding cattle there, then using the land for leisure, after reaching it by sea, on their yachts. Peasants would also travel down to transport the sick. They would wave sheets to the ships sailing by the shore. Occasionally, a ship would drop anchor, take the sick person onboard and transport them to Santiago. But more often than not, there was no ship and they would just die there, facing the sea, maybe finally catching a glimpse of the lights of Jamaica. The first human dwellings alongside the road-to-be were cemeteries: there are twenty-seven of them. The village did not come "down" until 1962, when the first dirt track was built. At the time of the legend,

however, there were only mountain paths. The villagers were completely isolated, which has left a long-lasting mark on their culture.

A village woman had been married to a farmer for a long time. They were a seemingly average couple. One night, during the celebrations of "la noche buena" (Christmas Eve), a friend of the husband danced with the wife and seduced her. The husband challenged him to a knife duel. As the fight started, the woman realised she wished for her husband's death. But the husband killed the lover. The following night, she murdered her husband and vanished. She was never seen again. Legend has it that she turned into a bird and comes back in December, around Christmas, and in April during the Holy Week, in order to kidnap unloved husbands. In those days, husbands avoided going out at night: maybe they suspected that their wives did not love them as much as they had thought. There are, of course, many versions of the legend, obviously combining various elements from Cuban daily life: the calendar of saints, obsessive jealousy, the flight of migratory birds. The story is also a product of pitch-black nights with no electricity – night falls at 6pm here. Scientists have tried to identify the winged creature the legend is based on: it is believed to be an "archetata heterodema", a small bird that migrates to the Carribean in winter, flying low above water, nesting in the Sierra and leaving in April. Those who know its name, which may not be accurate, will spell it out to you and make sure you write it correctly, as if meticulous technicality could help grasp the folktale's hazy contours. But a name does not a summer bird make: old villagers will remind us that no one has ever caught, or even seen, the bird-woman.

The legend had been well known in Oriente province, but it didn't fly any longer, so to speak. In 1996, Raul Pomares, a famous TV actor from Santiago, decided to erect a monument to the bird and set up a festival on 31 December. He had forgotten but one detail: the villagers' mindset. Not that they are uncivilised, but isolation, silence, slowness and centuries of austere living in such a remote place have made them overly guarded. They do not like surprises. They shy away from the outside world. They do not say no – they just go blank. Their silence is reminiscent of Bartleby, Herman Melville's mute character, with his invariable reply to his superiors: "I would prefer not to." Going to meet them can be a chilling experience for such a sociable country as Cuba: for a start, people here will not greet you. They will not look at you, let alone talk to you. You will need patience – and a concrete reason – for approaching them.

Raul Pomares may have been relying too much on his own fame. His view of the cultural narcissism of the people of La Bruja was probably a bit too simplistic. He thought he could tame them. But there was no TV in La Bruja in 1996, and the legend had grown surrounded by silence. There was only night, wind, a few guitars and bongos, a newly-arrived small turbine for power, that little miracle, and the "bembés" – night-long, brutal and mesmerizing musical rituals led by an old-school "santera". Pomares failed to rally the villagers. He approached the cultural community centre of Santiago. One of the centre's psychologists, Tatiana Tamayo, recounted that at first, they "didn't want to go there, it was too far!" Too far, because of a lack of transportation. Most people here do not have cars, and public transport is unreliable and costly: 7.5 pesos from Santiago to La Bruja (the average monthly salaries revolve around 150,

200 pesos, i.e. 10 dollars). Travelling 100 km was out of the question. Finally, in 1998, four young psychologists undertook the journey, but they made a mistake: they failed to inform the village authorities. Upon their arrival, everybody scurried inside. They asked questions – they got no answers. The bird of La Bruja? Never heard of it. Tatiana explained: “The locals were tired of having all those actors, civil servants, environmentalists and scientists coming to the village – with nothing in return.” Having had enough of being observed, they withdrew like snails.

The people of La Bruja have long lived in isolation. Life here is both smooth and rough. People live off the land, going up and down as if in a lift. Near the sea, the village spreads over 300 metres, in the trees, on a steep slope. Men come down there to sell their produce and rest. The rest of the time, they farm the land up there, above the clouds. They stay there for a week, or for a month or two, and come back down with a mule laden with tubers, fruit and coffee. The path is insanely steep. Their arms and legs look like they are made of wood. The high valleys are beautifully fertile, green, wet and muddy, and no stranger is allowed to enter: the land is dedicated to growing coffee, which is a national treasure. It is therefore under the supervision of the military. The village representative and “maestro” (schoolteacher), an educated man, explained with heavy rhetorical excitement that access to the top of the village was restricted because fake tourists once contaminated coffee plantations with a bacteria. In fact, the disease that stains coffee leaves is as old as the plant itself, and it can strike anywhere. But Castroism has shaped mentalities, especially in this hotbed of revolutionary peasants: strangers, however scarce, are potential enemies, because Fidel said so. And so they must be controlled and supervised.

Consequently, during his first five trips, Alexis Cordesse had to focus his work on the lower area: the village itself. He waited for the permit to reach the highlands. He dreamt of it like a not so inaccessible paradise. His portraits reveal the tension of this thwarted desire: each one pictures a little ritual with an invisible, but also untouchable, backstage area (the work, the gruelling trips, the silent nights in the mountains, the cold in winter, the rain, the rain, the unbearable heat).

During his first sessions, the farmers, their wives and children put on their best clothes for the picture – sometimes just shirts that are less torn apart than their T-shirts. They stood upright, without smiling. They did not want to be taken “by surprise” by an intruder. They did not want to fool around before the camera. They did not want to be captured in “natural” poses. They knew by instinct that photography has to do with time, death and self-representation, that it is indeed a ceremony in which nothing “natural” should be displayed. It is – literally – the reflection of an extraordinary moment. Most of them had no pictures, neither of themselves nor of their ancestors. Or maybe just an old ID picture. They accepted the photographer because he had something precious to barter: images in exchange for attendance. So they attended.

In real life, the farmers of La Bruja smile and laugh a lot. On photos, they do not smile. They show something else: a dignified home. Before letting in the eye of a stranger, they cleaned,

they tried to be good hosts. However, the eye of Alexis Cordesse had to struggle to reach inside. Each photograph not only commits the subject, but also the whole village. A woman, Olga, was captured with her fly open. “This is an opportunity for self-criticism!” said the maestro to her in public. Each picture was a battle, an equation with multiple unknowns. A few villagers gathered around the sweating photographer and his frozen model; they observed, they shouted, they laughed as if they were about to attend a strange but merry bullfight. First, Alexis Cordesse took a few Polaroids. He gave them out straight away, so that each person could see how he will handle their image: a kind of barter following the rules of Spanish-style bullfighting. Tension was released. People laughed a little bit, they teased each other – here come the spears and *banderillas*. Then the actual session began, and all became quiet – a new tension arose, like when the bull is about to be put to death. But here, the person was put to life. Alexis had meticulously set the framing and the pose. The models submitted and focused on their task, surrounded by their family and neighbours.

Sometimes the model was unhappy with the outcome. It was the case for Lela, an exuberant widow, the only one to own a “permanent” house (made of clay). She has had money and chickens stolen… Envy rules in La Bruja, like anywhere else. I’ll come back to that later. A Cuban proverb goes: “Small village, big hell.” Lela is also one of the happy few to own a picture of herself, dating back 20 years. On the picture, her hair is neatly pulled back, split in the middle. “At least I looked fine on that one” she whispered to me. “Not on Alexis’ picture…” On Alexis’ picture, she looks hauntingly beautiful, as majestic as an old black rock riddled with darkness and hardship. The image conceals the death of the first husband, the rowdy night-time lovemaking with the second one, a lifetime of washing the dishes, cooking, killing chicken, carrying vegetables, cutting wood, etc. But she did not have time to “get ready” for this picture. The photographer was looking for the power of genuineness, the wasted body, the very raw appearance that Lela was instinctively trying to conceal, constrain, standardise. She, however, was expecting a slick, standard-size photograph, but the photographer had “recreated” her. Pictures are born from such premeditated misunderstanding whereby someone’s fantasy penetrates the other’s skin. By freezing a moment, images capture a soul. They give Lela and all those men and women a glorified stature in spite of their isolation. They were made here, in this remote Cuban village, but could have been made somewhere else, Africa or the Pacific islands, e.g. the picture of the two cousins Lurdes and Reina under the blossoming tree. They capture raw human beings against the backdrop of their own light, turning the people of La Bruja into an epitome of the passing of time, or time that stands still – an “inner journey” of sorts, as Henri Michaux puts it. The images reveal how farming has tanned the bodies, hollowed the eyes. They are the opposite of perfect, predictable cover pictures. The people of La Bruja have no expectations of being fashionable or revisited by other people’s jaded intrusiveness: they just are where they are.

Lela and Alexis misunderstood each other, or maybe they actually understood each other all too well. Disappointment shall pass; the image shall stay on. Upon looking at it, one knows what Alexis was looking for: a lost photographic paradise, when one was not obsessed by the dubious miracle and the lies of multiple images – of themselves. Gradually, the villagers started

to accept the ways of the Rousseau-like photographer. Once he was accepted, his pictures changed: less decorum, less protocol. Everyone had their say about their favourite moment, about the initial clashes and the final closeness. Oscarin, Lela's son, was amused and enthralled. He exclaimed: "These are memories! We are alive and making memories!" So far, memories were to be experienced – family issues, love stories, quarrels of all kinds – but not looked at. Memories were mainly for the dead.

Oscarin is a horny twenty-year-old fellow with lots of girlfriends. He is neither faithful nor jealous. Faithfulness is no virtue in La Bruja, nor is it a rule. Love goes around unabashed from one "bohio" to the next (a bohio is a small shabby house made of wood or palm leaves). Cries and groans are heard through the night. They are part of the soundscape, like the blowing wind, the song of birds or the grunting of pigs. Oscarin Amarillo is nicknamed "the yellow man" here, because, as he explains jokingly "I am neither white nor black". He is one of the lucky ones who went to school. He even had an affair with the schoolteacher. Above all, he is one of the most "urban" people in the village. He is amazed by new things but dismisses them immediately with sceptical humour, as if wary of showing his own curiosity – or appearing too naïve.

But does naivety really exist? Have a look at Teofilo Isa Batista's beautiful, bony, hollowed face. He is the village mute and idiot. He often mumbles words that most adults barely understand. Children, however, are more permeable to broken language: most of them know what Teofilo means. He touches people, shouts, laughs, fills his toothless mouth with onomatopoeias. These seemingly joyful acts of compensation have made him the mascot of the village. He flutters about from one house to the next like a madcap. But his picture shows what no one can see: the loneliness, the instinctive struggle to be loved and understood – sending him back to his own tragic silence.

It took the young psychologists of Santiago quite a long time to overcome that silence, that resistance. The main reason for it was Juan Francisco Molina Mulen, who died in 1972 at the age of 125. Juan was allegedly a mambí soldier during the 1895 war of independence, but here he was mainly the village's "curandero" (healer). He lived in the mountains and had foreseen that the village would "come down" and that contact with the world, the road and the way of life from downhill would destroy families. His "teachings" were perpetuated. Isolation has become a virtue. Not that the people of La Bruja live so far away from everything. They commute vertically between the village and the mountain – horizontally, from the village to the outside and back. Most men do their military service outside of this area. Erasmo, a charming and powerful man nicknamed "Bolo", is still wearing his beret from three years in the army. For 18 months, he picked pineapples near Camaguey – a particularly hard task. He is a very fit man who smokes a pipe and likes to laugh. Some families also have relatives in Santiago, Holguin or Havana. One man, not technically *from* the village though, a bit of an "outsider", used to work in Bulgaria. One evening, as men were smoking their pipes at the maestro's house, he told his friends: "Over there, men can virtually lend you their wives!" "That's what good friends should do!" the maestro replied. "OK, lend me yours, then!" said a third fellow. "Let me return yours first!" the maestro retorted. Behind the door, the maestro's wife snorted, in the

shadow of this typically Cuban macho conversation. The maestro's wife was a beauty, and beauty is neither faithful nor affected. The traveller added: "One night, I went back home with a woman and her husband was lying dead drunk on the couch; we had sex in their bed, then he woke up and smiled to me. That's what they're like!" Another one pointed out: "Maybe his real wife is the booze?" Everyone laughed. An old man concluded: "Women are all right, but they make scenes. Rum never did my head in like a woman does – and it doesn't speak!"

Foreigners are but a hazy dream: no one here has relatives abroad, which is becoming an exception for Cuba. The entire island lives off the cash sent by expats. Life in La Bruja is affected by the absence of dollars, the only currency that gives access to consumer goods (soap, clothes, televisions, electrical appliances). Hence the village has become a world within the country. Amarillo has studied clock-making, but he has virtually no tools, and almost no one here owns a watch anyway. He summed up: "The problem is not how to live here, but how to get out of here." Getting out physically – sometimes a villager may spend hours alongside the road waiting for a bus which never shows up, only to walk back up after a lost day. Getting out mentally: the village is a cocoon. Those who get out will come back with goods, clothes, tools, commodities… Paradise may be somewhere else, but this beautiful little hell is where they want to live – or barely survive. They are drawn back to La Bruja, as if the rest of the world had ceased to exist.

But the rest of the world is increasingly making its presence felt. As they saw their new pictures, a lot of villagers said: "People in France must have a good laugh when they see us? They must find us miserable." No one here is proud of their own poverty. They may be proud of what they are; they may be happy to be where they are. But the world is changing and they know it. They have no watches, but they sense that they are "late". They are self-conscious enough to know it, and innocent enough to forget it. This is another thing to be found in the pictures: people at the border between what they have been and what they will be. Modern civilisation has reached them, but not engulfed them yet. They dream of dollars, like all Cubans, but their lives do not revolve around getting any at all costs. Nevertheless, the modernisation of the village, as well as the humanitarian aid that has gradually been coming in, are rapidly wiping out the harshness accounted for in the pictures. Just like the newly excavated frescoes in the film *Fellini Roma* disintegrate instantly due to contact with air. Four years ago, a turbine was installed: electricity had finally arrived. It was very weak at first; but at nightfall, it changed some habits, and maybe some dreams. The people of La Bruja still go to sleep early when there is no "bembé". But in the dim light of the naked bulbs, in this modern darkness, who knows if the legend of the bird-woman will carry on?

The psychologists came as part of Raul Pomares's cultural project. "But when we saw that the kids had no shoes, that the women did not work, that the schoolteacher had no teaching material and that the musicians' instruments were bashed up, we decided to do a different project." The presence of the famous actor, as well as the psychologists' activism, made "La Bruja 1998" one of the five national pilot projects of "integral development".

First, an organisation of Italian pensioners called Archinova donated clothing and supplies to the school. A Belgian charity, Oxfam Belgium, funded the hydraulic project and the development project. A soil survey was started. Permanent houses had to be built and water brought up to the village (the river flows below the village so water pumps were necessary). It was suggested to set up a communal farm with animals given by the State, but the villagers refused, distrusting any idea of sharing. "Who would feed the animals?" they argued. The idea of community was accepted, but a sense of everyone for themselves remained. The psychologists met no enthusiasm from the village representative, who feared they had come to judge him. For two years, they struggled to win over the two main characters in the village: the grocer and Lela. The third "guide" of La Bruja, the "santera", had left the place, now just coming back for local festivals. Television was gradually replacing the night-time "bembés" which she used to lead. A year and a half ago, a first TV set was brought in, funded by the Bayamo province. Every night, most villagers gather to watch the "novela" like cattle at a watering hole. It is a fascinating and lively moment, during which one of the small screen's most essential functions – often forgotten in the Western world – is revealed: communion. The TV stands outside, on an old table. The "novela" is played in the open. Alexis Cordesse took a picture but did not keep it; he did not like it. Perhaps it summed up a bit too obviously the status of this appliance in the village: it showed a mixed-race girl sticking her cheek up against an old TV that had never worked. In the background, she had set up a shrine with a statue of San Lazaro, the healing saint, and a picture of Gaviota, a famous "telenovela" protagonist. So far, the maestro has denied an offer for another TV set: he thinks it would tear the village apart.

Last December, two years into the scheme, the team made an evaluation of the project. It was not good. The windfall of clothes and medicine, as well as all the attention suddenly coming from outside, have aroused envy, jealousy, theft. People lock their houses at night or upon leaving. Another picture that Alexis Cordesse discarded was a close-up of a young woman holding one of her doves. Not long after the session, the dove was stolen. Adaïrma never knew who it was, or why. In such a small village, some things are left unsaid, and under a cheerful appearance, people are on guard, they spy, they have suspicions. Everyone forgets what they have received and complains about what others have obtained. Village meetings reveal resistance, defiance, and a kind of new immaturity: the hard-working farmers of La Bruja have turned into goslings waiting to be fed humanitarian aid. Modernity is difficult; human nature is complex.

So the psychologists decided to distribute the goods gradually, while involving each villager in voluntary construction work. This is where we are up to now. A second turbine is due to be set up. Houses are still the same – made of wood, palm or cob. Disillusions and dreams are in the air: change is not easy, especially when it comes from outside. The first time Alexis Cordesse came back and gave out the pictures from his previous visit, he made sure to give one to each model. The pictures were passed around the whole village like little treasures. The glossy prints were left with everyone's powerful gaze and fingerprints on them. Of course, the photographer had not developed them all: some were not good, some he did not like. Some subjects had to deal with the frustration of being "invisible", of missing out on this big village presentation.

Had they not sat for a photo session? Had they not put on their nicest clothes? Were they uglier than the others, or less worthy of being shown? The story continues to unfold at the time of writing… An exhibition is due to take place in the village to culminate this powerful work, which is now settling quietly, far from the hubbub of modernity. Like the Malian Seydou Keïta or the Galician Virgilio Veitez before him, Alexis Cordesse captures some of these paupers, neither damned nor favoured folk of the earth, and their unfathomable inner resources. He slows down, freezes, travels to the other end of the world – there, far from his own home, he goes back to the fundamentals: he becomes a village photographer who, one subject after the other, rebuilds the community – humankind.

Philippe Lançon.

Post-scriptum:

A few months later, during his sixth trip, Alexis Cordesse finally received permission to photograph the people in the mountains. The local cultural authorities had informed the Party, who informed the Academy, who informed the Ministry of Science. The minister himself had signed his permit to access a specific high valley, within a set perimeter. Cuban bureaucracy is slow and does not like surprises. Cordesse's obstinate requests to return to a place that should not interest him so much – as it does not interest anyone – was suspicious. What was he looking for? Had he found anything? Why didn't he, like anyone else, photograph old cars, handsome Black men, half-naked ladies of the street, or cheerful, skinny musicians? Why wasn't he just into smooth, colonialist photography? From the perspective of retailers of touristic images, something was wrong: not shallow enough. The country's official image must move with the times. Also, bureaucracies like to use their power over people's needs, like seducers play on people's desires. They "tease". Tomorrow, or the day after? Maybe, maybe not? We'll see. Every day had been tinted by the anguish of the missing document, applying relentlessly, obtaining nothing. Eventually, Cordesse was inexplicably granted the special favour from the Ministry. Graces from the gods arrive when one pretends to stop waiting from them.

Armed with his magic paper, the photographer arrived in the village on a celebratory evening. Slight changes had occurred. A fridge had appeared, but it was empty. Power shortages would soon make it redundant anyway. The grocer (the "bodeguero") had been dismissed: the government found he had embezzled 80 000 pesos (900 euros, a fortune). The villagers had saved him from going to jail by lending him money. Some had hidden savings – and the bodeguero now had years of repayment ahead of him. He had gone back to farming. He had become worryingly thin, having lost his belly of authority. A new mayor had been elected: the young Amarillo had replaced the schoolmaster ("maestro"), who had quit. The maestro had been complaining about the villagers. The villagers and the authorities had been complaining about him: he was lazy, they said. Generally, the authorities see La Bruja as a self-enclosed, unproductive, inbred village that does not meet farming objectives. Oscarin, aka Amarillo, a

man in his early twenties who wanted to make clocks, was now the mayor and wanted to become a travelling puppet master ("titiretero") – Raul Pomares (the actor who had failed to rally the villagers) had suggested creating a show about the legend of La Bruja. So, when Alexis Cordesse reached the village, Amarillo had gone to Havana for the first time in his life, looking for material to make puppets.

As usual, the photographer set up his base at the house of Lela, Amarillo's mother. During the night, a hand passed through the glassless window to steal his wallet, which was in full view. There were 60 pesos and all his papers and permits in it – 300 dollars' worth of administrative procedures. It was the first theft since the adventure began. Lela was devastated. She was in tears over the fact that it had happened in her own house; she was afraid of the trouble that would surely follow. In this place, the fear of authority can resurface over the slightest incident. The furious photographer then reported the theft to the "counter-intelligence" agent whose job was to keep an eye on him from the nearest town, Chivirico. A meeting was called – almost all the villagers were present. The photographer said: "I have come here for myself, but also for you. I give my time. I try to observe and understand. I respect you. I do my best to photograph you well. I give you prints of my photos. It takes time and money. It is about trust and friendship. So far, I haven't earned a penny from all that. I do it because I believe in the project, I believe in you. And now you rob me. The money doesn't matter, but the papers do. Tomorrow, I'm off to the mountains, but I will not take another picture of you until my wallet is returned." Distraught, the villagers listened to the photographer's patronising speech. Albeit reluctantly, he was isolating them by lumping them together, forcing them to collectively share the responsibility for the theft. He was fully aware of it, but had no idea what else to do. A clear line had to be drawn. The counter-intelligence man waited for a moment for the situation to sink in. Then he announced: "No matter who the culprit is, if the wallet is returned, no inquest or legal action will follow." He suspected that in this tight-knit community, many knew who the culprit was – but people were unlikely to speak out. One does not report brothers or cousins; in a family-based community, issues are resolved privately. During the following days, discussions became heated, each seizing the opportunity to criticise others. Previous thefts resurfaced in conversations – light bulbs, for example. No holds were barred in the village, and the story of the foreigner's wallet laid bare the undercurrent of their harsh reality. The wallet reappeared four days later outside Lela's house. The 60 pesos were missing, but the papers were inside. Meanwhile, Alexis Cordesse, for the very first time, had left for the mountains.

First, a steep, densely vegetated slope strains your legs. Then you find yourself surrounded by greenery, or, after a downpour – a soup of red mud. There is nothing up there. The country folk live isolated in small houses with only a table, a chair and straw bedding. They work from dawn to dusk on slopes so steep that Cordesse struggled to capture them. Anchored to the mountainside like a goat under an unforgiving sun, a man was digging the earth with a trowel, then by hand, to plant malanga, a tuber that doesn't taste too bad when fried. The exhausting work stops at noon, when the heat strikes. They go back to their abodes. They eat. They sleep. Sometimes, they go hunting. At 6pm, night falls. There is no electricity. The nearest stream can be an hour's walk away. During a drought, they must walk far to find water. Some, like

Amarillo's father, live up there all year round. On a picture, he can be seen holding an agouti (called "jutia" here). This rodent is, together with a small local monkey, the only meat that can improve the blandness of malanga. Amarillo's father is a gentle giant. His shoulders are wide. He is as strong as a tree – and notorious for getting into fights. But every night, he must get up several times to vomit – an ulcer is slowly killing him. He almost never goes down to the village. In these places, a mule is an absolute necessity for survival: harvests must be transported up and down the paths. Those who have one lend it to the others. On a good month, you can make 100 pesos (0.75 €). Most men are resigned to their fates. They do not complain about their harsh reality – what good would that do? Besides, they love the harsh nature that surrounds them: these steep valleys without a plateau; the stifling humidity – cold at night – which mists the photographer's lenses; the coffee they grow – their meagre livelihood alongside fruit and tubers. Some years ago, when a disease affected the coffee plants, many people cried. It was not so much over lost earnings, but over the devastation of their environment. A sense of beauty and health prevails in the high valleys: one family has made a beautiful flower garden around their cabin. However, two brothers who lived alone ended up leaving – life up there was too hard. Others seem ready to live there forever, and are willing and able to walk 30 km in a day. Sometimes they sleep with Vicenta, the local lady of the night ("Vamos a pisar la Vicenta" – let's mount Vicenta!). Then you can hear the mountain sing at night. The black kid photographed in the water, his chin on his knees, is already a well-known "son cubano" singer. He has been on TV, on local folklore programmes. He could become famous. Maybe we will see him in Europe, or in the US. La Bruja Social Club? Why not? Our taste for the exotic can set on the most unexpected ghosts. But this photo should be remembered. Let's remember how hard it was for Alexis Cordesse to capture the mountains on film during those two periods of ten days. Capturing extreme poverty on such acute angles is a photographic challenge. When looking at these pictures, try to imagine the lives of these farmers, the eye of the photographer, and how they both intersect within the reality of their respective solitudes; then try to remember the ambiguous and magical verse by the great Cuban poet Virgilio Piñera: "Each man biting the place left by his shadow."

Philippe Lançon is a journalist and writer. He works in the culture office of the Liberation daily and as a columnist at the Charlie Hebdo weekly. He has published several novels including *Disturbance: Surviving Charlie Hebdo* (Le Lambeau) in 2018 (winner of the Prix Femina and the Prix Renaudot Jury's Special Prize).