



1989

In Asuncion

Gonzalo Aldren

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

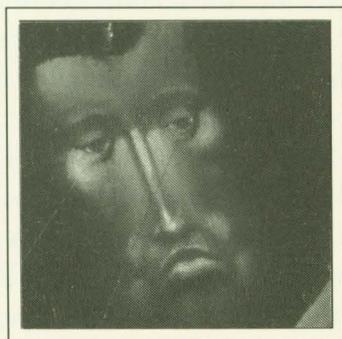
Aldren, Gonzalo (1989) "In Asuncion," *Inscape*: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 25.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol9/iss1/25>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inscape* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

In Asunción

Gonzalo Aldren



A low sliver of sky along the Chaco Paraguayo whispered rain. Jorgy and I walked down toward the river, and flying ants came out of the ground, testing their wings. Some, wings dry, flew up into the trees. The frogs would have it good.

We came to the home of the family Corales. It was possible la Dona Corales would want to be baptized—her husband was baptized six months before.

At the gate we clapped and went in. A son-in-law drew up chairs. A patient of Don Corales also came in, his chin tucked in, and sat on the edge of a chair without drawing it into our circle. He was given cloves to chew.

Gonzalo Aldren

Dona Corales was with customers in the despensa, who came out with their purchases wrapped in newsprint and left or took a chair in the circle. Neighbors came—and family from the house. Mosquitoes hovered under the chairs where our bottoms settled between the wicker. A punk spiral was brought out and lit for them.

Don Corales prepared the terere. He took up a guampa, a cowhorn carved hollow. A horse was carved onto the guampa—a shadow of what Picasso painted, Rocinante, Quixote's horse. Don Corales sifted tea leaves into the guampa. A fine green dust drifted up. He poured water over the tea leaves and strained it through the bombilla to his lips, his cheeks pulling back from the first taste of metal. He gave it to Jorgy. This was a quiet honor. Jorgy drew on the bombilla and passed to his left.

Their voices were strange to me—I had not been long in their country. I listened, then thought of running in the high dust above my family home and pulled at the shirt on my chest—I had never felt this sort of wet clinging that comes before the tropical storm. I slept, feeling their voices. When the guampa came around again, I drank a pleasing bitter taste of another world.

Don Corales set the guampa aside. The spiders had begun. There was a colony in the air between the trees, preparing for night. These spiders are not sinister, they are not solitary. They live near the river under the street lamps, moving around each other like shadows. The air glimmered with their new spoolings, then they were gone. The flying ants came around the light.

A customer fled the despensa just in front of Dona Corales, who snorted and brought the doors closed.

Don Corales looked down from the web and went to a high-backed chair. He rested his hands across the back, and the patient wiggled onto it.

Don Corales began to drill, pedalling with his foot as the drill whirred then grated in the man's mouth. I smelled burned bone and imagined grains of bone in my mouth and a barbed thing that threads in along the nerve and twists it out.

"Why do they flee Dona Corales," I asked the son-in-law.

"It is her eyes—she shows them their conscience."

"She is fierce," I said.

"She is not so bad," he said. "They come for wine, those men. She knows they have children who need food, usually. I have a family myself and know these things. You watch out for her eyes." The son-in-law winked and slipped from his chair. She took it. A substantial bottom would sag and bunch through the seat of such a chair in spectacular ways.

We took our chairs inside, past Don Corales who took up a mortar and pestle with mercury and silver. He finished and came along. He prayed to begin our meeting. When I want to talk to God, I remember his prayer.

We taught the plan of salvation, and I held up a chart I had worked up with the world we came from and the world we would go to. I held it up, and Jorgy pointed then flipped through his folder of pictures as he explained things. Dona Corales was on her second time through the lessons.

After, we got out a filmstrip projector sent down from the United States and aimed it at the wall. Everyone was impressed. We showed the story of Johnny Lingo and his eight-cow wife, which had little to do with the lesson Jorgy had taught, but we had been able to get no other filmstrip. Everyone gathered around the projector.

Later, when the neighbors and a few of the family went off, we started the baptism question: she smoked and couldn't get baptized until she quit. The body is holy, a temple. Smokes are filth, not for any temple. It is a commandment. Dona Corales knew this without hearing it from anyone—commandments come from inside us in the end.

We thought of her tapering off on the smokes and it did not seem right—Dona Corales for one did not buy it. She ended with the idea of chewing gum for a couple of weeks, and we'd see. We were ready to stick with that. Jorgy turned to me. "Ah—have you anything to say," he asked formally.

Gonzalo Aldren

I did not know what to do. Holding the cigarettes which she gave to me out of her skirt pocket in one hand and the book in the other, I thought.

Then I felt simplicity. I said, "You have had this before. Now you have this other."

This I said, but any one of us could have said it. The words were a gift. In that moment, the words moved between us. Jorgy tried the words to his lips, and Don and Dona Corales tried the words to their lips, breathing but not saying them. The son-in-law shrugged.

Dona Corales considered and said, "Tomorrow is Sunday. I wish to be baptized then."

We had luck getting home. Then lightning broke the sky into rain, first with a smell of charnel, a whispering ghost of Don Corales' patient, then it rained cleanly. We took our supper on the balcony and sat feeling the nearness of rain beyond the eaves. We waited for the new year, watching through wind that did not reach us inside the balcony, staring down across the city and the dark river and across the Chaco Paraguayo, country of the storm.

I knelt against the bed. The storm pulsed against the tiles of the roof, and I felt the slats of the bed pressing up through tick and remembered the words I had spoken to Dona Corales. I would be a part of this country. I knelt low and turned my face to the dry, cold flags of the floor. They spoke of home.