

About the Cover Art

Cover Essay: Darkness in Paradise

The beautiful, old Quiche Mayan city of Quetzaltenango (“Xela”), set in a high mountain valley, does not immediately inspire terror. Yet, in October and November 2000, rabies reared its ugly, dark head there, and four people died horrible deaths – hydrophobia, convulsions, salivation, asphyxia. The Guatemalan Ministry of Health initiated a program to destroy stray dogs. They ran out of strychnine, and ran into protests from animal rights organizations.

Throughout the world, it is estimated that more than 40,000 people die of rabies each year, most in poor countries in the Southern Hemisphere, approximately a quarter of them in India.

For many people in North America and Europe, this dark, uncontrollable wildness at the heart of nature seems far away. In the United States, Canada, and Europe (with the exception of the Russian Federation countries), almost all of the rabies cases reported are from wildlife – foxes, skunks, raccoons, mongooses, and bats – and only a few are from domestic animals such as cats, dogs, and cattle.

One can understand the passion with which people have fought back against this disease, ranging from shooting and poisoning dogs, trapping and killing wildlife, and blowing up bat caves. Much of this is based on bad science, but it is difficult to fault the emotions. Rabies is a disease whose scars run deep, and draw on seemingly inexhaustible wells of fear. The word *rabies* itself comes from the Sanskrit *rabhas*, 3000 years BC. It means “to do violence.” The Greek word *lyssa*, derived from a root meaning “violent,” is the name now given to the group of viruses – lyssaviruses – to which rabies belongs. Descriptions of the disease go back to the 23rd century BC, in Babylon. Three hundred and fifty years before Pasteur, Girolamo Fracastoro, an Italian scholar, described both the disease and how it was transmitted.

But describing this devilish, invariably fatal,¹ disease did nothing to make it go away, nor even to tame it. Some people killed themselves after they were bitten by what they thought was a rabid dog, more terrified of the disease than of a possibly judgmental creator. Other treatments have included holding people under water until they got better or drowned, a case of trying to treat the symptoms (hydrophobia – fear of water) without getting at the cause, or feeding various parts of chickens or dogs to the victims. No treatments, including the best technologies at our disposal today, are effective once the clinical signs set in.

Since our flight from our African Eden, dogs have been our most constant and faithful friends and companions. When we were hungry hunters, they guided us to prey. They have guided and guarded our sheep and cattle, sometimes paying for it with their lives. When we settled into agriculture, they warned us and barked at the approach of strangers.

Diego Isaias Hernandez’s painting *Un Susto de un Perro Rabioso (Fright Because of a Rabid Dog)* speaks of all those things. The rabid dog in the midst of this cheerfully colorful scene of naïve Tz’utuhil pastoralism wreaks havoc. Scarecrows swing from gallows, like the victims of the Guatemalan Civil War, or of unfettered free trade, above the maize fields. The volcano bides its time. Everyone in Guatemala knows that, sooner or later, it will erupt. The people – 9 out of 10 of them – look skyward. “I look to the hills; from whence cometh my help?” said the old songwriter-king. But these people are looking above the hills. From whence indeed comes help?

Louis Pasteur and his intellectual descendants would say, with very good reason, that our help comes from the

¹There has been one documented case of survival after the onset of clinical signs, in the United States, in 2004.

laboratory: “I beseech you to take interest in these sacred domains so expressively called laboratories. Ask that there be more and that they be adorned, for these are the temples of the future, wealth and well-being. It is here that humanity will grow, strengthen and improve. Here, humanity will learn to read progress and individual harmony in the works of nature, while humanity’s own works are all too often those of barbarism, fanaticism and destruction” (Louis Pasteur, 1822–1895).

Control of nature has brought us many benefits. We can control the crops and the markets, growing genetically improved maize and coffee in neat, fertilized fields, accompanied by our tail-wagging canine friends, whom we have taught obedience. But nature has dark secrets. Between 1982 and 2003, the number of human cases of rabies in Latin America decreased from 355 to 35; then, by the early part of this millennium, just as the number of cases from rabid dogs was coming under control, the number of cases from other species – mostly blood-feeding bats – rose.

Just when we think we have nature under control, it slips away. Volcanoes that are seemingly asleep erupt in a grand, destructive passion. The dogs turn on us, snarling and biting and bringing death and madness; it is as if our own children were attacking us.

We do have answers – vaccines, for instance, first developed by Pasteur more than 100 years ago and refined and perfected since then. But vaccines are useless unless they are distributed and administered. This requires something approaching a sense of human solidarity and international justice. Sadly, these instincts seem – at least at the governmental, political, and bureaucratic level – to be in short supply.

Pasteur was a consummate scientist of his time. He brought the world into his laboratory, and then took the results back out to the world. He did not do this secretly, hoarding data with the misanthropic aim to make money, or to save face, or to make a name for himself. He worked in the open, and open to challenge.

Today, as scientists, we have another challenge, and that is to take our science into the world, out of our very fine and expensive laboratories (knowing, thanks to Pasteur, that they are always there to back us up). We need to ask questions that do not necessarily have laboratory answers, to stand in the midst of the maize and the coffee, the rabid dogs and the fleeing peasants, and to ask, simply: What is going on here, and what can we do about it? If the dogs are not vaccinated, why not? If there is no vaccine, then why not? If people are

dying, why? The way we answer questions such as these will define the quality of our science, and our humanity.

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THE ARTIST

Like most Tz’utuhil Mayan painters, Diego Isaias Hernandez Mendez of San Juan la Laguna learned to paint on his own without any formal schooling. Isaias, as he is known to his friends, certainly deserves the title of the most jovial of all the Tz’utuhil artists. Perhaps his joviality allows him to laugh at life’s accidents, something he specializes in painting. The mishaps might be a small everyday accident such as dropping the coffee berries one has spent the morning picking. At the other extreme, he paints natural disasters. One week after Hurricane Mitch passed through Central America, Isaias had painted three small paintings of Mitch washing away houses with people clinging to the roofs. This theme painted in a larger format won Isaias Hernandez first place in the Biennial of Paiz, Guatemala’s most prestigious art exhibition. His titles are often the most interesting of any of the Mayan artists. A painting of children gathering firewood is not titled *Leña (Firewood)*, but *Muchos niños no reciben estudios (Many children do not receive schooling)*. This makes one think: Why don’t the children receive schooling? Because their family is so poor that the parents take them out of school to go work so that the family can survive. Like many younger couples in San Juan la Laguna, Isaias lives with his wife, young son, and many dogs in a house built by Habitat for Humanity. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian chose one of his paintings for the opening exhibition at their new building in Washington. More information about the life and art of Diego Isaias Hernandez Mendez and other Tz’utuhil artists can be found at <http://www.artemaya.com>

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Un Susto de un Perro Rabioso (Fright Because of a Rabid Dog), by Diego Isaias Hernandez, 2003 (21” × 25”, oil on canvas).

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