

COMMENTARY

“Paraguay” (1968)



Donald Barthelme

(1931-1989)

I would be reluctant to say that “Paraguay” is the best of my stories because I hope that there are others that come as close to achieving whatever it is that I’m trying to achieve. But neither do I think it the worst of the eighty-some I’ve written. A cab driver in Boston last week told me a bit of Georgia folklore, the story of a father coming to the hospital to look for the first time at his newborn son and saying, “That boy’s so ugly we gone have to tie pork chops to his face to get the dawg to play with him.” I don’t feel this way about “Paraguay.” Ordinarily I would have used the pork chop story in a story, but since the cab driver was himself a writer, a Yale graduate in English, as it happened, I’m sure he will want to use it in one of his own beautiful works but probably won’t mind if I borrow it, temporarily, here.

What I like about “Paraguay” is the misuse of language and the tone. Mixing bits of this and that from various areas of life to make something that did not exist before is an oddly hopeful endeavor. The sentence “Electrolytic jelly exhibiting a capture ratio far in excess of standard is used to fix the animals in place” made me very happy--perhaps in excess of its merit. But there is in the world such a thing as electrolytic jelly; the “capture ratio” comes from the jargon of sound technology; and the animals themselves are a salad of the real and the invented. The flat, almost “dead” tone paradoxically makes possible an almost-lyricism. I think my Paraguay is an almost-beautiful place, and a better writer would probably have lingered longer there, perhaps abided at book length. But I am extremely nervous, and had to hurry on.

Every writer in the country can write a beautiful sentence, or a hundred. What I am interested in is the ugly sentence that is also somehow beautiful. I agree that this is a highly specialized enterprise, akin to the manufacture of merkins, say--but it’s what I do. Probably I have missed the point of the literature business entirely. But “Paraguay” is for me a hint of what I would like to do, if I could do it.

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Writer's Choice
ed. Rust Hills
(David McKay 1974)