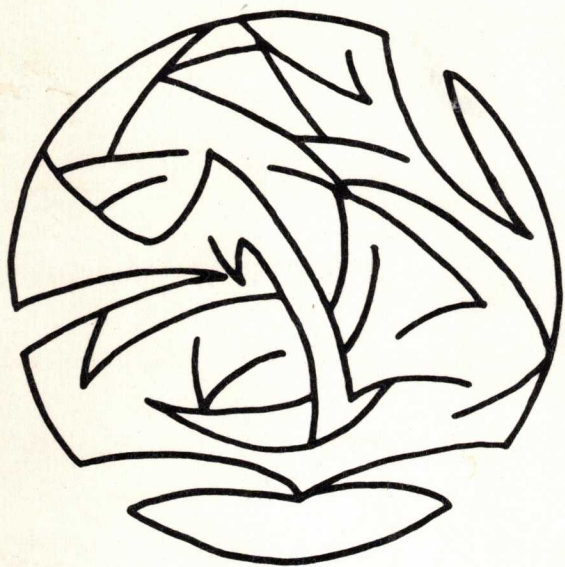




West Chester University

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DAEDALUS

Out Of Focus

The early morning mists mingled with our sweat as we struggled through the thick jungle underbrush. Ruiz, our small Peruvian guide, swiftly parted a trail through the ocean of green before us. He stopped every few minutes to mop the sweat off his forehead and curse the chattering monkeys who had been following us from above for the last three hours. Peter Hant checked his cameras constantly with the care of a watchmaker for his tools. Effortlessly, Hant strolled behind Ruiz, ducking occasionally to accommodate his large frame from the hanging vegetation and small vines that were too high for Ruiz to cut. I followed painfully, hoping for a breather, but I wasn't going to make it obvious to Hant. The son-of-a-bitch had to have about twenty-five years on me, and I'd be damned if he had to slow down because of me, even if he was more machine than man. Back in Lima, lounging poolside with the other journalists, I found this out.

The hotel in Lima wasn't a Hilton, but then again Lima wasn't Rio de Janeiro. It did have its points, though. The pool for one, and I wasn't the only foreigner to notice this asset. Every evening, after hours of speaking, or rather trying to speak the dialect of Spanish that is used in Lima, many journalists and photographers sat, disgusted with the daily ritual, gathered around the pool. Partly medicinal, these evenings offered comfort to the homesick and solace to the numerous alcoholics that were common in our profession. Also, to just hear a comment on how the Mets were doing helped us to forget the day's anxieties. It was on one of these evenings that I first met Peter Hant.

Most of us were there for one magazine or other after the fact. Everyone knew of the drug trafficking in the South American countries and of the atrocities of the warring drug lords and politicians, but we were here to maybe, just maybe, add a little insight or a new humanistic angle to this mess. Most of us had to read numerous travel pamphlets before arriving to help us familiarize ourselves with the country—except Peter Hant.

Hant was one of the first photo-journalists to arrive in South America or even Central America, for that matter. He spoke almost fluent Spanish and it had passed around the pool that he had married a native years ago, although no one had the nerve to ask him. This assignment was not exactly the highlight of our lives anyway, and we tried to do the best we could to forget about it by the pool, but Hant would just sit staring at a sunset long forgotten, sipping at a scotch and puffing slowly on a cigar. I brushed this off as Hant having a chip on his shoulder, but I was wrong. He was plain cold and closed to us. Night after night, not speaking a word to us or even seeming to acknowledge our presence, or not until one night when the monotony and the dead ends caught up and the booze wasn't cutting it.

Jim Bowen was a photo-journalist from Chicago. Although he was a little cocky and he dressed like Indiana Jones, he was all right. I mean, some of his pictures were pretty good. Well, at least the few pictures that he had taken so far. Jim was hitting the tequila pretty well when the conversation turned towards the dark-skinned native women of the area. The discussion was bringing on a few laughs and helping us to forget the day's failures when Jim mistakenly included Hant.

Jimmy, laughing at a snide remark about the sexual preferences of the local women, turned and slurred, "Yo, Hant, you should know. Do they or don't they? You did marry one, didn't you?" I almost choked on my drink. There was silence. Just an empty silence, you know, the kind of silence with weight. One minute the numerous clinks of glasses and sound of laughter, and the next, you could hear the mosquitos dive-bombing the small poolside lights. Everyone was waiting—for what, we didn't know, but we did know it wasn't for Jim's nervous laughter a minute later that came out a little too loud. "Aw, he don't know!" The laughter slowly resumed, a little too slowly if you asked me, but it ended quickly as a huge fist drove into Jimmy's head with a meaty thump. Silence again, followed with a few of the journalists remembering that they had a story due. Hant then picked Jimmy's unconscious form up and threw him into the pool while we stood shocked by the quickness of the assault. Finished, Hant turned and headed for his room. Jimmy surfaced sputtering and screaming, mostly at us, "Son of a bitch! You fucking machine! You photographed your own fucking wife being killed! You cold hearted fucker!" All heads turned towards Hant's retreating back. I thought I saw it stiffen for a moment, but the darkness enveloped it a minute later and silence answered Jimmy's accusations.

The following week the rumors and hatred of Hant grew, fueled by the stories of how Hant had photographed his wife being executed by guerillas and had sold it to his magazine. I don't know whether I believed any of the stories or all of them, but it was easier to go with the flow. Besides, it seemed everyone needed to focus their resentment of being here on something or someone. Hant was just the man. Blond with blue eyes, Hant towered over everyone with his six-four height. His age didn't seem to impede him any, only adding to his roughness and separating him from us more. Sometimes he looked at someone, just looked as if he was measuring that person up for something or judging. After the incident, no one talked about Hant when he was around, which wasn't often. That was why I was surprised one day when he knocked on my door.

"Come in," I stammered through some shaving cream as I quickly tried to finish. I heard the door open and turned to see Hant dressed in khaki with four cameras hanging off him. He stared at me for a moment and stated more than asked, "Need a story?"

Wiping my face with a towel, I stared back at him confused, "Where? And why me?"

Hant talked while focusing on a palm tree out the window, "a small village ten miles from here and you're the least of the assholes around here."

I choked back an angry retort and thought about my story so far, the effects of too much vodka on an empty stomach in Peru, and thought better of it, "What's

the story?"

Hant turned from the window and walked out the door saying over his shoulder, "a small village drug dispute, I'm leaving in ten minutes."

I wanted to laugh at his back. I wanted to tell him to fuck off, but the unused typewriter caught my eye and pissed me off more. So I packed instead.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sweat stinging my eyes. "Hant!" I yelled and stopped as soon as he turned and glared at me. He walked back to me and asked me in a lowered voice, "What are you trying to do, tell everyone within ten miles that we're here!"

I answered forcibly in a lowered voice. "I gotta take a break or I'm done!" Hant stared at me for a second, taking in the beads of sweat running down my face, judging me. He turned and spit out a fast sentence in Spanish to Ruiz. Ruiz flung something back in Spanish, laughing. Hant turned back to me with an expression on his face that I didn't recognize, a smile. Then he sat checking his cameras. "What'd he say?" I asked accusingly. Hant dug a cigar out of his breast pocket. Lighting it before he answered, "he said that we'd be there already if you were a woman." At this, Hant broke into another grin and took a drink from his canteen. I stiffened at the remark, remembering childhood taunts about my size and weight and my delicate features, but held back any comments I had. Instead, I tied a bandanna around my forehead, pushed back my dark hair, and started walking up the trail.

We arrived outside the village a little before dusk. I was going straight for the first shack when Hant dropped me, hard, with a snap of his right arm. I regained my senses and thought better of complaining when I heard a strange keening sound that hurt my ears and knotted my stomach. It sounded faintly familiar. When I was about eleven years old, I lived in New York City and having nothing better to do I used to hang on my street corner. Well, one night a bunch of kids caught a stray cat and lit it on fire. I could never forget that damn cat, it's fur burnt and smelling of gasoline and the sound it made lying there. Little mewing sounds that made us grit our teeth and didn't stop until it died. The smell and the feeling of fear I felt that day came back to me all at once in that moment. I noticed Hant and Ruiz looking at each other then backtracking into the jungle, grabbing me along the way. Silently, we made our way through the bush, not bothering to use the machete. We stopped about a hundred yards from the village on a slight rise or hill. The village was a little below us, and we had a clear view of the center space between the shelters or huts. I vomited quietly when I realized where the keening sound was coming from and what the four men were doing to a man tied upside down to a post. My mind refused to admit to itself that the red lump hanging was still alive or that the four men were still cutting strips off of it.

Through this, Hant photographed like a machine, loading and reloading. I marveled in a dull, dazed kind of way at how he focused, shot, and cursed when a camera jammed, then refocused. Ruiz sat watching the scene disinterestedly, scanning the hills behind us. I sat scared and angry at these two men who seemed untouched by the sounds of death. It was two hours later when the sounds stopped and the laughing men gathered their rifles and prepared to leave. One of them

noticed something and turned sharply our way, looking. "Shit, he saw the glint off my camera," Hant said as he got up, "Let's go!"

I saw one of the four men speaking into a walkie-talkie, then all hell broke loose. The four started shooting at us, and I heard the sound of a truck coming down the road. Ruiz ran ahead of Hant with me following both of them, panting. The noise of our pursuers diminished and we stopped. Breathing hard with my back against a tree, I waited for a bullet to enter my back. Hant looked at me and turned to Ruiz, quietly whispering to him. Ruiz nodded, clapping Hant on the back. Ruiz looked at me and smiled, "Adios, compadre." Then he ran down the side of the hill into a valley. "Where the fuck's he going," I stammered, "he'll be killed!" Hant smiled and said, "He's got a better chance without us." Hant then broke off in the opposite direction and I followed, trying not to stumble. We stopped and climbed a small ridge overlooking the valley and spotted Ruiz being run down by a dozen soldiers. "Shit!" Hant booked down the side of the ravine screaming something in Spanish. Whatever it was, it worked for half the soldiers started to chase Hant. Hant ran up the ravine again, followed by a few shots, screaming, "Let's go!" I quickly followed, but noticed the spreading stain on Hant's shirt. He didn't stop until the sounds of the pursuit were gone.

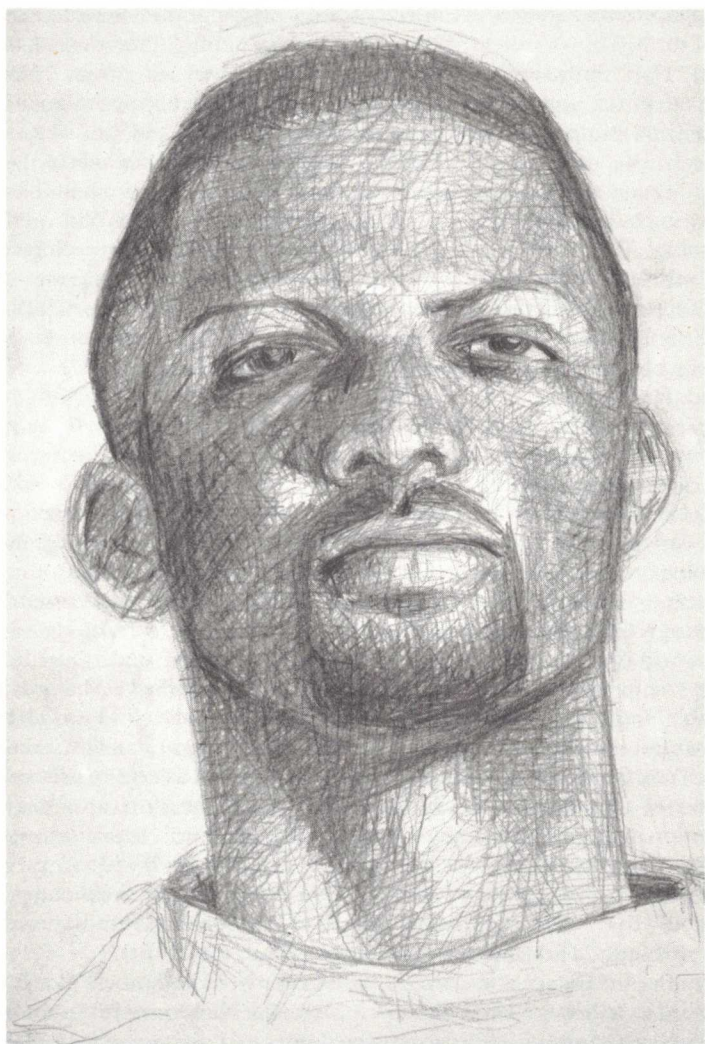
We found a small grotto and stayed there to make sure it was safe. Hant was breathing hard and when he sat down he winced, seeming to notice for the first time the bleeding wound. I opened my canteen and poured some water on his wound. He didn't notice me, just stared at the sun losing itself among the trees. Then he seemed to focus on me. "Paul," Hant spoke slowly through some mucous that oozed out the side of his mouth. I was nervous and jittery, spilling more of the water on the ground than on Hant's wound. I swallowed slowly, seeing Hant for the first time. Laying there looking small and confused with the blood darkening his lips, he was somehow more human, more vulnerable.

"Come on, Hant, a couple more miles, get your ass up!" I yelled at him more from fear than anger. The night was approaching fast now, and I cursed God for its timing. It was pitch black and starting to come more alive with the sounds of things swinging through the trees or rustling through the undergrowth. "Paul, you're safe for now," Hant whispered. I lay back and lashed at the only person available, "whadaya mean I'm safe now, we're safe, shithead!" I was blabbering like an idiot now, needing to make something concrete to stand on, even just to bitch. "You Goddamn son of a bitch, you brought me out here so you could take pictures of that...that," I was shaking Hant by the shirt now, taking the frustration of the last six months out on him. Then I noticed he was wincing and I stopped. I let go, ashamed, my hands wet and sticky with his blood.

"Paul," Hant whispered through his own fluids, "I took the pictures so that they would live!" He coughed and I noticed his eyes glazing, but still he seemed to plead with me, "They must be remembered, Paul, they must!"

I sat after his silence and cried, ashamed for myself and others like Jim, who pretended to be better. "Hant, I'm sorry," I cried as I held on to his limp shirt that was slowly turning cold. Silence answered me.

The sun blinded me out of the darkness of sleep and the sounds of the jungle surrounded me. I took Hant's cameras and started to dig a hole with a branch, but stopped. Over the night, nature's trashmen had been working as I slept. Hant's eye sockets and mouth had given shelter to large black ants who welcomed a stream of other insects. I sat staring for a minute and did all I could do for him. Although my vision blurred, the lense remained clear and the clicks of the camera cried out into the silence as I stepped back to get a better angle.



Portrait #1/Tetsako Hirai