

IT RISES OR FALLS  
DEPENDING ON WHETHER YOU'RE COMING OR GOING.  
IF YOU ARE LEAVING, IT'S UPHILL;  
BUT AS YOU ARRIVE IT'S DOWNHILL'<sup>1</sup>  
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A series of interviews with antique dealers in the Nieuwe Spiegelstraat in Amsterdam develops into a journey throughout different periods of time and place. The antique dealer is a peculiar character who can legitimate what is valuable, what should be kept, and how an object can become a status symbol. This narrative is mixed with a particular event in Mexican archaeology: the movement of the colossal stone statue of Tlaloc, a rain divinity, who lay for centuries in a dry stream bed in the village of Coatlinchan, thirty miles from Mexico City. On April 16th 1964, he was removed and transported on the back of a giant, specially built trailer to his present location, the entrance to the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

**1** It is raining in Mexico City. Tlaloc, the rain's divinity, is entering the capital. The storm is not comparable with the ones of the rainy season. This shower is a punishment from Tlaloc to the people who dared to move him from his original place.

Tlaloc, the gigantic monolith weighting 167 tons, stayed lying on his back for fifteen centuries in a dry streambed in the village of Coatlinchan, 30 miles from Mexico City. The sculpture, built between the fourth and sixth centuries A.D.—the biggest monolith in the Americas—always attracted the attention of curious people, tourists and foreign researchers. It was at the beginning of the nineteenth century when archaeologists defined him as Tlaloc, the divinity of rain.

**2** “Can you send me that one in a fax, please? It's the same number as this... yes, ok... It's very difficult to get new pieces, but when you are in Amsterdam, come and visit my shop (...) So, there is a lot of talking about ancient cultures, but people are not thinking very well; they think that I first go to Egypt, to dig, to do the stuff, and then I go to Mexico with my shovel, and then I go to Peru, you know. And then you hear the stories

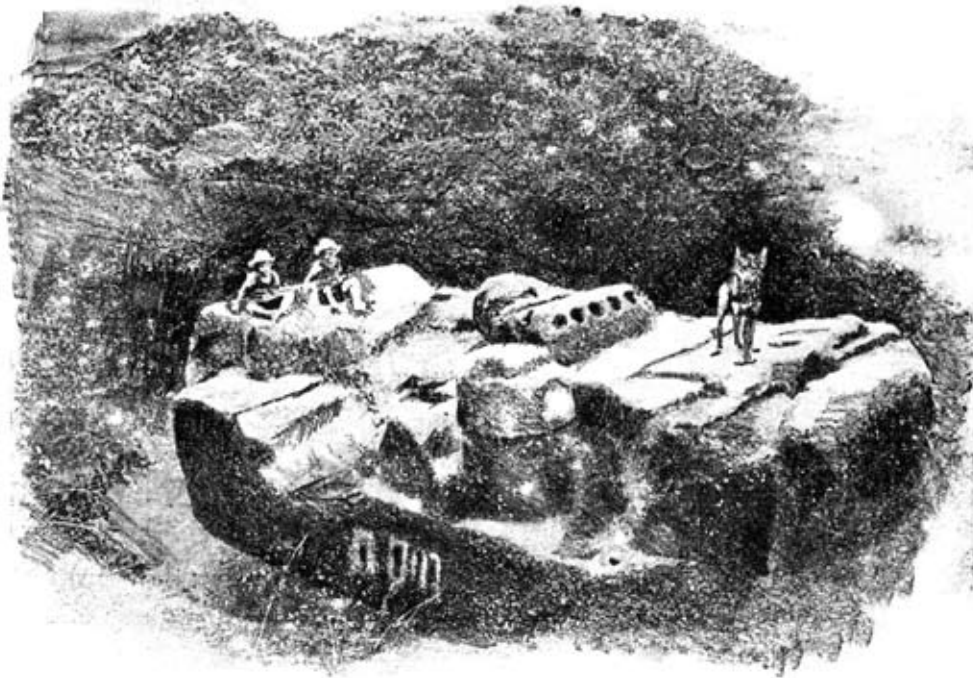


Fig. 59

<sup>1</sup> Sentence taken from *Pedro Páramo*, by Juan Rulfo. Rulfo, Juan. *Pedro Páramo*. Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2005.

from the museums, that all is illegal. They say that, but I want to know the real story about those things, because I don't know that and I am in the business. Something happens always, but it's not a lot; maybe here and there something is happening, but not as people believe. Because where is it, where is the stuff? I don't see it (...) That's not stealing, we were called amateur archaeologists, and we were digging, and we had a lot of fun with it—maybe that's why I became an antique dealer—but not for the money, because it was a lot of work, and we never found treasures, just pottery and this and that. And a lot of the things I found are now in the museums, go to the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen at the Archaeological department, half of the things you will see there, come from my hands.”

**3** On Thursday, April 16th, 1964, it was moved to the museum of anthropology in Mexico City. The authorities negotiated the statue for a school, a health center, a local museum, and a replica of the divinity. Four decades later, it's clear that almost all of those promises remained unfulfilled.

**4** “The real feeling for art is, art can be very much on the street (...) not on the street, not on the street, if you are in the business for many years you know where to go, I buy from private people, at auctions, from colleagues (...) mainly through auctions, collections or people inheriting, and who have themselves nothing; occasionally through Africa, but there is not much left, already when I started you could find just third or fourth quality objects (...) There are always families who want to sell objects they have at home, and we see if they have any valuable items, and then we buy them and restore them.”

**5** There were several attempts by previous governments to move the monolith, but it was at the end of 1963 when the machinery started to arrive. This time the government came for the stone. After a big maneuver, the sculpture was lifted, ready for the move.

At that moment, the rebellion started. The inhabitants of Coatlinchan tried three times to prevent it from being moved. They broke the metal structure holding the enormous monolith so it fell again in its original place. They stopped and hit, in vain, the trailer and drivers. They also damaged the wheels of the platform; the children were lying on the middle of the road to stop the vehicles. The day after, the army occupied the town, staying until the end of the operation.

**6** “My clients are getting old and they stopped buying, and young people are not interested, they buy fake furniture which looks nice, and they have a big apartment where they hang huge paintings from the wall, or prints or whatever with no value, but it looks nice; and they like to travel—that's how young people spend their money—they travel to faraway horrible countries (...) I know eight countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Kenya, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Cameroon, Gabon (...) I travel not that much, the dealers send me the pictures and I say ‘bring it to me’ and if I don't like it I ask them to take it back, so the traveling is not that important as it was before. You can actually buy items through the Internet; if you buy a sofa it is possible, but if you want to buy a cupboard it's very hard because you need to see it, you need to stand in front of it. They make very nice, beautiful pictures, but reality is not always so beautiful.”

**7** Because the resistance continued, in a couple of days they built a school and a health center. The headlines read: “Tlaloc raising a thunderstorm.” The testimony of one of the inhabitants reads: “It is possible that through the veins of many of us, there is still blood running from our ancestors, people who made the sculpture. I understand the importance of archaeology and all that, but Tlaloc belongs to us.”

**8** “The real interest, that's gone: twenty, thirty years ago you had sons of doctors—for example—and the father collected Rotterdam silver, so they collected it as well, and they knew everything about it; but that's a little bit gone, now they want to have one piece, one decorative piece, and they don't really—they don't recognize it anyway because that takes a lot of time—but they can't imagine that the piece comes from the eighteenth century, for example, and that it was on the Louis XVI or Louis XV period, and that it was used for something quite different than now. So that's gone, the history idea. But it can be helped! Because they don't even learn when Napoleon lived (...) I think life is influenced by so many different things, that we need to force ourselves to stand still and look at things carefully. Everything seems to be fading out. I was already in my thirties when I recognized or understood what history is, so I am not sure if young people understand how short history is. Now we think that 2,000 years is very much, but if you count, 2000 years is nothing but thirty times your father and his father and his father and his father. So if you speak about the seventeenth century, it's just eight grandfathers before you! History still gets burned every second (...) They don't learn anything at school in

Holland anyway—they don't know anything about history—if you mention famous Dutch people from the seventeenth century they say, "Who's that? Never heard of him." So they are not interested in the items either. Sometimes when they see it they say, "Oh, how is it possible that you can still buy these things, from the seventeenth century?" They don't realize what's going on in the world; they want just music and drugs.

**9** At 6:00 am on April the 16th, 1964, the journey of the god began. Operation Tlaloc lasted close to twenty-four hours. Under the custody of one hundred soldiers in line, lead by a real army of anthropologists, engineers, and mechanics, transporting the gigantic monolith started. The experts responsible for moving the sculpture weighing 167 tons lifted it on top of a powerful transport with seventy-two wheels, with tires specially designed to hold the tremendous pressure of this colossal mass.

Two powerful trailers with diesel engines of great horsepower constituted the moving force, and a powerful bulldozer also made a great push forward, to achieve a speed of five kilometers per hour.

**10** "The view has changed—many of the old collectors traveled for a special reason to Africa: as social workers, in the army, with the church, or whatever; but they had a personal relationship with Africa, and started like that to collect.

"So there is no way to build up a relationship, I always say 'Good morning Sir,' and the next time they come I say, 'Good Morning Sir.'

"What's your name?"

"My name is Nick."

"My name is Hank."

"...and then they go again. The relationship with my clients, I always keep distance; the moment I get friendly with them, I am the one who is in the bad position, because then I need to give them everything very cheap. At an auction, they say, 'I want that, so don't beat on it', but then I am their slave and I don't want that. When I am at an auction and there is something I like and you like it too, I don't know you, at that auction I don't know you. But they get angry, 'I told you, I wanted it!' and I answer back 'I wanted it also.'

"How much is it?"

"300 euro."

"Can you give me a better price?"

"350 euro."

"And they look at me with a strange gaze, and I say, 'Why it should be always better for you, why it can't be better for me?' Then they smile and they are funny, and usually they buy it.

"So, that's the relationship I have with my clients."

**11** The inhabitants of Coatlinchan, in the middle of the cutting morning cold, said goodbye in silence to the god that stayed with them for centuries. There were no incidents, but rather an atmosphere of certain melancholy within and around the inhabitants of the region.

**12** "If they can feed their family for one month selling a piece of wood that they have somewhere in the corner, they will sell it, because they just believe half in the things anymore. They are not stupid—if ten people want to buy something like this, they will make you things like this. This means, the things that Europe has considered as beautiful or strong. It is maybe not how they perceived it, but Europe wants it, so let's make it.

"There is a borderline—minimum fifty years—because already in the 1950s, everything started to become 'modern,' that means that Europe had more influence.

"In the cities already before, but in the villages it started around that time. So everything after the fifties, I call it a 'question mark.' Is it used, is it not used? Is it authentic?"

**13** The transportation was realized slowly, throughout the six-kilometer road that was made especially for the deity.

It was night when Tlaloc arrived in Mexico City, yet 25,000 people awaited him in the main square Zócalo. The city was prepared as if for a fiesta; lights were on everywhere, traffic was stopped, and the streets were thronged. Ironically, the arrival of the rain god was greeted by the heaviest storm ever recorded for this ordinarily dry season.

Since the monolith has been gone, it stopped raining in Coatlinchan; the clouds become heavy and grey, but that's all. On the contrary, in the capital, even the streets get flooded.

**14** "In education, they should tell people to listen much more to their own taste, to be convinced about their own way of living, and not just follow what the rest is doing (...) Anything I like is my specialty, I am interested in the things I like, and the things I don't like I don't

care for them (...) It is always when you really have achieved something, when you have done something, it gives you a good feeling, of self respect: I am someone, I can do something, but people, they feel bad, they feel they miss something, they don't know what, they are not capable of doing anything, and they lose themselves in... shit, too much.

"I think it is... it is generally a decline in behavior.

"So, what you see is that people are always profiling, showing their profile. They are in a party, with a glass of wine and they say 'I have just being to the Van Gogh Museum, and I like it so much!' That's what they say, and when you come into their houses there is absolutely nothing! And that is what I hate so much (...) There is always a risk, you can't predict anything—it is also a luxury to buy things you like—so if the economy is bad, that's a risk too, but if things are going all right again? I can't look in the future; I can only do my best."

**15** There is a growing migration. Young men started to leave, one by one, to "the other side." Nowadays, just women, children and old people remain in town. The locals affirm that there are people from "the outside" arriving. People who don't remember the times when everything was green and the landscape was full of trees. People from "the outside", don't understand the importance of Tlaloc. Not only because it gave some money to the community, in the sense that plenty of tourists were visiting, but it also in the sense that made them feel important, unique, with an identity.

**16** "Officially, everything older than fifty years, that is brought to Europe after 1973, needs papers from the country where it comes from. But... who can say now that this has come in 1970 or in 1990? If somebody wants the shit, he will just put two names in between: collection this, collection that.

"The law exists, but the law is not checked, not for us, not for them."



Fig. 60