Something Rotten in the State of São Paulo

Politics and Style in Latin America's Biggest Megacity

Abstract

Megacities are cities with over ten million residents. In developing countries particularly, they operate differently to the cities which flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These new megacities have grown rapidly and without apparent control, spreading outwards, often illegally, and with little thought given to the public space so valued by earlier urban planners. Their sheer uncontrolled size, as well as the breadth and variety of experiences they contain, present different formal challenges to a writer aspiring to capture the contemporary urban landscape. One question this

thesis sets out to investigate is just how fiction writers are responding to the new stylistic demands of the world's biggest urban hubs. A key finding has been how central the politics of inequality are to the formal choices made in the two novels I have showcased.

In both my critical and creative components, I've concentrated on São Paulo, where my first child was born and where my husband was raised. In my critical thesis I have used key urbanist texts from the city to analyse local contemporary fiction, focussing on two award-winning books that offer very different depictions of the megacity: *There Were Many Horses* by Luiz Ruffato and Sheyla Smanioto's *Desesterro.* By analysing these texts side by side, I hope to illuminate some of the different ways in which São Paulo writers are responding stylistically and formally to their enormous, mutated version of a city, as well showing just how critical politics and literary activism is to both Ruffato and Smanioto, as well as other contemporary São Paulo writers.

My creative component, *June in São Paulo,* is a novel based on my own experience of first coming to São Paulo as a young journalist with a new Brazilian boyfriend, staying with his family in a small apartment on the outskirts of the city, living in a neighbourhood that was not very safe, hours away from the museums, bars, parks and general city life of the centre. In a similar way to my critical component, the novel questions how a megacity citizen, living generally a more isolated life than they would in older, traditionally modelled cities with large amounts of public space, can capture accurately the experience of living closely with millions of others in unequal conditions. My answer, which drew inspiration from Ruffato and Smanioto, was to anchor down into the individual, drawing out from personal stories the urgent political challenges presented by the turbulent and often traumatic new landscape of the megacity.

The way in which the colonial history of Brazil, a country founded on illegality, inequality and violence, is embodied in the contemporary megacity architecture of São Paulo, and also in urban writer's responses to this cityscape, is one of the final conclusions of this thesis.

Word Count: 99, 905

Table of Contents

Introduction

In 2007, the human condition changed. We ceased to be a mostly rural race. Most of the world, from then on, has lived in cities. Urbanization, particularly in developing countries, is happening at a speed 'unprecedented in human history'.[1] This poses new challenges to writers of cities and particularly writers living in the enormous urban hubs of more than 10 million people called megacities. What formal responses are there to the grave inequality fostered by privatised megacity architecture, for example, or to the isolation caused by a new lack of public space, or to the simple sheer size of the cityscape, the possibility and variety of experiences that could be captured when trying to illuminate life in a megacity?

First coined by the urbanist Janice Perlman in the 1970s the term megacity now defines cities of more than 10 million people.[2] Size is not subtle, but it captures well how quickly and how much our urban landscape has changed. The first cities of antiquity were tiny, with populations of a few thousand, or in rare cases, hundreds of thousands.[3] At the beginning of the 19th century Paris sheltered just over 500,000 people, although the population increased sharply in the years before Baudelaire's birth, rising to over a million by 1846.[4] The first megacity was New York in 1950 and since then they have steadily

[1] Davis, Mike, *Planet of the Slums,* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), p 5.
[2] Caves, W Roger, *Encyclopedia of the City* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p 454.
[3] Woolf, Greg, *The Life and Death of Ancient Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p 13.
[4] Stovell, Tyler, *The Rise of the Paris Redbelt,* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1990), p 17.

added to their ranks. One in eight people now live in the world's 33 megacities. There are expected to be another ten by 2030.[5]

Megacities often develop differently to older cities. Whereas the European capitals of the 19th century were triumphs of 'public enterprise' and 'co-ordinated public enterprises'[6] urban growth today is often disorderly with flow of resources and privatised, securitised space becoming conceptually more important than public, civic architecture.[7] Shenzhen, for example, the youngest and fastest growing megacity in the world, encapsulates the term 'generic city', coined by architect Rem Koolhaas to describe a city without history that develops randomly, without planning, regulation or public vision.[8] The peripheries of some megacities have spread so far, with so little control, that they have joined up with another periphery to create great urban corridors and in these cases rural folk do not migrate to cities, the city moves to them. The already enormous city of São Paulo has joined up with several nearby cities including Osasco, Campinas, Santos to create a single macro-metropolis. This great urban beast has not stopped there, growing further up the coast towards Rio de Janeiro, around 500 kilometres away, to create what is now known as the Sao Paulo/Rio Extended Metropolitan Region, which, in 2003, had a population of thirty-six million,[9] nearly twice the world population at the time of the French Revolution.[10] When Baudelaire spoke of 'enormous cities' could he ever possibly imagined anything such as this?[11] Possibly not, but Baudelaire's call for a new more supple language to evoke life in colossal world cities remains true for writers today as it did when he wrote about Paris. It was the new challenge of capturing the enormity of São Paulo as well as the extreme disparate experiences the city contained that first inspired Luiz Ruffato, one of the two *Paulista* writers this thesis investigates. His experimentation with a jump-cut vignette structure to

---

[5] United Nations, *World Urbanisation Prospects: The 2018 Revisions,* (Online, 2018), https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-KeyFacts.pdf
[6] Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition,* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), p 302.
[7] Graham and Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition,* p 2 – 3.
[8] Ouroussof, Nicolai, 'The New New City', *The New York Times Magazine,* 8 June, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/magazine/08shenzhen-t.html.
[9] Hamilton, Tolosa, 'The Rio/Sao Paulo Extended Metropolitan Region: A quest for global integration', *The Annals of Regional Science*, 37, (2003), 479-500, (p 479).
[10] Davis, Mike, *Planet of the Slums,* p 5.
[11] Berman, Marshall, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p 148.

create a myriad of experiences is now one of the celebrated hallmarks of his novel *Eram Muitos Cavalos.* The huge distances between the periphery of the city and the centre similarly informed the form of the second novel investigated here, *Desesterro,* which evokes the isolation of the poor on the edges of São Paulo by anchoring down not just in one neighbourhood, but in one singular lane and one singular hut.

A significant amount of the technical challenges for writers trying to capture city life have changed over the years but some have also stayed the same. The first cities were built upon the riverplains of Sumer, a Southern region of what is now Iraq, around 4000 BCE. The actual task of putting words down permanently was the first hurdle to overcome and the city helped with this – specialised crafts which took time to learn such as stone carving, pottery and writing were supported by rulers. It was in the city of Urak, on clay tablets, that the world's oldest narrative poem, *Gilgamesh,* was written, set in the city itself. The poem explores many modern urban preoccupations – friendship, status, society, and even what Baudelaire's flâneur would perhaps call *ennui.*[12] Thousands of years later critic Marshall Berman, writing in 80s New York, covered much of the same ground as this epic poem by using the dual vision of Paris created in the works of Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire to explore what it meant to be modern, and these two men still have great influence on how writers approach cities today. A feminist reading of Baudelaire's flâneur, for example, *Flâneuse,* inspired one of 2017's most lauded books on the city, in which author Laura Elkin reclaims the flâneur for women, whilst Teju Cole's 2012 novel *Open City,* set in New York, follows clearly in the footsteps of the flâneur with a narrator who walks all over the city, observing and watching its streets, its public spaces and parks in much the same way that Benjamin's leisurely Parisian stroller had done just over a century before.[13]

However, whilst Baudelaire's flâneur is still revered by megacity writers such as Ruffato - who says he wants the flaneur for himself - with observation of fellow citizens at the core of his novel *Eram Muito Cavalos*, he and other megacity writers face a completely different urban landscape to

[12] Woolf, Greg, *The Life and Death of Ancient Cities,* p 60.
[13] Scholes, L, 'Flaneuse by Lauren Elkin Review - wandering women', *The Guardian,* 25 July, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/25/flaneuse-women-walk-city-paris-new-york-tokyo-venice-london-review-lauren-elkin.

that of Cole's New York or Elkin's Paris. In many of the newer megacities, a good walk is virtually impossible. São Paulo, for example, has an increasing number of neighbourhoods without any sidewalks at all. The infamous shopping mall, Daslu, could only be entered by car or by helicopter, a form of transport so popular in the city that Uber now run a taxi helicopter fleet.[14] This thesis aims to build on the study of urban literature, and in particular the work of Berman, Benjamin and Baudelaire, by investigating how writers are responding technically and formally to this new landscape. Both the novels I will investigate respond to lack of pavements in different ways, for example. In Ruffato's *Eram Muitos Cavalos*, street walking becomes a sign of madness, whilst in Smanioto's *Desesterro*, characters simply stop moving around, staying locked in the same neighbourhood as if it was an isolated village as opposed to situated in a contemporary urban space. These two novels - Luiz Ruffato's *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos* and Sheyla Smanioto's *Desesterro* – are both set in São Paulo, the city in which my husband was born and grew up, where I lived for some years and where my first child was born. I hope, with the help of local urbanists and historians, to show how, whilst these two novels are formally, stylistically, and linguistically very different, the techniques of both writers have been formed in response to the significant challenges that representing in fiction a megacity such as São Paulo presents. [15]

…..……

Son of an illiterate washerwoman and a semi-illiterate popcorn seller, Brazilian novelist Luiz Ruffato more than defies the status quo of one of the most unequal countries in the world. His debut novel, set

[14] Schmidt, B, 'Uber Lets You Hail a Helicopter in Brazil for 63$', *Bloomberg,* June, 2016, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-06-21/uber-lets-you-hail-a-helicopter-in-brazil-for-63.
[15] Because *Desesterro* has not yet been officially translated I will use the Portuguese titles for both books. *Eles Eram Muito Cavalos* has been translated into English as *There Were Many Horses* and I will reference this translation in footnotes.

in São Paulo, exploded Brazil's literary scene in 2001, winning almost all major prizes that year. In the 20 years since *Eram Muitos Cavalos* was published it has been critically acclaimed as one of the most important novels in contemporary Brazilian literature,[16] lauded for its 'kaleidoscopic' experimental form - a myriad of separate vignettes of life over a single day in Sao Paulo - as well as its unflinching denouncement of what Margarite Itamar Harrison calls an 'an inexorably unjust society'.[17] Ruffato says the book was inspired by São Paulo and his depiction of the urban landscape is central to many readings of *Eram Muitos Cavalos*. Regina Cristina Rocha, for example, compares Mario Andrade's seminal modernist poems inspired by the city with what she calls Ruffato's post-utopian São Paulo.[18] Leila Lehnen concentrates on urban violence and exclusion.[19] I would like to build on this work by reading the novel through a specifically urbanist lens to analyse how much the megacity environment formed the stylistic, thematic and formal choices made by Ruffato. Futhermore, by comparing the fiction of *Eram Muitos Cavalos* with urban anthropologist Teresa Caldeira's study of crime and segregation in São Paulo, *City of Walls*, published in the same year, I hope to show that these choices were made not simply in response to the general malaise of contemporary city life, but to a very particular era of upheaval in São Paulo's history as a megacity.

São Paulo can sometimes appear in critical readings of the novel as a generalised urban dystopia.[20] Leonora Paula, for example, uses the novel as a critical space to make sense of trends in globalization whilst Itamar Harrison personifies Ruffato's city as 'ruthlessly all-consuming…literally swallowing people up'.[21] Internationally acclaimed architect, academic and social activist Raquel Rolnik presents a more dispassionate and detailed picture of the city in her urban history of São Paulo,

---

[16] Paula, Leonora. "*Eles eram muitos cavalos*: Challenging the Regulating Fiction of the Global City." *Romance Notes*, 54, (2014), 95-102, (p 95).

[17] Itamar Harrison, Marguerite. 'São Paulo lightning: Flashes of the City in Luiz Ruffato's *Eram Muitos Cavalos, Luso-Brazilian review,* 42, (2006), 150-164, (p 151).

[18] Rocha, Rejane Cristina, 'As formas do real: a representação da cidade em *Eles eram muitos cavalos', Estudos de Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea*, 39, (2012), 107-127, (p107).

[19] Lehnen, Leila, 'Os não e paços da metrópole: espaço urbano e violência social em Eles eram muitos cavalos, de Luiz Ruffato', in *Uma Cidade em Camadas,* ed. Itamar Harrison, Marguerite, (São Paulo, Editora Horizonte, 2007), 77 – 92, (p77).

[20] One exception to this is Sofia Beal's chapter on failed public works in *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos* in Beal, Sofia, *Brazil under Construction: Fiction and Public Works,* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) although the author's investigation is weighted heavily towards literary theory as opposed to historical urbanist readings of São Paulo.

[21] Rolnik, Raquel. *Territórios em conflito,* (São Paulo: Três Estrelas, 2017), p 10. Translations are my own.

Territórios em conflito. It's a history whose mission is to reveal how the seemingly 'un-captained ship' of São Paulo is actually 'the product of a series of models of city and urban management that were implemented to manage a place that went, in 100 years, between 1854 and 1964, from a city of 30 thousand to more than 2.5 million, arriving at 10 million people' over the next fifty years. [22] I hope to take on Rolnik's mission, at least in part, for myself and to dissect those first general impressions of the megacity as a ruthless monster swallowing us all up. Although the São Paulo of *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos* appears chaotic and almost completely unnavigable, its citizens buffeted along as corks in a storm, Rolnik shows us that what the reader is actually experiencing is one chapter in the story of a continually developing city whose evolution has been 'directly influenced by political choice, taken in fundamental periods of the city's history'.[23] These political choices are a key driver in the formal response to the city by Ruffato and also the second writer I will investigate, Sheyla Smanioto, and both their works are threaded through with political and literary activism.

Published just over a decade and a half after *Eram Muitos Cavalos,* Sheyla Smanioto's 2016 *Desesterro* follows the fortunes of four generations of women between the windy backlands town of Vilaboinha and a poor periphery neighbourhood of São Paulo. It is a debut novel and just like *Eram Muitos Cavalos,* won some of Brazil's biggest literary prizes the year it was published. It is a remarkably different book to *Eram Muitos Cavalos* but was similarly shaped by the megacity environment in which Sheyla grew up. However, whilst Ruffato's stylistic choices were made in response to a moment in time in the city, Smanioto's form and content are inspired by the more overarching story of how São Paulo became a megacity, by the millions of people that journeyed from the surrounding countryside and from Europe, exploding the city's size over a small number of years. She says herself that migrations to and within São Paulo were an inspiration for the book and the effect of[24] imagining what life was like for people before they came to the city means different choices from Ruffato regarding the way she depicts the city. And example of this is her linguistic

[22] Rolnik, Raquel. *Territórios em conflito,* p 10.

[23] Rolnik, Raquel. *Territórios em conflito,* p 10.
[24] Smanioto, Sheyla, in *Megacity,* ed. Kathleen McCaul Moura, (Norwich: Boiler House Press, 2020), p 272.

styling of São Paulo as a sanctuary, albeit a poverty stricken sanctuary, which provides a counterpoint to Ruffato's angry depiction of the megacity as a monstrous place of severe inequality.

Whilst *Eram Muitos Cavalos* is completely of its moment, illuminating a specifically low point in São Paulo's life cycle, stating in the very first line of the book the exact 24 hours over which the novel takes place: 'May 9, 2000. Tuesday', *Desesterro* offers a portrait of São Paulo within a context of Brazil's history of colonialism, slavery and ruthlessly feudal countryside. The title *Desesterro* is a made-up word which means, roughly, to unbury and one of the book's profound purposes is to expose the crimes of Brazil's rural past in the contemporary city, just as anthropologist James Holston relates the country's history of 'exclusion, inequality, illegality, violence' to the way in which São Paulo's periphery developed.[25] Coming from a family of migrants, Smanioto herself says that *Desesterro* was her way of living her 'ancestry' and that 'Literature is a way of praying for all the forgotten souls' of Brazil's violent history - the murdered black youth, the tortured, the Indians.[26]

Smanioto transcended her upbringing in what locals call – *a peripheria* – the periphery - to become a prize-winning novelist and many of the formal choices made in *Desesterro* are also a result of Smanioto's experience in the poor handmade neighbourhoods which ring the central city. When thinking about exactly what stylistic challenges the new megacity presents for an urban writer today, it is important to pay some attention to these outskirts. The precarious marginal edges of São Paulo are typical of new megacities, with slums being one of the defining features of 21st urban life. In 2003, when UN-Habitat released their first report on slum dwelling, they estimated that 1 billion people, 32 percent of the world's population lived in informal settlements.[27] Mike Davis sums up this new megacity landscape succinctly in his 2007 investigation into the new urban margins, *Planet of the Slums:*

[25] Holston, James, *Insurgent Citizenship,* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p 6

[26] Eralldo, Douglas, '10 Perguntas inéditas para Sheyla Smanioto', *Listas Literarias,* 2 January 2016, https://www.listasliterarias.com/2016/06/10-perguntas-ineditas-para-sheyla.html. Translations are my own.
[27] UN-HABITAT Report, *The Challenge of the Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003,* (London: Earthscan publications Ltd, 2003), p 6.

> the cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring towards heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay.[28]

It's a bleak picture and one that corresponds accurately to *Desesterro's* fictional periphery neighbourhood of Vila Marta. However, what is also interesting and important to examine in Smanioto's treatment of the periphery is her double vision of the outskirts as a place of refuge and hope, as well as a place of poverty and affliction. Her creative response bears out economist Edward Glaesar argument that the prevalence of urban poverty in megacities such as São Paulo, of the slums and squalor that thread through both *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos* and *Desesterro*, is a sign of urban strength, not weakness. Glaesar explains that megacity slums can often turn into centres of productivity and creativity and this is particularly true regarding contemporary writing in São Paulo.[29] The periphery of the city has over the last two decades fostered an ever-growing movement of writers and poets called *Literatura Marginal.* Examining Smanioto's experimental, fantastical, ambitious style in relation to this movement provides us with a final prism in which to examine how contemporary urban writers are banding together stylistically and thematically, responding to the formal challenges of the megacity in chorus to create their own politicised genre of megacity fiction.

Chapter One

[28] Davis, Mike, p 19.
[29] Glaesar, Edward, *Triumph of the City,* (London: Penguin, 2011), p 74

'*São Paulo não pode parar'*[30]

It could be argued that it is São Paulo, more than any other city in Brazil, that has inspired and illicited new artistic responses from urban writers. In 1922, when São Paulo was a coffee boomtown coming towards the end of its first great wave of industrialisation and immigration, Mario de Andrade published *Paulicéia Desvairada.* Considered one of the inaugural texts of Brazilian modernism, the title can be translated as *Mad São Paulo* and each poem begins with a snapshot of the city. [31] Critic Foster Williams argues that the collection does not poeticise São Paulo but rather urbanizes poetry, influencing the literary history of Brazil in a way that other major cities have not.[32] One is, Williams says, 'hard-put to recall a major work of poetry like *Paulicéia Desvairada* that is devoted to Rio or to Bahia.'[33] São Paulo also gave birth to *concreta poesia* - Concrete Poetry - the 1950s literary movement which tried to integrate poetry into the new modern life of the city and formed 'the dynamic core of Brazilian poetry over the next fifty years'.[34] The influence of Brazilian modernism can still be felt in the city's literature today and has been well investigated by critics of *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos.* [35] The neologism of *Desesterro* is also reminiscent of the playful style of São Paulo's modernists and Smanioto cites one of the most influential poets of the group, João Cabral de Melo Neto, as one of her own literary guides.[36]

In other fields - music, for example, and politics - São Paulo has also been considered a centre, drawing talented people from around the country and bearing out Glaesar's theory that megacities offer creative opportunities that the countryside and smaller cities do not. Industrial São

---

[30] Local saying translated as 'São Paulo can't stop'.
[31] Foster, David William. "Mário de Andrade: On Being São Paulo-Wise in 'Paulicéia Desvairada.', *Iberoamericana* 5, (2005), 27-40, (p 27).
[32] Foster, David William, p 29.
[33] Foster, David William, p 29.
[34] Franchetti, Paulo. "Poetry and Technique: Concrete Poetry in Brazil." *Portuguese Studies*, 24, (2008), 56 – 66, (p 60).
[35] Itamar Harrison, Marguerite, *Uma Cidade em Camadas* (São Paulo: Editora Horizonte, 2007).
[36] Eralldo, Douglas.

Paulo had by the sixties overtaken Rio as the centre of entertainment production and was key to the hugely influential *Tropicália* movement.[37] The first hit of musician Tom Zé was 'São São Paulo', inspired by his move from the North of Brazil to the city's frenetic streets. Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, often cited as founders of *Tropicália*, both originally from Bahia, also moved to São Paulo and it was here that Veloso says he first heard the word *Tropicália,* at a lunch with Luiz Carlos Barreto.[38] It was to São Paulo that former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva famously made his journey from the Northern city of Recife in an open-bed truck. It's a common migration scene that forms the backbone of *Desesterro,* in which beleaguered Fátima dreams of a filmy new life in São Paulo, making countless trips to the isolated rural bus station before finally making her life-changing voyage. And although *Eram Muitos Cavalos* stays firmly in the city, this journey from the North still makes it into the novel when a local taxi-driver, one of the few characters in the book that seem genuinely at ease in the city, recounts his own journey from the North on the back of a truck:

> slats of wood for seats, a tarpaulin cover, everyone eating out of tins and lunch boxes, sugarcane and manioc flour, day after day on the road, sweet holy mary! But I can't complain, São Paulo's been like a mother to me. As soon as I arrived, I found a job as a cleaner in an auto-parts factory. And I worked my way up from there…[39]

Lula himself was originally a metalworker in the car industry and like our taxi-driver, São Paulo was good to him. He founded his left-wing political party *Partido dos Trabalhadores* in the city's periphery and it was periphery community activists that gave Lula one of his original bases of support.[40]

---

[37] Avelar, Idelber, and Christopher Dunn, editors. *Brazilian Popular Music and Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p 76.

[38] De Oliviera, Ana. 'Interview with Caetano Veloso', *Tropicalia,* http://tropicalia.com.br/en/ilumencarnados-seres/entrevistas/caetano-veloso-2.

[39] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p 90.

[40] Holston, James, *Insurgent Citizenship,* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p 5.

However, by the time writer Luis Ruffato had himself moved from the Brazilian countryside to São Paulo with ideas to be a writer, the city which locals say can't stop had bunged itself up something rotten. His responses to the city were consequently darker, bleaker, more isolated and more political than the exuberant modernist movements that had gone before. He was not part of a group of city writers but was inspired simply by his individual reading and his lived experience of the city which got steadily more difficult to live in over the years since his arrival. By the nineties, air and sewage pollution had reached crisis point after decades of negligible environmental control by authorities. When an area south-west of the city full of springs was designated as an area of conservation, the government did the opposite, building enormous housing projects on the swampy, unsuitable land that not only expanded the city further than ever before but compromised the city's water quality, creating ghettos of poverty whilst aggravating two of the 'principal scourges that made the city hellish' - circulation and drainage - causing massive floods with loss of life and property. [41] Moreover, the city whose motto *'São Paulo não pode parar'* came about because it always had more work than it could handle, attracting labourers from around the country and the world, ground to a halt in significant ways. The eighties economic crisis combined with the automation of industry meant a massive loss of employment, and specifically a lack of jobs that required the skills and training which had made working class labourers so valuable.[42] At the same time, finance, tech and global business grew, demanding a few highly qualified workers amongst a sea of expendable labour - security guards and cleaners who could be replaced with far greater ease than a unionised metalworker. The nineties were characterised for many by precarious work without security: by 1999 half the workforce in the city were self-employed or unregistered.[43] Ruffato's taxi-driver again sums up succinctly the chasm between the experience of the city for the working classes in the sixties and seventies who had good jobs, disposable income, homes, and understandable hopes for a steadily improving future, compared to those at the bleak end of the nineties. This is no place for the young, he says, who can't get a 'job', nor a 'chance', or a 'break', so different to his day when there was such a shortage of labour 'you'd

[41] Rolnik, Raquel. *Territórios em conflito,* p 46.
[42] Rolnik, Raquel. *Territórios em conflito,* p 55.
[43] Rolnik, Raquel. *Territórios em conflito,* p 55.

barely climbed off the back of the truck, and you were already in your first job. And they trained you too. I even had money.'[44]

The dual forces of globalisation and job insecurity combined with increasing land value in parts of the city previously populated by the working class to create an explosion of poverty and favelas, which had until this time been uncommon in São Paulo. The periphery of the city previously organised by local political activists and the Catholic church was known by the late nineties for drug trafficking and the extreme violence of both police and organised crime. [45] The city's murder statistics tell a grim narrative. In 1978, murder was cited as reason for 1.44 percent of the deaths in São Paulo.[46] In 1994, it had risen to 6.57 percent, an increase of 365 percent.[47] For young people, this increase was yet more stark, with murder increasing by 80 percent amongst ten to fourteen year olds during the 80s.[48] Tragic but understandable then, when Rael, the young hero of *Capão Pecado,* the cult nineties novel set close to Jardim Ângela, once known as the most dangerous neighbourhood in the world,[49] finds the death of his first friend 'an enormous blow' but the death of the next two 'less exhausting' until finally 'Rael had grown-up.'[50]

Rael is one of the many poor people living on the margins in São Paulo. His parents make a Christmas tree from a broom stick inside an old paint pot filled with concrete and the family of three share the same bed. But there are many very wealthy people in São Paulo. The city has ranked 12th in the world for the number of resident multi-millionaires, just after Zurich.[51] One of the ways these elites responded to the 90s wave of violence was to retreat from the public spaces of the city and instead conduct their day-to-day lives within private and highly-secured walled spaces that Caldeira calls 'fortified enclaves'.[52] Caldeira admits that 'walls are old indeed' but she argues that the city's

---

[44] Ruffato, Luiz. *There Were Many Horses,* p 90.
[45] Rolnik, Raquel. *Territórios em conflito,* p 57.
[46] Caldeira, Teresa. *City of Walls,* p 126.
[47] Caldeira, Teresa. *City of Walls,* p 126.
[48] Caldeira, Teresa. *City of Walls,* p 126.
[49] Paula, Mirglia. 'Safe Spaces in São Paulo', *LSECities*, December 2008, https://urbanage.lsecities.net/essays/safe-spaces-in-São-paulo-1
[50] Ferrez, *Capão Pecado,* (São Paulo: Editora Planeta do Brasil, 2005), p23. Translations of this book are by myself and Victor Meadowcroft.
[51] https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/may/08/cities-top-millionaires-billionaires
[52] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 3.

new highways and malls, armies of private security, gated communities and secured apartments were a new way of organizing social differences in the urban space where 'inequality is the organizing value.'[53] The businessman in *Eram Muitos Cavalos'* vignette 'Like This', represents the pinnacle of this new feudal landscape. Waiting for his helicopter, he laments the 'putrid' state the city is in, particularly the violence, 'ugly so filthy so dangerous' although looking down from the helipad he can only see 'swimming pools like little blue lakes'. Caldeira's sense that there is something rotten in the state of São Paulo - that the health of the city is failing because of the immorality of the ruling classes - is a theme that Ruffato returns to in many of his vignettes. The businessman is a political donor with a daughter studying architecture in Paris. He also has a penchant for underage sex and for using his power to push through ministerial decrees. The city is in freefall but he's content to move between his different 'fortresses' on the grey bar of the horizon because '*seen from a height São Paulo isn't all that*'.[54]

It was in this environment that local *paulistas* Teresa Caldeira and Luiz Ruffato began working on books that would be seminal in their own careers and in their fields. Urbanist and anthropologist Teresa Caldeira published *City of Walls: Crime, Violence and Segregation in São Paulo* in 2001 and went on to win the Senior Book Prize of the American Ethnological Society. Shortly after this book's release, writer Luiz Ruffato published his debut novel *Eram Muitos Cavalos,* which won both the Brazilian APCA award for best novel in 2001 as well as the Brazilian National Library's Machado de Assis Award and is now critically acclaimed as one of the most important novels in contemporary Brazilian literature.[55] Walter Benjamin argued that the flâneur figure could have only existed at the exact time and the exact location of Paris, as Hausmann was renovating the city, with new boulevards inviting whimsical walking and creating a new public stage for private life.[56] The specificities which Benjamin describes - the gaslight, the arcades, the rise of the flâneur -

[53] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 4.
[54] Ruffato, Luiz. *There Were Many Horses,* p 30.
[55] Paula, Leonora. '*Eles eram muitos cavalos*: Challenging the Regulating Fiction of the Global City', *Romance Notes*, 54, (2014), 95-102, (p 95).
[56] Benjamin, Walter, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso Books, 1997), p 36.

all drew attention to Baudelaire's instinctive ability to engage with these new surroundings and with the emotions which they evoked in his fellow citizens. I'd like to argue that *Eram Muitos Cavalos* maps organically onto São Paulo around the turn of the millennium just as Benjamin saw Baudelaire's poetry intrinsically linked to its own urban context and furthermore displays new formal responses to the traumatic urban landscape from which it was created.

'*The Talk of Crime'*

Crime is not new in cities or in their literature. Oliver Twist is a pickpocket, Raskolnikov murders an old woman for pittance and there is so much bad in early 20th century Los Angeles that private eye Phillip Marlowe is kept busy for seven novels over nearly 20 years. Benjamin himself argued that the flâneur was 'a precursor to the literary detective', predicting a great future for city literature that concerned itself with the 'disquieting and threatening aspects of urban life' and Baudelaire was famously drawn to the underbelly of Parisian society. [57] Ruffato, however, faced new challenges in evoking the violent landscape of nineties São Paulo, where murder and robbery, for example, were not anomalies, but for many locals, part of everyday life. How does a writer describe a city where crime and segregation were not simply an aspect of the city, as for Phillip Marlowe or even Raskolnikov, but the organizing principal and overriding narrative of the city and its citizens too, what Caldeira terms 'the talk of crime':

> As violent crime has increased in São Paulo in the past fifteen years, so has fear of crime. Everyday life and the city have changed because of crime and fear, and this change is reflected in daily conversation. Fear and violence, difficult things to make sense of, cause discourse to proliferate and circulate. The talk of crime - that is, everyday conversations,

[57] Benjamin, Walter*, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism,* (London: Verso Books, 1997), p 40.

> commentaries, discussions, narratives, and jokes that have crime and fear as their subjects - is contagious. Once one case is described, many others are likely to follow. The talk of crime is also fragmentary and repetitive. It breaks into many exchanges, punctuating them, and repeats the same history, or variations of it, commonly using only a few narrative devices. In spite of the repetition, people are never bored. Rather, they feel compelled to keep talking about crime, as if the endless analysis of cases could help them cope with their perplexing experiences or the arbitrary and unusual nature of violence. The repetition of histories, however, only serves to reinforce people's feelings of danger, insecurity and turmoil. Thus the talk of crime feeds a circle in which fear is both dealt with and reproduced, and violence is counteracted and magnified.[58]

Caldeira's description of the way people talked about crime in São Paulo during the nineties gives us a good window into the techniques Ruffato uses to depict this landscape. The short vignette form and jump-cut structure as well as the repetition of different violent stories, build to form a sense of a city where crime is everywhere. The 69 vignettes, fragments of the city, are laced through with variations of kidnappings, shootings, murder, rape, massacre, robberies, which are then repeated through 'everyday conversations, commentaries, discussions, narratives and jokes'. Like the everyday São Paulo locals of which Caldeira writes, a reader of *Eram Muitos Cavalos* is left with the strong sense that they have entered not only a violent but an arbitrary and disordered world.

Whilst the underbelly of Paris was an integral part of the city for Baudelaire, and dislocation from the city has been investigated by Simmel, through to Poe and Eliot and beyond, the utter hopelessness found in *Eram Muitos Cavalos* is something more extreme. 'Disquiet' and 'threat' have turned into full-blown trauma and terror. Berman uses the example of the rise of fast-moving traffic in post-Haussmann Paris as one reason to explain the sense at the time that urban life had become more chaotic, more 'risky and frightening'.[59] Traffic is a still a great problem in São Paulo, but Berman's

[58] Caldeira, Teresa. *City of Walls,* p 2.
[59] Berman, Marshal. *All that is Solid Melts into Air,* p 159.

scene feels a pale comparison to the commute of the woman in the vignette 'What a Woman Wants'. The misery of rush-hour becomes something much darker when the traffic traps her in the middle of a shoot-out. She thinks about running, but worries the car will get robbed, so simply lays down and begins to daydream. When the cars behind her start honking, she gets up and drives back on home, past police dragging 'two guys soaked in blood and definitely dead and loads of others sitting on the curb just in their underwear hands behind their heads'.[60]

It's a shocking journey, even in crime-heavy megacities, but Ruffato skillfully allows the reader to experience this scene as part of everyday life, framing the story around the morning breakfast routine of a married couple, full of minute details that anchor them in normal São Paulo life. Before we hear of the woman's terrible journey, we see her shuffle across the tiny apartment to wash out a jar of an incredibly popular cream cheese brand. She sits down to drink coffee from a thermos, as is the fashion in the city, chats with her husband about the latest book he has just picked up from a local book fair – Foucault - a fleeting image from an elegant European city which will soon seem very, very far away. Only then does she begin to tell her husband about her journey home, deliberately wrought in São Paulo vernacular - the conversational style with which citizens of the city 'talk of crime'.

The effect of framing this violence in everyday settings, in local slang, amongst friends and family goes further than simply showing how prevalent crime had become in São Paulo at this time. Ruffato shows us through both form and content the way in which everyday felony and vice grind citizens down to a point at which they disconnect from their city, disconnect from their neighbours, even disconnect from themselves, building literal and metaphorical walls in a way that 19th century Parisians or 20th century Angelinos did not. The 'Continuous Old Fella', for example, who calls his wife '*old dear*' to the other men in the washroom, makes light of the call she's just made about another shoot-out that's started on his street. Hiding behind the sofa, she tells him not to come home in a suit in case he is mistaken for a detective. He laughs but says he'll take off his tie, because 'bless

[60] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p 15.

her… she's getting on, old dear'[61]. His own fear is buried, but it's there - in the repeated washing of his hands, in his 'embarrassed grimace' and in his bleak ride home through a landscape with which he feels no connection, 'eyes down, dead river, the indifferent cars, the futuristic buildings, the dark curtain on the horizon, *the old dear, bless her*'.[62]

Ruffato's buries the old man's real emotions under a sham of love, showing us the same disconnection and retreat from São Paulo which is, Caldeira argues, one of the overarching effects of crime and the talk of crime of which 'the building of walls is the most emblematic.' One of Ruffato's questions, when he set out to write a novel of São Paulo, was how to capture the precariousness of the city whilst at the same time not simplifying or editing out the normal life that continues in and amongst the violence. His solution was in 'the precariousness of the form. The form is like this way of life' and his celebrated jump-cut structure is an excellent example of how the megacity environment can force new stylistic responses from urban writers:

> I wanted to make a novel that wasn't consecutive but simultaneous, in lots of different places at the same time, you could be in various times and various spaces at the same time. We live in different times in São Paulo, if you go to the periphery, right into the periphery, you'll finding people living like in the middle-ages in Europe. And here in Perdizes, you are living the same life that you are living London. Time is completely different, and space is completely different. I was trying to create a novel based on these questions. And also, I was trying to bring in a thing which I find curious. In a megacity you don't know the whole story, you only know pieces of the story, because of the speed of the time and space of the whole megacity. So based on these things I started to structure the book.[63]

[61] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horse,* p 63.
[62] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p 63.
[63] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Urban Protest in Brazil: The City and The Politics of Luiz Ruffato', *Asymptote Journal*, August 2016, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2016/08/25/urban-protest-in-brazil-the-city-and-the-politics-of-luiz-ruffato/.

The 69 separate vignettes build on modernist stream of consciousness and non-chronological storytelling, as well as the work of the Concrete poets who captured in experimental forms portraits of city life but take these techniques to a more extreme place corresponding to the extremity of the cityscape which in which Ruffato finds himself. Some of the vignettes stop before the grammatical end, some have no structure, and some are simply lists in the vein of Perec's *Life: A User's Manual.* However, unlike in *Life,* none of the characters meet and none of the characters return. Whilst the reader roams across the city there is a sense of the characters themselves being restricted, each one isolated literally within the walls of their particular vignette. The overall effect is one of characters who are partitioned and unknown to one another, seen however from the point of view of a classic omniscient narrator, who is able to bring these disparate portraits together into a unifying portrait of a city where inequality and violence have divided the local population.

Like Caldeira, Ruffato's formal choices are a direct response to his political vision of the city sees the building of walls as one of the most problematic aspects of the city. He told me that in a place like São Paulo, in a megacity, 'we are losing the ability to feel what other people feel. We are not affected by other people's lives in the same way. This is where mental walls appear.'[64] A good example of the way in which mental walls are as isolating as, for example, the privatised infrastructure many of the characters find themselves within is the vignette 'We could have been such good friends'. The narrator is a well-to-do *Paulista* living in an apartment block with a swimming pool. His children go to private school, he has travelled widely, drinks good Portuguese wine and New Zealand lamb, and has a wife whose concerns seem to consist mainly of 'housemaids, breast implants, Botox and lipo'.[65] Despite his relative success the man appears lonely - fantasising about becoming friends with a neighbour in the same building as himself. He moves through several dream scenes with his new friend in which São Paulo appears a sociable, convivial city - couple's dinner, rounds of aperitifs in a Lapa bar, weekends at the beach, Saturday mornings buying fish and vegetables at the fair. He then reveals that none of these things will ever happen. In reality, he's only

[64] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Urban Protest in Brazil: The City and The Politics of Luiz Ruffato'.
[65] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p 40.

met the guy a couple of times, in the elevator, by the pool, and now he won't be returning, as he was caught in an express kidnapping:

> They grabbed him on Republica do Libano Avenue, stole his documents, his checkbook, credit and debit cards.
>
> Later, on some wasteland near the Guarapiranga reservoir, they made him kneel in the scrub and put a bullet in the back of his head.
>
> The body was found there in the morning.
>
> Still no sign of the car.[66]

It's only at this shocking conclusion that we realise we have not in fact been reading the story of one man's desire to break down the invisible walls which surround him but instead a fine example of Caldeira's 'talk of crime'. It *is* possible to partake in the friendly leisure activities the narrator previously described but they lose almost all their attraction in such a terribly risky landscape, as do the fruits of any friendship which could be so quickly and horribly cut short. The narrator's matter of fact tone, the materialistic conclusion, wondering about the car as well as the title 'We could have been such good friends' points to a remarkable selfishness. Can the reader really condemn this man for his lack of feeling in such a brutal landscape? Is his blunted emotion not simply a reaction to how fragile his nice lifestyle really is?

This conundrum is what Ruffato calls 'capitalism at the edge of the world' - a precariousness which, in form, theme, and character, is at the heart of *Eram Muitos Cavalos* and at the heart of the experience of the 21st resident of a developing world megacity such as São Paulo:

> What for me marks this kind of capitalism as well, is the precariousness of everything. You can have money, jewellery, live in a mansion but your life is much more precarious in São Paulo. You can go on this street now and be murdered. I wanted to say, for example, when

[66] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p 42.

> you live in England, rich or poor, but I'm imagining someone poor, you might have worries about money, food, but you don't worry about arriving at home alive. This lack of security changes everything, changes your perception of the world, it changes the way you have relationships with things and people.[67]

Ruffato's technical choices regarding form, structure, language, dialogue are all driven by a desire to illuminate what it is like to live in an extremely precarious city where violence and crime are everywhere. His formal choices end up going further than this however, getting under the skin of his characters and showing the long-term psychological effects of living in this type of urban landscape - 69 citizens that are terrified, numbed and literally and metaphorically isolated within the walls of their story cell.

Death of a Flâneur

Picking out violent and traumatic scenes gives a particular view of *Eram Muitos Cavalos.* It would not be fair to portray the novel as all gore and murder and this was not Ruffato's vision. 'What annoys me' he says, 'sometimes in literature, is when you try to show a world, which is only a violent, terrible world. But I know this already. The image of a child crying in a favela, I know it. It's not new.'[68] Ruffato makes a particular stylistic choice to show everyday normal scenes of city life interspliced between the violence. This is something which Caldeira's report on crime and segregation does not do and perhaps points to Ruffato's literary heritage. He is a writer who knows Baudelaire, knows the observational traditions of European urban writers and has claimed that he wants the flaneur for himself. Travelling around the city, being financially stretched, breaking up with a lover,

[67] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Urban Protest in Brazil: The City and The Politics of Luiz Ruffato'.
[68] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Urban Protest in Brazil: The City and The Politics of Luiz Ruffato'.

meeting up with friends, getting drunk or high, are all examples of what Berman might call 'primal modern scenes'[69] - archetypal narratives of the contemporary city - which also make it into the book. They are however deployed in new ways, slotted side by side with the shocking violence previously discussed. In the vignette 'Diet', for example, a young girl, bored, working on a checkout in a cheap Brás clothes store, struggles, like women all over the world, to stick to her new diet – one of Berman's primal modern scenes, perhaps. She resolves not to devour her second and third hot dog, nibbling them instead between sips of her diet coke. This turns out to be a terrible waste of self-control when a gun is suddenly put to her forehead, a plastic bag held out in front of her. She hesitates for a moment too long before she is shot dead in the head.

Whilst the extremity of this switch is shocking, moving between two different modes of the city is firmly in the tradition of urban literature. Indeed, Berman argued that it was the duality of Benjamin's investigation into the city that gave his work such energy and 'poignant charm':

> His heart and his sensibility drew him irresistibly toward the city's bright lights, beautiful women, fashion, luxury, its play of dazzling surfaces and radiant scenes, meanwhile his Marxist conscience wrenches him insistently away from these temptations, instructs him that this whole glittering world is decadent, hollow, vicious, spiritually empty, oppressive to the proletariat, condemned by history. He makes repeated ideological resolutions to forsake the Parisian temptation - and to forbear leading his readers into temptation - but he cannot resist one last look down the boulevard or under the arcade; he wants to be saved, but not yet.'[70]

Ruffato too, has this duality, this sense of being in love with the city, in love with the act of observing the craziness of its streets, that heady imaginative intoxication that almost every writer of a city must feel in some ways. However, whilst Benjamin was drawn to 'beautiful women, fashion, luxury', the elite life in São Paulo disgusts Ruffato, with the wealthy characters almost uniformly ugly in character

[69] Berman, Marshal. *All That is Solid Melts into Air,* p 148.

[70] Berman, Marshal, *All That is Solid Melts into Air,* p 146.

and speech. His affection is for the grubby parts of the city and for the people who stay closest to the afflicted 'irregular asphalt', with its 'creases, bumps, grooves, potholes, saliences, ridges, pebbles, black nooks'. It feels a deliberate choice, for example, to use a young girl from the periphery, not professional enough to be called a prostitute, but who lets men have sex with her hoping they will pay her something, to be the one to capture the dazzle and temptation of strolling through the city. To create a profound portrait of what a city can give someone from this perspective is a clear statement of politics. Ruffato choses to elevate this girl, who literally flies through the seedy central district, sneakers 'gliding millimeters over the cobblestones that pave Direita street' as opposed to, for example, the grubby compromised businessman looking down on the city from his helicopter pad high up in the sky. The language here is stream-of-consciousness, a list of the sounds and images and smells all hitting the girl at once in a delightful array:

> On the ground, she dodges canvas and black sacks, tarpaulin stretched over stalls which her eyes peruse, jeans, Chinese knockoffs, medicinal herbs, bootleg tapes, pirate CDs, fruit stalls, perfumery from Paraguay, chameleonic knickknacks: hawk and peddle. A fat mist sits in this canyon. Music, tunes, they spill, they squawk, they billow...

This is different to the dialogue style of many of the street scenes. It's a stylistic choice which feels in some way inspired Joyce's Leopold Bloom, lifting the girl's wanderings through São Paulo streets into the literary firmament, even whilst she is down in the gutter. Moreover, it is an example of Ruffato affirming that the act of wandering the streets of the city, of watching and being watched that so inspired Baudelaire, Benjamin, Berman, *is* still possible. If any of the characters in *Eram Muitos Cavalos* could earn the lauded title of a flaneur, it would be this vulnerable, compromised young girl and it is little wonder that Ruffato himself says he wants to take that role on for himself. A writer, he says, is one who needs to 'flâneur...If I don't put myself in the other person's place there won't be any literature. You can have reports and journalism, but you don't have literature.'[71]

[71] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Urban Protest in Brazil: The City and The Politics of Luiz Ruffato'.

'The Right Not to Be Bothered'

The young girl wandering through downtown streets is just one demonstration of the way in which Ruffato's stylistic and formal choices are not simply a response to the megacity environment but are also formed by his political vision. It is important to note, however, that these political beliefs have in turn been formed in response to a dystopic urban environment which fosters this inequality. For Ruffato, Smanioto and other São Paulo writers, literature, politics, and their feudal urban environment are intrinsically entwined. Ruffato's fury against the powerful and wealthy of São Paulo and the damage he believes they have done not just to the city but also to Brazilian society, is threaded through the book, from the opening epigraph, taken from Psalm 82:

> *How long will you defend the unjust*
>
> *And show partiality to the wicked*[72]

to the penultimate black page which Itamar Harrison likens to the Antonio Henrique Amaral's paintings of rotting blackened bananas, inspired by 'Brazil's regime of institutionalised oppression in the late 1960s.'[73] Is putting wrathful politics at the centre of an urban novel part of a new stylistic response to the megacity? Although Baudelaire wrote about politics and society, his most celebrated writings are observational poems of Parisian life. These of course make important political statements, but outraged politics did not compel his literature in the way that Ruffato's own writing is fuelled. We do, however, find a similar outrage propelling the work of Caldeira, also in response to the new

[72] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p vii.
[73] Itamar Harrison, Marguerite. 'São Paulo lightning: Flashes of the City in Luiz Ruffato's *Eram Muitos Cavalos, Luso-Brazilian review, 42(2),* January 2006, p 164

architecture and infrastructure of the megacity, upon which she reads clearly the older unjust, unequal, and feudal lines upon which colonial Brazil was drawn.

In the work of both Caldeira and Ruffato, it is the *Paulista* elite, sheltering from the streets in securitised tower-blocks and in armoured cars, that are judged to be directly responsible for the dystopic cityscape. Caldeira concentrates her analysis of the city's crisis of crime and segregation upon what she calls the elite's love of 'fortified enclaves'[74] which she says have been instrumental in breaking down the ideal of public space in the city. She particularly analyses the private, closed condominiums which had become by the nineties the 'most desirable type of housing for the upper classes',[75] super-ceding the elite 70s fashion for apartment living. Whilst the older residential towers were all in walking distance of the centre, still 'integrated into the urban network'[76] and open to the streets, the newer closed condominiums are built far away in the periphery, walled and securitised, with large common areas, landscaped grounds and a wide variety of services: 'psychologists and gymnastics teachers for children, classes of all sorts for all ages, organized sports, libraries, gardening, pet care, physicians, message centres, frozen food preparation, house-keeping, cooks, cleaners, drivers, car washing, transportation and servants to do the grocery shopping'.[77] The attraction of these condominiums for the rich is well illustrated by Caldeira through their real estate adverts which all promise similar escapes from the city, often surrounded by nature, always exclusive, always private and secure. 'The right,' as one advert puts it 'not to be bothered.'[78] This sentiment, whilst not particularly noble, feels understandable given the explosion of crime which began in the eighties. However, as Caldeira notes, many of these adverts come from a time before the rise in violence and in fact this turning away from public life and public responsibility by the powerful was a significant factor in the spiralling sense of citizenship in the local population. Caldeira reaches for the neighbourhood of Morumbi to illustrate these ugly demarcations. 'Emblematic of the most dramatic changes in the city', until the beginning of the 80s the area was mostly green spaces and large houses.

---

[74] Calderia, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 10.
[75] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p257.
[76] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 259.
[77] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 267.
[78] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 267.

A wild decade of construction turned Morumbi by the 90s into a dense forest of immense closed condominiums. [79] The first of these, *Portal do Morumbi,* was, says Caldeira, ´literally put up in the middle of no-where'[80]. Hardly any supporting infrastructure was provided by the developer to the point that more than twenty years later the backstreets around the complex were still dirt roads. This set the tone for the erection of enormous highly luxurious blocks built with almost no planning controls, on narrow roads without pavements, probably, says Caldeira, 'a feature intended to preclude people without cars'.[81] In Morumbi, the relationship between the elite love of the car and fortified enclaves is clear. Residents cannot walk the streets, buy bread or take their children to school without driving.[82] Severe traffic jams are routine. Despite the terrible urban infrastructure, Morumbi is home to some of the richest in the city and each condominium aims at reaching new and exotic heights of luxury such as the individual ´swimming pools like little blue lakes', captured by both Ruffato and photographer Tuca Viera.

It does not seem a coincidence, that Ruffato choses Morumbi as the setting of one of the bleakest of *Eram Muito Cavalo*'s vignettes, half within the condos themselves and half around their dysfunctional, chaotic hinterlands. It begins with a chorus from a point view which appears remarkably similar to the dissatisfied Morumbi housewives Caldeira features throughout her report, watching from their private balconies a bothersome woman 'who drags herself scarecrow down the streetavenues' of Morumbi. They speak in mannered, looping poetic couplets, giving their complaints a melodramatic, air of Greek theatre, hard masks hiding any natural empathy for the poor woman they watch. At the midway point of the vignette the form switches to a simple story of a single mother from the neighbouring favela Paraisopolis, full of the small São Paulo details that make Ruffato's scenes so real and so relatable. One day her 11-year-old daughter does not come home from school and her starched, clean bedsheets stayed unslept in. The mother searched for days - ´police stations hospitals correction centers ERs morgues tracing and retracing the route from home to school

[79] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 244.
[80] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 245.
[81] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 245.
[82] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 247.

knocking on doors looking for clues signs intuitions' - until she is called to the public telephone to receive a call. It´s her daughter, sobbing, panicked. [83] She tries to find out where she is, hears voices, then silence. It´s then that the mother turns into ´that woman´ so irritating to the chorus of what we can imagine are wealthy Morumbi housewives. She falls on her knees to the sidewalk before crawling off in search of the voice of her daughter, dragging herself continually down the hybrid ´streetavenues' of Morumbi. The simplicity of the style of the story, so different from the gossipy singsong chorus, highlights not only the tragedy but also the gilded, poeticised version of the city which the housewives inhabit, so far away from the reality of this poor woman, finding no empathy in watching her mad wandering, which to them is simply bothersome. The impossibility of strolling 'everywhere in the city' as the original Parisian flâneurs liked to do is managed by Ruffato here to heighten his drama and add further irony to the tragedy.[84] The bothersome woman is one of the very few characters in the novel who walks because, as the Morumbi chorus observes, she is 'oblivious', in her madness, 'to the rats and the roaches to the rain or the sun the runoff in the gutters to the flip-flops shoes trainers cops oblivious'.[85] To walk in São Paulo, is, put simply, an act of madness.

'That Woman' is a clear example of the way in which the politics of the megacity inform the stylistic choices of writers such as Ruffato, however, the chasm between rich and poor is not a new subject for a city writer. Baudelaire's poem 'Eyes of the Poor', for example, contains many similarities with this vignette, and comparing them side by side can highlight the specific ways in which megacity writing on inequality has changed since this landmark work of urban literature. To begin with, unlike the chorus of 'That Woman' , the narrator of 'Eyes of the Poor' is fully engaged with the street life of his city. The poem begins as he is finishing off a classic day in the life of the Parisian flâneur, spent wandering through the city, enjoying his time aimlessly with his lover. As evening arrives, they sit down in one of the street cafes that began emerging on Hausmann's wide boulevards. In some ways the setting is like that of a Morumbi condo. The cafe is surrounded by rubble from the construction of the new avenue whilst the interior design displays just the kind of

[83] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p 71.
[84] Benjamin, Walter, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, p 36.
[85] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p 71.

glorious splendours that might, considering Caldeira's reports, fit well in an escapist-themed closed condominium: 'laughing ladies with falcons perched on their wrist, nymphs and goddesses carrying on their heads fruits, pies, and poultry…all of history and all of mythology at the service of gluttony.'[86] A poor family in rags appear in front of the lovers, eyes wide with wonder, taking in the spectacle. Unlike the chorus of 'That Woman' however, the narrator is immediately empathetic to the father and his two children, imagining their thoughts and their feelings whilst as the same time feeling ashamed of the glasses and carafes in front of him, 'too big for our thirst'.[87] He turns to his lover, thinking that he will see his own feelings reflected in her eyes. Instead, she is irritated and uneasy with the poverty in front of her, wanting the waiter to send the family away, an interesting auger, perhaps, of the elite megacity attitude towards the poor that was to come. The narrator, however, is ashamed, full of rage and it is because of this, he tells his lover, that he hates her today. None of these uncomfortable feelings seem to bother the chorus of 'That Woman' or indeed any of the elite characters within *Eram Muitos Cavalos.* The chorus stares at the woman and do not try to look away. There are no feelings of guilt, or culpability or shame at the abyss between their power and wealth and the terrible state of the woman who has nothing. As Caldeira notes, there is no attempt to hide the apparatus which, in São Paulo, keep the poor away from the rich. It is normalised and nothing to be ashamed of. These two different megacity social landscapes can be seen embedded in the form of each piece and point to the way in which the urban environment really does impinge itself of the stylistic choices of the writers living there. Whilst Ruffato switches between two distinct models of writing, bisecting his vignette just like the separated worlds of rich and poor in which São Paulo is divided, 'Eyes of the Poor' is a prose poem, a hybrid form which brings with it all the mess and difficulty of a city street together with the high life of the elegant bourgeoise, the exclusive city cafe amongst the rubble of construction, embodying the quite different relationship that the rich and poor of 19th century Paris enjoyed when compared to those in contemporary São Paulo.

[86] Baudelaire, Charles, *Paris Spleen,* trans. James Huenaker, Joseph T Shipley and Arthur Symons, (ebook, Digireads, 2015), p 66.
[87] Baudelaire, Charles, *Paris Spleen,* p 66.

The Parisian elites might have felt uneasy in situations such as that depicted in the 'Eyes of the Poor', but they had a more integrated relationship with the city and the different classes which occupied the public space. In his essay on the flâneur, Benjamin describes how the bourgeoise had developed an enjoyment of all of society, including an appreciation and a sensitivity 'that perceives charm in even damaged or decaying goods'.[88] Baudelaire was himself from the bourgeoise and this sensibility can be seen threaded throughout his poems - from 'Eyes of the Poor' and 'Loss of a Halo' to 'Twilight' and 'The Crowds'. Caldeira's reports from within the condominiums paint by contrast an ugly portrait of a privileged people with little respect for any aspect of society. The new condominiums have failed, according to Caldeira, to create a sense of community and are rife with internal aggressions, disputes and crime. Residential meetings, often the place where problems are attempted to be resolved, can be bullying and sometimes even physical. The residents, says Caldeira 'have a hard time accepting democratic procedures, respecting other people's views and accepting differences and disagreements as a normal part of social interaction. The authoritarian desire of imposing ones will without recognizing other possibilities seems strong indeed...For the Brazilian elite, it is easy to break the law and it can even by fashionable.'[89] Urbanist James Holston explains there is historic precedent for the way in which the elites of Brazil act in comparison to, for example, the French Bourgeoisie. Originally gifted by the Portuguese king with absolute authority, the first great Brazilian landowners ruled over plantations on which worked armies of African slaves. When the monarchy was abolished the powerful in Brazil disliked the idea of democracy. They copied the French 'Declaration of Man and Rights' when composing their constitution but purposely left out one of the most important democratic concepts: 'men are born and remain free and equal in rights'[90] and set about structuring a society based on 'exclusion, inequality, illegality, violence'.[91]

Ruffato shows real sympathy for the middle-classes of São Paulo, not poor and not rich, just trying to make ends meet and avoid getting car-jacked, however the very wealthy in the book seem, almost uniformly, villainous to the point of caricature, often written in first person as opposed to

[88] Benjamin, Walter, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism,* p 59.
[89] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls,* p 146.
[90] Holston, James, *Insurgent Citizenship,* p 64.
[91] Holston, James, *Insurgent Citizenship,* p 6.

having their stories helped along by a mostly sympathetic omniscient narrator, locked away in hermetically sealed cars and apartments and helicopters, they appear to have lives filled with vice but little humanity. It's a portrait of society and a style of writing clarified by the unrestrained anger with which Ruffato shocked audiences when he gave the opening speech at 2013 Frankfurt Book Fair, preceding, and significantly disrupting, the unequivocally positive image of Brazil then given by vice-president Michel Temer. Ruffato began by identifying himself, and the country, as 'on the periphery' - a loaded word in Brazil which means to be marginalised, and often criminalised - and the opposite of the image of the economic and political powerhouse that Temer intended to portray. Ruffato then proceeded to tear apart any romantic image of Brazil - 'an exotic region, a place of paradisiacal beaches, edenic forests, carnival, capoeira, and soccer' - that anyone listening might have had. Those familiar with *Eram Muitos Cavalos,* however, would have instantly recognised the picture painted by Ruffato's speech, which bears an uncanny resemblance to Caldeira's *City of Walls:*

> ...the history of Brazil has been built almost exclusively through the explicit negation of the other, through violence and indifference...invisible held down by low salaries and deprived of the basic rights of citizenship: housing, transportation, leisure, education and healthcare - the majority of Brazilians have always constituted a disposable piece of the machinery driving the economy. 75 % of the national wealth lies in the hands of 10 % of the white population. A mere 46,000 people own half the land in the entire country... Abandoned in the bleakness of life on the margins, individuals who are denied this status of being human react to the other who denies them this status. Because we cannot see clearly the other, the other does not see us. And thus our hatreds build - our neighbour becomes the enemy. The homicide rate in Brazil has reached 20 deaths per 100,000 people, which totals 37,000 homicides per year, a number three times greater than the world average. And those most exposed to the violence are not the rich, who are enclosed behind the high walls of private condominiums, protected by electric fences, private security guards, and electronic surveillance, but the poor confined

> to favelas and neighbourhoods on the periphery, living at the mercy of drug trafficking and corrupt police officers…[92]

Ruffato continues, painting a picture of Brazil and Brazilians as unremitting as the black page with which he ends *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos*. It is a country of male chauvinists, occupying the seventh place of countries with the highest number of victims of domestic abuse. It is a country of cowards who accumulated more than 120,000 accusations of abuse against children and adolescents in the year 2012 alone. It is a country with a grave lack of education. Brazil, Ruffato claimed, occupied one of the last positions among rankings that evaluate educational performance worldwide, with one in three Brazilian adults unable to read the most simple of texts, despite the country having one of the largest GDPs in the world at the time.[93] Shameful in any light, Ruffato goes further, accusing the Brazilian elite of purposefully robbing the wider population of basic citizenship through miseducation - the 'perpetuation of ignorance as a tool for domination, which has been the defining characteristic of an elite that has remained in power until very recently'.[94] Despite all these miserable statistics Ruffato ends his speech on a note of hope, with his own history, as a young boy from the poor backlands of Brazil, raised by barely literate parents, who became one of the country's best-known novelists:

> I believe, perhaps naively, in the transforming power of literature. As the son of an illiterate washerwoman and a semi-illiterate popcorn vendor, having worked myself a popcorn vendor, a store cashier, a salesclerk, a textile factory worker, a metalworker, a manager of a diner - my own destiny was altered through a fortuitous encounter with books. And if reading a book can change the course of a person's life, and given that society is composed of people, then literature can change society...'[95]

[92] Nielson, R. P. 'Dispatch from Brazil', *Mester*, 42, (2013), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2j443663.
[93] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_growth_1980%E2%80%932010.
[94] Nielson, R. P. 'Dispatch from Brazil'.
[95] Nielson, R. P, Dispatch from Brazil. *Mester*.

Astonishing anywhere, the story feels heroic in the Brazilian context which Ruffato sets out in his speech. His own biography breaks roundly with the literary poverty depicted, for example, in the novel *Vida Secas* by Graciliano Ramos. Considered a classic of 20th century Brazilian fiction, the book tells the miserable story of an inarticulate, uneducated family from the poor arid countryside, who appear to have no more control over their destiny than the weather. Like *Eles Eram Muito Cavalos*, the heart of this book lies in its form, which is cyclical, with the first chapter interchanging with the last to elucidate the cycle of poverty the poor of Brazil were at that time locked in.

However, unlike *Vida Secas,* there is one character in *Eram Muitos Cavalos* who echoes Ruffato's own history, able to step out of his isolated vignette, to see a bigger picture and advocate for change. A sixteen-year-old black boy from the periphery is nicknamed Cranium because he loves to read and think. His story is told through the eyes of his younger brother, already a seasoned gangster working in the drug trade, hiding his gun in his bedroom. Despite their differences the narrator could not be prouder of Cranium, who's respected in the community, an example all mothers give their kids, 'deep' and 'intelligent', who looks like a buddha when he's reading[96]. The little gangster is always trying to sort books out for his brother, even robbing a postman, although he hides the envelopes in which he finds the books because his brother would not approve of the crime. Cranium is unequivocal in his criticism of petty crime and the drug trade, not simply because it is wrong, but because he sees the young men are being used:

> tellin us we're a bunch of suckers
> stickin' our necks out selling blow with the cops
> breathin' down
> (our necks)
> you're the ones who gets smoked he says
> and the playboy is in his mansion in Morumbi

[96] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p 107.

who's the real boss behind the business

He's getting richer and richer, his kids of studying abroad

bullet-proof imported car with bodyguards

butler nanny gardener kitchen staff housekeeping…

and we're up here like flies on shit

waiting to get clipped like ants queuing outside an anthill

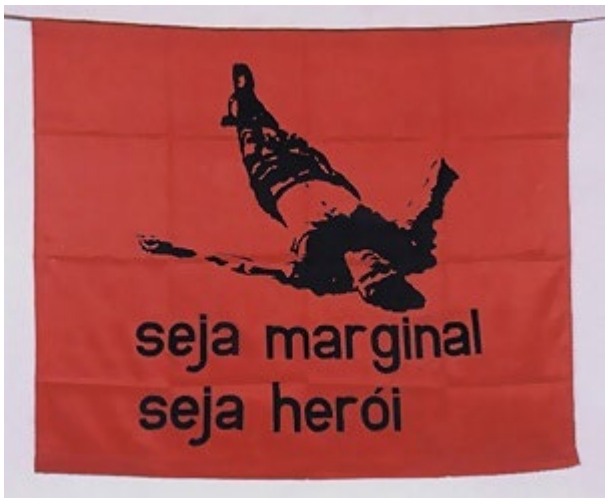
waiting for the grim reaper..

Like Baudelaire, Ruffato rejects those very first urban heroes, Achilles and Agamemnon, statesmen who represent power and wealth. In the world of *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos,* the very powerful are now the worst of villains: the senator with a penchant for cocaine and sex parties, the corrupt mayor with offshore bank accounts and crime rings. However, the heroes which Baudelaire himself held up, the everyday 'men and women in the crowd' are also passed over by Ruffato. [97] Although their stories make up much of *Eram Muitos Cavalos,* these everyday characters appear to be doing little more than making ends meet and trying to stay alive. São Paulo in the nineties needed a more revolutionary type of hero, one such as Cranium who can step out of his world, see clearly the rotten way in which his city operates and begin a process of change. Cranium is a fighter, like Achilles, or Agamemnon, but not a physical fighter and of course from the opposite end of the social spectrum, from a favela, perhaps a similar kind of place to the slum in which the family in 'Eyes of the Poor' appeared from. Here is another significant difference between the literature of Ruffato and

[97] Berman, Marshal, *All That is Solid Melts into Air,* p 147

Baudelaire. With the character of Cranium, we see the urban world of São Paulo through the eyes of the poor themselves as opposed to simply looking into their eyes as Baudelaire did from his cafe table, imagining what they think and feel.

A revolutionary periphery hero was not a new idea in São Paulo at the turn of the millennium. In the picture below a dead man lies on the floor with his arms outstretched, his legs crossed. Beneath him are the words: *'seja marginal, seja herói '*- to be an outlaw, to be a hero. The image was created in 1967 by artist Hélio Oiticica and became an emblem of the resistance movement against the military regime that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985.[98] In Brazil the word *marginal* does not simply mean outlaw, it also means, simply, from the margins. Oiticia's dead hero demands status for the marginalised in a country where the poorest have always been exploited by



those in power. It's an outraged and tragic portrait although the status quo appears strong - the hero is already dead. Decades later, in *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos,* the situation does not appear to have progressed far. Whilst Cranium demands the respect of his brother's crew and all those in the favela community in which he lives, the positive story of a potential leader, a potential hero, ends darkly, with tragedy on the horizon. Cranium is picked up by the police, driven around São Paulo and beaten up. His brother's crew are enraged at the unfairness that a boy, who, unlike themselves, has 'no beef with no man', is tortured and beaten anyway. They want revenge and hustle an informer for the home

[98] McCaul, Kathleen, 'We are Favela!', *London Review of Books Blog,* July 2016, https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2016/july/we-are-favela!

addresses of the police involved. The story ends with the crew getting their guns ready for a night raid, though they don't tell Cranium, who would not want anyone killed. His problem, says the gangster narrator, who, finally, is not enlightened by his brother's example, is that his heart is too big.

Setting an example for a different way of life in the periphery or anywhere in the city appears in this story, as with Oiticia's dead hero, ultimately useless. *Eram Muitos Cavalos* is a relentlessly dark book, from the Psalm which opens the book, raging against the unjust and wicked, to the penultimate black page. However, like Ruffato in Frankfurt, I'd like to end this chapter on a note of hope. Whilst the works of Caldeira and Ruffato, together and apart, illuminate a particular dark and difficult time in the history of São Paulo, they were published on the eve of great and mostly positive change in the city and the country. These changes, discussed in my next chapter, were mostly political but they were literary too and they were bought about in significant part because of men and women from the periphery of São Paulo, who, like Cranium, saw clearly what was rotten around them and fought successfully against it as autonomous citizens as opposed to helpless victims.

Chapter 2

Sheyla Smanioto's *Desesterro*

Unearthing rural history in the contemporary megacity

Sheyla Smanioto's 2016 award winning novel *Desesterro* is stylistically, formally and thematically a very different book to *Eram Muitos Cavalos,* however it is similarly shaped by the megacity environment of São Paulo. The author herself has compared the way she thinks and writes to the way São Paulo periphery is 'both far from the city and within it. As I am.' Migrations to and within the city form the marrow of her response to her urban environment. These journeys structure *Desesterro,* in a similar way to how Ruffato's investigation of the variety and vastness of the megacity structure his vignette jump-cut form. Both authors are answering questions they have about the same megacity although their responses are individual and distinctive. A comparison between these two very different stylistic responses to one particular urban environment can perhaps throw light on what are the essential new megacity aesthetics, and which are unique to a particular artist.

Smanioto wrote her novel just over a decade after Ruffato published *Eram Muitos Cavalos,* and it is important to note that whilst they are investigating the same city, São Paulo changed a huge amount in those intervening years. The urbanist Raquel Rolnik points to how different the urban environment had become by the time Smanioto began writing, symbolically encapsulating these changes by describing two midnight journeys through the city. The first of these journeys, at the turn of the millennium, is seen from the point of view of a upper middle class male driving a bullet proof car, nervously watching streets which are full of jeopardy. His pleasure in the city mostly comes from shopping in secure complexes, buying European style bread for the family breakfast which he gives to his live-in maid to prepare when he returns home: inequality, crime, a securitised walled city. The second journey is seen through the eyes of a young woman from the periphery, at the end of a wild carnival party in the centre of the city. The streets have been wrested from criminals by the kids, who treat the centre as if it was their own and use public transport to get them back home to the far-off neighbourhoods in which they live. They walk home in the early dawn without incident: inclusivity, openness, more fun, less fear. This new frivolity does not enter Smanioto's own vision of the city, which is in its own way as relentlessly dark as Ruffato, however it does feed into her overall response to São Paulo, which is as a place of opportunity as opposed to simply vice and trauma. This vision of

the city as a refuge is also a product of Smanioto mining her own family's experience as immigrants, from the North of the country and also from Europe, who found a new life in the city. Whilst Ruffato stays absolutely in the moment, focussing on a single 24 hours in São Paulo, Smanioto ranges over time and space to bring different historical and geographical dimensions to the city. To put it simply: By comparing life in the city to life in the countryside, Smanioto leads us to believe that São Paulo is bad but not half as bad as some of the places that migrants have come from.

Where Smanioto and Ruffato do clearly cross paths is in their politics. Like Ruffato, Smanioto sees the society around her in terms of inequality, with the elite and powerful running roughshod over the weak and the vulnerable. Like Ruffato, her stylistic and formal choices are all at heart a response to what she has called a 'historical repetition of tragedies' – a continuing feudal society which disregards equality and human rights in favour of power and violence. A comparison of these novels suggests that the new megacity architecture of São Paulo is in fact embodying the historic colonial society of Brazil and writers of the megacity are responding to this phenonmenom in profound ways. This is something which is borne out in urban studies of the city, with Rolnik describing the ubiquitous fashion for even the smallest São Paulo apartment to have a maid's living quarters as a contemporary reflection of the colonial relationship between the grand house of the landlord and the *senzala,* or slave quarters, which were built in a way which would allow slaves to be observed at all times.

'*Praying for Forgotten Souls'*

The history of São Paulo and Brazil in general is of central importance to Smanioto, who says that *Desesterro* was her way of living her 'ancestry' and that 'Literature is a way of praying for all the forgotten souls' of Brazil's violent past. This is borne out in the structure of the novel, which flicks randomly between the present and the past, so different from Ruffato's own choice to begin his São

Paulo novel with the year, date and even the time of day. In *Desesterro,* the lifestyles of the women are remarkably old-fashioned, killing chickens, peeling cassava, having babies. There are however buses going to São Paulo from the countryside and the city has an established periphery which suggests the story happened sometime in the 20th or 21st century, although it is still vague. This nebulous timeframe is just one of the ways in which Brazil's past haunts Smanioto and her writing. The title itself is a made-up word meaning to unbury and it becomes clear in the closing chapters of *Desesterro* that one of the profound purposes of the book is to uncover the historic crimes of the rural past in the heart of the contemporary megacity. The diggers of Vila Marta have spent the entire book turning the periphery neighbourhood upside down in order to uncover a dead body. Although they seem unaffected by their discoveries the narrator herself says finally that 'forgetting is a crime without a corpse'[99]. Simultaneously, up in the Northern countryside, past crimes literally refuse to be buried when Penha, who at first appears as the powerful matriarch of the story but who is gradually revealed to have been abused throughout her entire life by the town in which she lives, will not stop in her grave. The locals find her disinterred, running alongside them in a gale:

> They chucked the body in again, put a tree on that unquiet thing, a creature to live on top of her, but the madwoman's arm came up along the roots, then her body, and she was being reborn whole. They threw her body back in, tramped all over it, set up houses there, sent up prayers, but in that earth her body would not stay.[100]

The folksy abstract way of telling a gory story feels just like a countryside tale. It is again so different to Ruffato's vernacular conversational street style, stylistically far removed from what a reader would perhaps expect from urban writing, however the dark fairytale quality of the storytelling continues on into São Paulo, reinforcing in language and content the way in which the past of the countryside haunts the urban present. This theme reaches its horror-filled apex when a body is exhumed in the city

[99] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2015), p 197, translations by Sophie Lewis and Laura Garmeson.
[100] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 249.

which appears to be from a murder that happened in rural Villaboinha. In a final blackly magical twist, the periphery of the city and the countryside then literally merge into one in 'the fantastical metamorphosis of Vila Marta Vilaboinha'.[101]

This connection between the countryside and the city is present in *Eram Muitos Cavalos* but faintly. Rural life is used mostly as a kind of idyllic foil to the dystopia of the megacity, especially in the memories of the girl from Minas Gerais, whose recollections of a happy childhood full of family and good food and beautiful landscapes make her current life in the megacity all the more desolate:

> Her radiant blue eyes scanning the green expanse of rolling hills and she was so happy the kind of happiness we feel at seven years of age and which now, with the stereo pounding on the thirteenth floor of an apartment high-rise in cerqueira-césar, as she's spread out drunk on the floor, she desperately recognises my god how did I let it crumble and slip between my fingers where did I lose it when my god when…[102]

In *Desesterro,* on the other hand, the countryside and the city are intrinsically linked and the episodic flicking between Vila Marta and Vilaboinha, each location viscerally described, makes the reader continually aware of how the city and the countryside operate together and apart. Rural life, for example, is violent and abusive with authority figures almost completely missing. In Vilaboinha there appears to be no priest, no doctor, not even a midwife, which is unfortunate for the many babies who die in the town, 'too listless to leave the womb'.[103] Events mostly happen in an animalistic pack. This mirrors not only the way in which one of Brazil's most famous writers, Euclides da Cunha, described the terrible effect of absentee rural landowners managing tenants 'far away from his vast estates, which in some cases he has never seen' but also the devastating results that the withdrawal of elites have had on public space in São Paulo as described by Ruffato and Caldeira.[104] The windy town of

[101] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 216.

[102] Ruffato, Luiz, *There Were Many Horses,* p 109.
[103] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 216.
[104] Da Cunha Euclides, *Rebellion in the Backlands,* trans. Elizabeth Lowe, (London: 2010, Penguin) p 103.

Vilaboinha feels directly inspired by the traumatic past of rural Brazil made famous by De Cunha in his report *Rebellion in the Backlands*. It is a town 'where midday is as terrible as midnight',[105] where a fresh corpse turns up every day and where no-one ever saw anything, but everyone knows where to find the spade and hoe to bury the evidence. Abuse is ingrained into the fabric of the town, with child abuse, rape and domestic abuse not just accepted but sanctioned by weary folk dragging their 'lives out, sweating, dishevelled, half-dead'.[106] 'To put it bluntly,' says the narrator, 'Villaboinha is a good piece of land for leaving.'[107]

By focusing in on this immigration from the Northern countryside to São Paulo, Smanioto harnasses her story onto one of the great demographic narratives of Brazil and the megacity. Contextualising the megacity as she does is one of the reasons that her vision of São Paulo is perhaps kinder than that of Ruffato. One of the main reasons that São Paulo grew so quickly and to such an enormous size was the steady exodus of thousands of backlanders such as *Desesterro's* Fátima and former president Lula da Silva's own family, who wanted to make a better life for themselves in the big city. There are now so many Northeasterners in São Paulo that the city hosts an annual day of the Northeasterner to celebrate its status as the largest city of Northeasterners in the country. [108] Around the time that slavery officially ended, the thousands coming from the North to São Paulo were suddenly joined by millions of European immigrants whom Brazilian elites expected to replace slaves on plantations but who, once they arrived in Brazil, gravitated towards the cities where they could be free and find a variety of work.[109] In the context of the migrations from the North-East in particular, but also immigrants choosing between indentured rural labour and a free life in the city, São Paulo appears not as the vice-ridden dystopia of Ruffato and Caldeira but a fictional promised land. It is the dream of going to São Paulo that sustains *Desesterro's* Fátima through her traumatic marriage and the

[105] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 49.
[106] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 200.
[107] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,*p 90.
[108] Nelson, Lin, 'SP: Centro de Tradições Nordestinas comemora o Dia do Nordestino', *Agencia Brasil*, October 2021, https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/geral/noticia/2021-10/sp-centro-de-tradicoes-nordestinas-comemora-o-dia-do-nordestino.
[109] Holston, James, *Insurgent Citizenship,* p 124.

anonymity the city provides is not isolating but such an enormous relief to Fátima that she describes it in the almost biblical language of rebirth:

> Fátima's sure that São Paulo is a good land to arrive in. Fátima and the child will arrive in the rain, they'll bathe in the rain nothing stays stuck in a rainbath, only us. The earth washes away altogether and the memories of Vilaboinha along with it. Nobody refuses her *feijão* or cornmeal or *farofa*, making her way in life like this, small child in her arms, such a tiny little thing. Nobody refuses her a plate of food a favour a place to stay, look how tiny the child is, look at the poor little mite.[110]

The reality, perhaps predictably, is not so idyllic. The marginal neighbourhood of Vila Marta is obviously one of the very poorest, made up as it is of clapboard shacks and muddy alleys, right at the city's furthest and least desirable edge, weaving itself raggedly into the surrounding countryside, a plank over a stream, a washing line over a field, a scrappy bit of woodland beyond the last row of shacks. It is not portrayed however, as a rubbish dump, a *quilombo,* or a desolate kind of warzone, as it is Ruffato or in the work of other periphery writers such as Carolina Maria de Jesus and Ferrez. Instead, it is a sanctuary. The tiny clapboard shack in which Fátima lives is the scene of some of *Desesterro's* very few happy domestic moments. It's an incredibly tight fit, even just for her, and Fátima sleeps with her feet between cardboard boxes containing her very few possessions. She is free, however, and this tight squeeze does not feel meagre but as viscerally delicious 'as putting a warm tongue into the bony hole in a tooth'.[111] When Fátima's daughter Scarlett arrives, the two women share all the household duties, getting up before sunrise to sweep and clean so that their home gleams. In a world where men take no part in the household labour this feels symbolically ideal. [112] The shack acts finally as a kind of citadel in which the two women can shelter - from the past crimes of

[110] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 75.
[111] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 30.
[112] Caldeira, Teresa, 'Gender is Still the Battleground', *Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p 422.

Vilaboinha, from the memories and ghosts of their elders and finally from Fátima's abusive husband Tonho, who hounds them to their door but cannot enter.

Smanioto's depiction of the margins as a place of refuge and opportunity correspond not only to other fictional accounts of slums around the world but also the history of the periphery in São Paulo itself. [113] Holston describes how when the city's poor began to settle the surrounding wasteland, building their houses and neighbourhoods by hand, millions of Brazilians became property and landowners for the first time. Literacy rose steeply which gave the poor a new political power denied to them since illiterates had been banned from voting in 1882. [114] Thus, an unexpected result of the rural poor's migration to São Paulo was the autonomy and independence which the elites of Brazil had spent so much time and legal energy denying them. The great emotion attached to this is captured by Holston in an interview with one of the earliest settlers of the periphery who describes the deep tranquillity that having an 'independent corner' gave himself and his family. [115] Although Carolina Maria de Jesus, whose diary of life in a São Paulo favela became the best-selling book in Brazilian history, does not feel such gratitude, her own story echoes this newfound liberty. Although she hates the favela in which she lives, describing it as a pigsty and the people who live there 'human wrecks',[116] she herself had moved from the countryside and did not want to return. The hut that she built herself provided her, like Fátima, with a security that she could not find anywhere else. She worries about many things, but she never has to worry about paying rent or being moved on. When she hears from one local that they cannot find work in the city and so are returning to the north, she feels unequivocal pity. 'They´re going to pick cotton,' she says, ´I felt sorry for her. I have picked cotton. I felt sorry for her.'[117] It appears, from this perspective, that the image of monstrous São Paulo is a relative one and Ruffato's poor *caipirinha,* spread-eagled drunk upon the floor in a São Paulo

[113] McCaul, Kathleen, *Megacity,* p 23.
[114] Holston, James, *Insurgent Citizenship*, p 101.
[115] Holston, James, *Insurgent Citizenship,* p 173.

[116] Maria de Jesus, Carolina, *Child of the Dark,* p 26.
[117] Maria de Jesus, Carolina, *Child of the Dark,* p 131.

high-rise, should not be so hard on her vice-laden self. When she asks how she let her idyllic rural childhood crumble away, one answer could be that it was never really the way she remembered it.

'*The Periphery Inside Her'*

Any study of São Paulo's urban literature would do well to dwell for some time on the periphery of the city. The poor, often handmade neighbourhoods that ring the city are not only indicative of the prevalence of slums in megacities across the world but also spawned the renowned São Paulo literary movement, *literatura marginal*. Ruffato does spend time in the periphery although he does not dwell here much longer than anywhere else in the city, his vision almost always conforming to the general perception of the São Paulo margins as dangerous, difficult places to live. Smanioto, however, never leaves the poor marginal neighbourhood of Vila Marta, creating a powerful and realistic portrait of how isolated these peripheries can be. Like many in the city, Fatima's home is cut off from even the most basic of city services such as transport or healthcare. Still, the margins of the city have provided her with the independence, autonomy and anonymity that were impossible in the feudal, violent countryside from which she fled, and this dual vision of the periphery forms one of the defining stylistic hallmarks of *Desesterro's* megacity landscape.

Sheyla Smanioto grew up in the periphery of São Paulo and *Desesterro* is not only the history of rural migration to São Paulo but also the journey of self-discovery she had to go on to travel from the margins of the city to its centre. She says:

> There are only twenty kilometres separating the centre and the periphery of São Paulo, where I was born, but it took me twenty-four years to make the journey between the two, and to feel as though the city centre also belonged to me. It wasn't just a case of taking three buses. Before that, I had to understand who I was, as a woman who came from the periphery, the daughter of northeasterners and of immigrants far removed from their original culture. I had

> to understand that being a woman and coming from the periphery meant taking three buses in order to speak, five buses in order to be heard, and seven buses in order to be respected. There is no train for this journey. You have to set out on foot, taking step after step, and that was what I did when I was writing Desesterro. I wrote it drawing on memories of my upbringing combined with the experience of crossing a social divide and reaching the other side. And that's what Desesterro is about: it is about the distances that we cover within ourselves to arrive at who we truly are. It is about the social distances that leave their mark upon our bodies and tell us what we can and cannot do. I don't write this aimlessly: the periphery is both far from the city and within it. As am I. I am always far from and within São Paulo.[118]

Smanioto's introduction is particularly helpful in understanding the abstract couplet which punctuates two parts of the novel:

> *Daughter is: love that eats us from inside.*
> *Periphery is far from the city inside her.*[119]

This strange conversation hardly makes more sense within the context of the book than outside it, however, together with Smanioto's own reflections on São Paulo, it begins to illuminate the conundrum of the city's periphery. The enormous ring of poor, self-made outer neighbourhoods are at once an integral and defining part of the city whilst at the same time being far away from the centre, both practically, with commutes of hours for the many periphery residents who work in wealthy central neighbourhoods, and also in the imaginations of *paulistas*, who see their city in terms of an inner circle of sanctioned, serviced and relatively well-to-do districts surrounded by a band of urban poverty characterised by handmade - or *auto-construido* as they say in Brazil - houses of varying quality, severe lack of infrastructure as well as organised crime and violence. There is a history in São

[118] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Megacity,* ed. McCaul Moura, Kathleen, p 272.
[119] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro*, p 79.

Paulo of poor periphery residents being cut off from the benefits of the city's central sanctum - from its culture, its parks and even its basic services - not only by distance but also by the physical and invisible walls described in chapter one, prevented by security or simply not feeling worthy to enter the libraries, shopping malls and museums that should be for the entire city but have often been, in reality, solely for central residents.[120]

Whilst Ruffato travels in his writing all over the city and lives in the vibrant middle-class central neighbourhood of Perdizes, Smanioto, in reality and in fiction, keeps herself firmly planted in the periphery which she so mindfully journeyed away from. However, these two different responses to how to articulate the setting of the megacity result in remarkably similar atmospheres of isolation and both point to the difficulty of residents to move freely around the city. Unlike *Eram Muitos Cavalos,* which manically jumps around São Paulo, *Desesterro* never moves from one small marginal neighbourhood. Indeed, the narrator seems to view the periphery as completely separate from the rest of the city. When the diggers begin their mad excavation, throwing the tight alleys into confusion, the narrator says, 'Goddamnit, São Paulo's big enough, what do they want with Vila Marta?'[121] Cutting off the poverty-stricken *bairro* in this way echoes the point that Ruffato himself makes about São Paulo and which first inspired him to write *Eram Muitos Cavalos*. Whilst there are people, he says, living in the centre in the same way they would live in New York or in London, there are many in the margins who live in a kind of medieval 'social abyss', unable to partake in any other part of the city than the one in which they find themselves. [122] Ruffato's image of the ragged edges of São Paulo, archaic, isolated and backward, is captured well in the directions given to reach the dig site of *Desesterro's* Vila Marta. Localised to the extreme, the directions could only be given by a local who knew that ghetto intimately, with none of the street names, apartment numbers or other address indicators which would be expected in an everyday modern city neighbourhood. The periphery landscape appears old-fashioned and rural, not in the picturesque way described by Ruffato's girl

[120] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Rolling with the Rolezinhos of Sao Paulo', *Al Jazeera English*, February 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/2/24/rolling-with-the-rolezinhos-of-sao-paulo.
[121] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 25.
[122] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Urban Protest in Brazil: The City and The Politics of Luiz Ruffato'.

from the countryside, but tainted with the sinister hint that some crime has been buried here far away from the everyday law of the city:

> In Vila Marta you climb up the rocky slope one two three posts past a *pitanga* tree shack shack shack turn into the backstreet after Torto's bar twists into the alley before the yellow two-storey house the clothes-mender's sign ice-cold beer stairs on the left another flight of steps cross the plot of land careful of the nail in the plank over the stream into the backstreet shack shack go up the steps, watch out it's slippy, put on boots, flip-flops will do, wellies for you, cross the plot go straight on through the backstreets, keep turning left, keep going keep going up to the two-storey house with an aerial, next to that there's a backstreet go on go on go on until you reach the field, there'll be a pile of washing line from there to the end, over by the forest, just beyond the houses, and you're there, you can dig up what's there.[123]

This stream-of-consciousness patter is, in some ways, like the slangy dialogue of many of Ruffato's vignettes. It does not however seem to have the same clued-in patter – it's more old-fashioned, distant, village-like. The effect, once again, is similar - that of megacity residents locked in their own world, in the periphery, or the centre, to the point that locals have distinguishing accents, just like they would in a large nation with regional cultures and language. Although the styles of these two novels are very different, the megacity, in both Ruffato and Smanioto appears to contain a myriad of divided and disconnected regions.

……..

[123] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 25.

It's not all bad news, however. In the years between *Eram Muitos Cavalos* and *Desesterro*, there were enormous and positive changes in São Paulo's periphery. One of the most important of these changes was the steep decline in the city's homicide rates which were cut in half between 2001 and 2007 - a phenomenon researchers Goertzal and Khan call 'The Great São Paulo Homicide Drop'.[124] This meant the periphery was a far safer place to live and travel to and from. A distinctive periphery culture - in art, music and writing began to gain pace at this time. Caldeira argues that two new municipal policies which came into practice after the election of Lula da Silva in 2003 had an enormous effect on the cultural life of the periphery and caused a surge in the number of cultural producers there, one of whom was Smanioto herself. The first was the building of 45 large multi-purpose cultural centres called CEUS which combined schools, libraries, theatres and other spaces which had been until then almost non-existent in the periphery.[125] The second was VAI, a programme which funded artistic projects by 14 - 29-year-olds from the periphery. From 2004, when Smanioto turned 14, until 2012, 9.5 million dollars was invested in different art ventures, 'provoking a dynamism never seen before and at a scale only public funding can create.'[126] And whilst new train and metro lines connecting the centre and the periphery began to open up, the growth of smart phones and access to the internet meant the young people of the periphery were more plugged into citywide, national and international culture than they had ever been before. Caldeira describes how these young artists, the children and grandchildren of those first migrants who first moved 'into the middle of nowhere to build their houses' looked at the city quite differently from their parents, with more confidence and a new pride in their own marginal culture. [127] One example Caldeira gives is the rap group Racionais MCs, who became hugely popular throughout the city but consciously reinforced a belief that the centre was a different world from the periphery and 'that they spoke from there (the periphery) and to other people like them'[128]. She cites their famous lyrics 'the world is different on this side of the bridge' as a powerful 'elaboration of the 'dichotomy between there and here'.[129]

[124] Goertzel, T and Kahn T, 'The Great São Paulo Homicide Drop', *Homicide Studies*, 13 (2009), p 398 – 410.
[125] Caldeira, Teresa, 'Gender is Still the Battleground', p 419
[126] Caldeira, Teresa, 'Gender is Still the Battleground', p 419
[127] Caldeira, Teresa, 'Gender is Still the Battleground', p 419.
[128] Caldeira, Teresa, 'Gender is Still the Battleground', p 415.
[129] Caldeira, Teresa, 'Gender is Still the Battleground', p 415.

Another literary example of this marginal pride is Smanioto's own journey as a writer. Although she travelled away from the periphery, receiving degrees in literature from centrally located universities, she also chose, imaginatively and politically, to return back to where she came from and has aligned herself in articles and in her fiction with the renowned periphery literary movement *Literatura Marginal.*[130] The periphery is, as her abstract couplet states 'always inside her'.

Literatura Marginal is a movement of writers and poets that come from the periphery of São Paulo. The name was coined by the writer Ferrez whose cult novel *Capão Pecado* kicked off a fashion for writing from the periphery and who is seen by many as the father of the movement.[131] Their work is often biographical, heavily influenced by rap and hip-hop, and marked in several ways by the periphery itself - poverty, violence, and the heroism of survival on the edge of Latin America's biggest city.[132] It is now a hugely popular scene, held together with regular poetry salons called *saraus*. The oldest of these*, Cooperifa*, is a landmark event with many writers from the city centre, including myself, making the pilgrimage to the southern periphery to hear local poets. It is a festive scene, with buses coming and going well into the night, people spilling out into the street lit by Zé's bar, where reformed drug addicts, cleaners and local students recite verses amongst beer crates, plastic tables and a well-thumbed library of books including Montaigne, Descartes and Kant.[133] Smanioto is only one a whole new generation of *marginal* writers to now have the confidence to see value in their own experiences at the edges of São Paulo and to write them down.

The movement has sometimes found itself at odds with critics in both urban and literary studies. One of the things that makes *Desesterro* an important book in the development of São Paulo's marginal literature is the way in which the novel not only moves on from these criticisms but manages to turn what have previously been seen as weaknesses in writing from the periphery into particular strengths. Caldeira cites one of the greatest complications with the rise in artistic production in the periphery as the gender bias against women. In her article, 'Gender is Still the Battleground' she uses

---

[130] Ito, Carol, 'A Palavra e Deles', *UOL Online*, March 2018, https://revistatrip.uol.com.br/tpm/jessica-balbino-criou-o-projeto-margens-para-dar-visibilidade-as-mulheres-perifericas-na-literatura.
[131] McCaul, Kathleen, 'In Conversation with Ferrez, Father of *Literatura Marginal.*
[132] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Poetry and poverty on the margins in Brazil', *Al Jazeera English*, April 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/4/8/poetry-and-poverty-on-the-margins-in-brazil.
[133] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Poetry and poverty on the margins in Brazil'.

Hip-Hop, graffiti and the *Literatura Marginal* scene to demonstrate a male-dominated world in which female artists have felt excluded, harassed and sometimes even abused. Male writers and rappers represent women as either saintly mothers, particularly their own, or untrustworthy femme fatales - Caldeira uses the Racionais MCs song about promiscuous, disingenuous and dangerous 'Vulgar Women' as an example. The same derogatory attitude towards women is displayed in the character of Matcherros in *Capão Pecado*, who is constantly suspicious that his girlfriend is cheating on him and thinks she's getting fat.[134] The poet Elizandra Souza told me in 2016 that women artists faced an enormous battle in the periphery:

> Women are rarely invited to join in with poetry debates, or at discussions…The *saraus* are mostly organised in bars, which, culturally, are places that only men go. Women who hang around bars are seen as loose, sluttish. We've broken that down now, but there's still the question of violence against women. This affects women from all classes, but the women from the periphery have to fight against the stigma of the eroticised body which comes from the time of slavery, when the body of the black woman was a body to be used, not to have affection for. This is a theme that comes up a lot in our writing. *Literatura Marginal* is trying to propose change and a new society but often with machismo protagonists, and we want to change that.[135]

This feminist insurgency is so central to Smanioto's writing that she says that there is no way that the urgent discussion on the condition of women would not appear in *Desesterro.*[136]Sexual and domestic violence are at the heart of the novel and are part of the great crimes that refuse to be buried. The historical element to this violence, which began in what Souza calls 'the time of slavery', is particularly important and Smanioto explains that the abusive character of Tonho is not only addicted to violence but to the 'historical repetition of tragedies.'[137] Tonho is first introduced to us through the

[134] Ferrez, *Capão Pecado*, p 64, trans. Victor Meadowcroft.
[135] McCaul, Kathleen, 'Poetry and poverty on the margins in Brazil'.
[136] Eralldo, Douglas.
[137] Eralldo, Douglas.

the eyes of a photographer, employed to take a family photo after the christening of the newest female member. It is supposed to be a proud family moment but what is actually captured is the women's painfully calm endurance in a brutal male-dominated landscape, 'prepared to wait out their entire lives…looking the camera in the eye unafraid of what it might tear out'[138] At the heart of the scene whilst also absent Tonho appears at first as simply an irresponsible, selfish gap in the family portrait. As the novel goes on however, Tonho is revealed to be a monster, a man who not only enjoys killing dogs but beating 'anything dog-like to death'.[139] The depiction of the violence done to his wife Fátima is gut-wrenchingly visceral. Gory, maimed bodies, body parts, fluids and entrails are everywhere, sickeningly dissected in words, into meat, flesh, cooked food, animals even - when Tonho beats Fátima for the last time, she dies as a 'dog-woman':[140]

> Tonho pulls Fátima's hair, her nails biting his flesh, Tonho pulls Fátima's face and her dark circles to the ground…back plucked bare, eyes full of blood the woman's rags on the floor and this desire. He presses Fátima down squeezes her neck her insipid body, gives her weary donkey bollocks another slap, another slap to see if she'll learn. He drags Fátima's face smeared with blood…[141]

The graphic imagery is perhaps the author's own method of fighting not only readers inured by the sheer number of victims in Brazil's violent past but also the characters of *Desesterro* themselves - Tonho, Penha and the whole of the backward little town - who accept, normalise and sanction violence against women. Names are of huge significance in *Desesterro* and none is more obviously symbolic than that of the matriarch Maria de Penha. The Maria de Penha law was passed in 2006 in an effort to reduce the significant domestic violence in Brazil, named after the activist Maria de Penha who was continually beaten by her husband over their 23 year marriage, ending up as a paraplegic

[138] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 19.
[139] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 9.
[140] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 213.
[141] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 213.

after two murder attempts.[142] Maria de Penha of *Desesterro* is, unfortunately for Fátima, not an activist. After Tonho rapes Fátima for the first time when she is not more than a child, he goes to Penha and 'gets straight to the point; she won't do for a decent man anymore, I even rimmed her.' [143] Penha agrees he can marry her granddaughter. The formal choices made to illuminate the historic cycle of abuses makes this moment particularly shocking. The episodic flicking between the present and past mean that a reader has already witnessed various intimate scenes between granddaughter and grandmother which have taken place after the awful sacrificial marriage and show just how accepted abuse is in this society. The same jumping structure also makes clear that Penha is simply acting out her part in that 'historical repetition of tragedies'. We learn of her early history through the last third of the book - an abuse and rape victim herself who continually buries trauma to survive and keep the family intact. The dilemma between Penha's pain in witnessing her granddaughter's wounds and her own role in perpetrating this violence is neatly played out in several interchanges condensed into one conversation. It's another example of the way Smanioto deftly concertinas time for dramatic purpose - so many excuses for accidents coming so quickly after one another appear in this way almost impossible to believe:

> 'What's that, Maria de Fátima?'
> 'I bumped into the corner of the sink, Grandma...'
>
> 'And all those marks on your leg?'
> 'Must be from scratching, Grandma Penha...'
>
> 'Take care of yourself, Fátima, cut your nails.'
>
> 'Don't worry, Grandma, I'll cut them...'
>
> 'Is that blood on your neck?'
> 'I was taking the chicken off the bone...'

---

[143] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 114,

> ‘And the graze on your cheek?’
>
> ‘Must have been the razor...’
>
> ‘You chipped your tooth again, don’t you look after yourself?’
>
> ‘I was distracted, Grandma, see.’
>
> ‘Damn, Fátima, is that all it was?’
>
> ‘Believe me, Grandma. At least try.’ [144]

The structures of abuse against women demonstrated throughout the book to be strong as houses and which Smanioto says she uses her writing to fight against, are, in the end, vanquished. Fátima is transformed and escapes to São Paulo. [145] Tonho is eaten by the same dogs that howl inside him. The way in which the fictional de Penha dies, urinated on by the nameless granddaughter who hates her, is a pathetic scene far removed from the machismo style of *Literatura Marginal* which Caldeira and female periphery writers find so problematic. At the same time the scene does, in its own unique way, powerfully represent what the founders of *Literatura Marginal* - and also Ruffato - want to do with their own poetry and that is, to put it very crudely, piss on the historically exploitative status quo established by the powerful in Brazil. Penha spends the entire novel bullying and abusing her second granddaughter, beginning at her birth by refusing to name her, an act which has echoes of the way in which slaves in Brazil had their own birth names erased.[146] In the end, however, justice seems to be served, with the girl treating her grandmother with the same inhumanity and cruelty which she herself received. Yet another of *Desesterro’s* ‘historical repetition of tragedies’:

> Grandma doesn’t move when the girl kicks her in the shin, or when Skinny’s teeth tug on her leg’s wrinkled skin, she doesn’t move when her youngest granddaughter gives

[144] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 87.
[145] Eralldo, Douglas.
[146] López, Laura Álvarez, “Who Named Slaves and Their Children? Names and Naming Practices among Enslaved Africans Brought to the Americas and Their Descendants with Focus on Brazil.” *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 27, (2015), 169-171, (p162).

> it back she spits on her, or when the doggy pisses on her toes, nor even when her granddaughter, good idea Skinny, when her granddaughter goes and pisses on her.
>
> Grandma isn't breathing.[147]

This original and difficult scene could also perhaps be used as evidence in a second criticism of *Literatura Marginal,* investigated by critic Lucas Amaral de Oliveira, and that is that periphery writing, whilst remarkable for being produced in such difficult circumstances, cannot be judged in the same way as the established literary canon. Oliveira believes this is partly due to 'old-school' critics 'being incapable of analysing the innovations brought by this kind of literary production'.[148] It is also partly due to the defiant stance of periphery literature, which celebrates grammatical errors and low register as part of its heritage. Periphery poet Sergio Vaz, for example, claims he and his fellow writers have no need for critics whom he believes just want sweet and easy-to-digest material instead of the truth contained in their own 'harsh, dry, outspoken poetry':

> …sometimes with accents missing, other times without a comma, but even so poetry, with the smell of gunpowder, with the taste of blood, with the pus from a disease without medicine, bare foot, afraid, but with courage, fighting, with sugarcane molasses and the damn pipe…Poetry has taken to the street and it will never be the same. The academics? Let them eat brioches![149]

The cult novelist Ferrez, who has an international German agent and whose novel *Capão Pecado* is still in print 20 years after it was first published, felt literary recognition in the form of prizes or other accolades had been denied him not because of the way that he wrote but because of where he came

[147] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 101.

[148] Oliveira, Lucas Amaral de, 'Speaking for themselves: Observations on a "marginal" tradition in Brazilian Literature', *Brasiliana Journal for Brazilian Studies*. 5, (2016), 441 – 471, (p 462)

[149] Oliveira, Lucas Amaral de, p 461.

from and his themes. When I interviewed him in 2016 he did not seem quite as sanguine as Vaz, saying, with no little emotion, that he had been told he would never win a literary prize because he wrote about poor people.[150] In his *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* Terry Eagleton seems to agree with Ferrez when he says that the value of literature is a reflection of the society who reads it.[151] However, Smanioto and Ruffato are both from poor backgrounds and both write about poverty and crime ridden societies with great acclaim. Eagleton cites difficult, unusual language as another important marker used to define literature, originally by the Russian formalists.[152] Perhaps it is the 'low' street style in which Ferrez and other *marginal* writers present their stories which prevent their works winning prestigious prizes? Eagleton points out that ordinary speech can also be literature however Caldeira captures a particular 'lowness' in language, explicit and offensive, which has come to define periphery cultural production:

> Rappers, writers of marginal literature, and other artists from the peripheries articulate a powerful and complex voice, a balancing act of trying to transform derogation into a source of dignity. They speak from the perspective of dangerous peripheries and of the prejudices expressed against them. Instead of contesting the terms that stigmatize them, they adopt them to identify themselves, reinforcing the terms of derogation. Moreover, they create a new aesthetic that in general exaggerates whatever is considered negative: precariousness, violence, bad words, ugliness, defacement, and spoken Portuguese that ignores correct grammar.[153]

Still, even this violent, street-inspired style does not really distinguish *Desesterro* from the rest of *Literatura Marginal.* Smanioto seems to do all the negative things listed by Caldeira. The novel is

[150] McCaul, Kathleen, 'In Conversation with Ferrez, Father of Literatura Marginal'.
[151] Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p 10.
[152] Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* p 4.
[153]Caldeira, Teresa, 'Gender is Still the Battleground', p 416

written in colloquial, difficult Portuguese which often ignores grammar and employs many made-up turns of phrase, just as many acclaimed works of Western literature were written in colloquial English which also often ignored grammar and employed made-up turns of phrase. Wordsworth and Colridge's *Poetic Ballards,* Joyce's *Ulysses,* Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* all value a closeness to regional voices over elevated, 'literary' language. And if 'precariousness, violence, bad words, ugliness and defacement' were written on the cover of the book they would not do too bad a job of illustrating just what a reader would find inside. They could all be ticked off at once in that moment when de Penha's grand-daughter pisses on her dead body.

There are, I believe, a few important ways in which *Desesterro* marks itself out from other works of São Paulo's periphery literature. Firstly, *Literatura Marginal* generally puts community and collaboration before individual artistic vision. The first edition of *Capão Pecado,* for example, contains contributions – texts, sketches, photographs - from a whole community and is, in the words of critic Sofia Beal 'a collective scrapbook of a marginalized community with Ferrez as its lead voice…a collaborative multi-media portrait of a place, a work of not only art but also community solidarity.'[154] This philosophy of community artwork was demonstrated to me when I visited the *Cooperifa* poetry night. Anyone and everyone were welcome to stand up and recite their verses, talent was unimportant compared to documenting your lived experiences. When a young poet received a weak round of applause the compere remonstrated with the audience saying 'Come on people! We are better than that! We are Favela!'[155] The audience cheered intensely.

Desesterro, on the other hand, is a singular vision which brings together a variety of different styles of writing and registers far removed from the non-fiction diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus or the simple, documentary street-style of Ferrez. The story begins with the lilting colloquialism '*Em Vilaboinha, lá para as bandas do norte'* which means 'In Vilaboinha, up there in the North,'. It's just how any Northeasterner on any corner of São Paulo could start his own story. But the language

[154] McCaul, Kathleen, 'We are Favela!', *London Review of Books,* July 2016, https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2016/july/we-are-favela!

[155] Oliveira, Lucas Amaral de, p 456.

quickly becomes poetic, intense, repetitive, puzzling, full of images but little plot, focusing in on the act of Tonho trying to kill a dog, going over the scene from many different angles building to a choric conclusion. It is a scene written with the confidence of a writer who believes their reader to be equal to themselves, the kind of reader who will stay the course through fragmented pieces of history, scattered conversations, ghost stories, couplets of poetry, magical realism and horror until the whole finally makes profound sense. Unlike most *Literatura Marginal* writers, often inspired by hip-hop and testimonial writing, Smanioto writes in the context of Latin American and World Literature. [156] It was a paperback copy of Gabriel Garcia Marquez that first introduced her to 'what literature was capable of'[157] and Marquez's influence can still be seen in *Desesterro's* own dark brand of magic realism – turning into someone else by eating their entrails, unburying decapitated gorillas in the middle of a city, convoys of ghosts arriving from the middle of no-where. And whilst Smanioto says that she was not directly influenced by modernism, she is more than aware of its history and can cite a host of seminal writers which the novel responds directly to – Kafka, Cortázar, Rulfo and João Cabral de Melo Neto.[158] This is the same simultaneous reading and writing craft practiced by time-honoured writers such as Marquez and Joyce among many others. Perhaps it is this ability to create a particular personal literary canon in which she can then situate her own writing which helped Smanioto in reality, and in fiction, make that great leap from the periphery to the centre. At the same time, she magically manages, just as in a Marquez story, to keep her imagination in the isolated, jungle of the periphery as well as the rural backlands. In this way the novel is able to capture something which almost all *Literaratura Marginal* seems to be clutching in some way towards, and that is the sense that the periphery of the city, 'all those shaky houses', 'built on feverish earth' is the embodiment of Brazil's rural past and all its crimes unearthed, 'the fantastical metamorphosis of Vilaboinha Vila Marta'.[159] Smanioto's voracious talent is to turn remembering this into literature so meaty and so sensuous:

[156] Eralldo, Douglas.
[157] Eralldo, Douglas.
[158] Eralldo, Douglas.
[159] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 147.

Hunger: having a word on the tip of your tongue but you don't remember.

Remembering: finding a trace of the taste of flesh on a bare bone.[160]

Conclusion

Although markedly different in their style, their approach to form, to language, to reading, Ruffato and Smanioto share remarkably similar politics. I believe that their activism against inequality and abuse are at the heart of São Paulo's new megacity fiction. Both their investigations into the cityscape uncover just how Brazil's colonial society which was founded on 'deprivilege, illegality and violence'[161] has become embodied in the contemporary architecture and infrastructure of the megacity. Smanioto herself says that language is political and both writers advocate for the weak in a violently unequal society. This activism is also at the heart of the movement *Literatura Marginal* as well as other individual writers I spoke to whilst researching this thesis, such as the poet Dirceu Vila.

Reading in this environment can also become a small kind of insurgency, as Ruffato said after the 2018 murder of Black LGBT politician Marielle Franco:

> It is difficult to live in Brazil and close our eyes to the sad reality that surrounds us. What is more difficult is living in Brazil and fighting to change this sad reality that surrounds us... But there are many, many who do this... And you are doing it now, all over the country, at the very moment that you read this article.[162]

[160] Smanioto, Sheyla, *Desesterro,* p 285.
[161] Starling, Heoisa and Schwarz Moritz, Lilia, *Brazil: A Biography,* p 393.
[162] Ruffato, Luiz, 'A final, quem matou Marielle?', *El Pais,* June 2018, https://brasil.elpais.com/autor/luiz-fernando-ruffato-de-souza/.

Whilst there is a clear sense in the work of Smanioto and Ruffato and other *Paulista* writers that the world which they are describing is unfair and needs to change, it is less obvious whether their writing can have a significant effect on the megacity society in which they operate. Ruffato's speech at the 2017 Frankfurt bookfair caused enough of a stir in the literary world to inspire a whole anthology of criticism analysing literature and ethics in Brazil.[163] However, the president which Ruffato ruffled, Michael Temer, had not been elected to office, but arrived there through what a significant number of critics described as a coup by Brazil's elitist and traditional right-wing politicians and he stayed in power until the current president Bolsonaro was elected in 2019. [164] Bolsonaro's presidency has been characterised by the same inhumanity and sense of impunity that the old rural *coronels* were known for: persecution of minorities, wanton burning of the Amazon rainforest, proliferation of fake news, steep increase in violence and a shockingly inhumane response to Covid-19. Some in Brazil have linked him to the killers of Marielle Franco.

However, my personal and mostly positive experience of São Paulo suggests that powerful individual voices such as Ruffato and Smanioto, as well as city movements like *Literatura Marginal* can bring about change even in a megacity of more than 10 million people. My first experience of the city, arriving on the invitation of a local who was to become my husband, taken from the congested airport to a small apartment in the far North Zone of São Paulo, was, unsurprisingly, given the previous chapters, difficult. It took one of Brazil's most venerated architects, Ruy Ohtake, to explain to me what was needed to get to know, to appreciate and perhaps even enjoy the megacity:

> São Paulo is a city you must know better. The first impression of the city is not good. São Paulo has no natural landscape. The development of São Paulo happened in less than 500 years, too quickly, in a very short time. São Paulo was a city of work. So, to see São Paulo you must stay some time, to make some friends and know many little places, beautiful

[163] Carvalho, de Vincius Mariano and Gavioli Nicola, *Literature and Ethics in Contemporary Brazil,* (London: Routledge, 2020).
[164] Perla, Hector, 'Here's Why Some People Think Brazil is in the Middle of a Soft Coup', *Washington Post,* April 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/04/16/heres-why-some-people-think-brazil-is-in-the-middle-of-a-soft-coup/.

> cultural spaces, visit art events, bookstores, restaurants and parks like Ibiripuera. It's an important mix to know São Paulo.[165]

I interviewed Ohtake in 2012 for the magazine ArtInfo, not long after arriving in the city. Soon I found myself enjoying São Paulo in the way he described, freely moving around through a mixture of public transport and taxis, writing about art and culture and investigating the periphery of the city. I did not often feel threatened, despite the city's reputation for prolific violence. I would like to argue that Ruy Ohtake and the years around which we talked are both representative of a relatively egalitarian and optimistic time in São Paulo's history. Ohtake grew up in the working-class inner-city neighbourhood of Mooca and went on to design some of the city's contemporary icons: the enormous stone arc that is Hotel Unique as well the glistening glass tower that houses the art institution named in honour of his mother the artist Tomie Ohtake. Whilst these buildings are symbolic of the wealthy and elitist megacity world criticised by urbanists such as Stephen Graham, Ohtake himself overturned the idea that contemporary megacity architecture cannot, or will not, engage with the poverty that often surrounds their centre. [166] In 2003, Ohtake was misquoted as saying that the favela Heliopolis was the ugliest thing in São Paulo.[167] He corrected his meaning, explaining the ugliest thing in the city for him was the difference between the poor and rich neighbourhoods, in particular Heliopolis and Morumbi. It is just this juxtaposition that photographer Tuca Viera famously captured with his image of Morumbi and Paraisopolis the following year, in 2004. Ohtake received, some days later, a call from a community leader from Heliopolis, asking him to come and help make the favela better. Ohtake, with the support of the São Paulo city hall, went on to design and build a new housing complex, a library, a cultural centre, a park and a school.

This story is not only an example of the strong political activism in the periphery of São Paulo, where it is not unusual for an internationally famous architect, or indeed the mayor, to take a

---

[165] McCaul, Kathleen, private interview notes.
[166] Graham, Stephen, *Vertical,* (London: Verso, 2016).
[167] Carvalho, Guilherme, 'Social Architecture: The Misunderstanding that led Ruy Ohtake to improve Brazil's second largest favela', *Archdaily.com,* July 2018, https://www.archdaily.com/897700/social-architecture-the-misunderstanding-that-led-ruy-ohtake-to-improve-brazils-second-largest-favela.

call from a community leader. [168] Nor is it simply a story of the social spirit of one single architect. I would like to argue that it points to dialogue between the separated worlds of rich and poor, the 'ghettos' and 'fortresses' which have been criticised by urban theorists. My own experience of São Paulo between the years of 2011 - 2015 was, mostly, in this positive vein. The physical barriers between the divided worlds of the megacity existed - shopping malls, highways, helicopters, private condominiums surrounded by auto-constructed neighbourhoods that became poorer and more precarious the further you moved away from the centre. But São Paulo was at that time under the liberal leadership of the left-wing mayor Fernando Haddad and he fostered the beginnings of a more open mindset in São Paulo which did in some way conform to urban street life idealised by those such as Jane Jacobs. Central neighbourhoods were being rediscovered by a middle class who wanted to drink beer in pavement bars. All-night music events were held in downtown, in amongst rotting historic buildings and roads previously taken over as crack dens. There were cycle lanes painted by the sides of six lane highways. Avenues and roads, normally fumy and gridlocked, were closed on the weekends so locals could stroll along as if beside the Seine, or Ipanema beach. Political groups formed against the car and the repopulation of *centro* by young people created, Rolnik says, a new movement 'against the previous escape to fortified enclaves...parks, sidewalks, full squares turning into something common, configuring the emergence of a new urban culture and transforming the relations of residents to the city.'[169]

Shortly after I left São Paulo to study at the University of East Anglia, things began to spiral once more in the city. Covid 19 coupled with a recession and a rolling back of minority freedoms meant reports came back to my husband and myself of a São Paulo with more homelessness, more crime, more violence, more unemployment, less street-life. However, just as I conclude this thesis, São Paulo stands on the verge of another age with a new president due to be elected in the coming weeks – a choice between iconic periphery politician Lula da Silva and President Bolsonaro, an admirer of the former military dictatorship and their torture methods. Once again, São Paulo's writers

[168] Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo,* p 81.

[169] Rolnik,Raquel. *Territórios em conflito,* p 76.

have displayed a remarkable kind of 'insurgent' literature in fighting to overturn Bolsonaro's rule. Smanioto has tweeted that the president should be imprisoned whilst Ruffato has criticised Bolsonaro many times in his writing as a journalist. In the last week fellow *Paulista* novelist Julian Fuks received death threats after publishing an article in which he decried the far-right president entitled 'Wanted, a terrorist capable of a subtle act that transforms history'.[170] These threats are not empty – Lula's treasurer was shot dead by a Bolsonaro supporter in July. More than a century ago, Baudelaire claimed that new types of artists were needed to explore the heroism of modern life, poets who could travel through all levels of society, exposing the hypocrisy of high office and depicting the beauty of the underworld.[171] It appears that in today's megacity of São Paulo, Ruffato, Smanioto, Fuks and others are more than fulfilling Baudelaire's clarion call in their style, form, themes and in their literary activism.

My own creative writing project reflects my deep respect for the way in which the megacity writers I studied put politics at the heart of their novels whilst not sacrificing the highest ambition for the form, style and content of their literature. Like them, I was compelled to investigate and articulate the megacity landscape I found myself in and was particularly drawn to writing about the new fortified enclaves which Caldeira investigates, and which are so present in *Eram Muitos Cavalos.* I also wanted to examine the way in which Brazil's feudal colonial history continued to affect the megacity society of São Paulo and at the same time capture in language my own vibrant experience of living in that city, to have a reader feel, smell, see the amazing sights and sounds that São Paulo gave me. However, as an English writer, from one of the wealthiest countries in the world, I couldn't ignore the fact that I myself was in some way part of the elite, albeit global elite, towards which Ruffato and Smanioto felt so much anger. Whilst I had an instinctive urge to take on their mission against inequality and exploitation of the weak and vulnerable, I was frightened of hypocrisy and also my own form of exploitation, using my adopted city as material for my own ends. My solution to what felt at first an almost insurmountable problem was inspired by my reading of autofiction,

[170] Downie, Andrew, 'They Twist The Message: Brazilian Writer faces Ire of Bolsonaro Backers', *The Guardian,* September 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/06/brazilian-writer-julian-fuks-faces-ire-jair-bolsonaro-backers.
[171] Berman, Marshall, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air,* p 144.

particularly Rachel Cusk and Maggie Nelson. I based my novel closely upon my own journey to São Paulo as a young journalist writing about art who soon after arriving found herself pregnant, imagining however, that the anti-heroine of the book had a background in which she had directly benefitted from colonialism. This allowed me the freedom to describe and enjoy writing about São Paulo from my direct and mostly positive experience, whilst at the same time questioning the differences and difficulties between a young couple, one from a country who colonised and one from a country that had been a colony. I made my main character sometimes quite morally dubious. This was a nod to my own history as part of a culture who had gone to other places and taken things which weren't theirs. It also allowed me to think about a more general theme which interests me greatly and that is ownership, and more particularly, what we can ever really say we own. The question of whether we can truly own material goods, land, nationality as well as bodies and stories, in many ways structured the story. Finally, I kept by my side throughout the writing of this book a copy of Gabriel Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude.* I first picked this novel up as a sixteen-year-old in my local library, enticed by the strange cover, and it is one of the few books that has stayed with me ever since. When I first began to think of my own fictional megacity, I had an overwhelming sense that São Paulo had begun in much the same way as Marquez's Macondo, as a small settlement in the middle of the Latin American jungle. How Macondo would feel and look like if it had finally grown into a megacity was one of the stylistic questions that I continued to ask myself as I wrote the following book.

……..

Bibliography

Books

Avelar, Idelber, and Christopher Dunn, editors. *Brazilian Popular Music and Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)

Beal, Sofia, *Brazil Under Construction*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013)

Baudelaire, Charles, *Paris Spleen,* trans. James Huenaker, Joseph T Shipley and Arthur Symons, (Ebook: Digireads, 2015)

Berman, Marshall, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982)

Benjamin, Walter, *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 - 1940* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 2006)

Benjamin, Walter, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso Books, 1997)

Caldeira, Teresa, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000)

Caves, W Roger, *Encyclopaedia of the City* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)

Carvalho, de Vincius Mariano and Gavioli Nicola, *Literature and Ethics in Contemporary Brazil,* (London: Routledge, 2020)

Davis, Mike, *Planet of the Slums,* (London and New York: Verso, 2006)

Da Cunha Euclides, *Rebellion in the Backlands,* trans. Elizabeth Lowe, (London: 2010, Penguin)

Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008)

Glaesar, Edward, *Triumph of the City,* (London: Penguin, 2011)

Graham, Stephen, *Vertical,* (London: Verso, 2016)

Guène, Faïza, *Just Like Tomorrow,* trans. Sarah Ardizzone, (London: Penguin, 2006)

Graham and Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition,* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001)

Ferrez, *Capão Pecado,* (Sao Paulo: Editora Planeta do Brasil, 2005), translations by Kathleen McCaul and Victor Meadowcroft

Hamilton, Tolosa, 'The Rio/Sao Paulo Extended Metropolitan Region: A quest for global integration', *The Annals of Regional Science*, 37, (2003)

Holston, James, *Insurgent Citizenship,* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008)

Maria de Jesus, Carolina, Child of the Dark, (New York: Signet Books, 2003)

McCaul, Kathleen, *Megacity,* (Norwich: Boiler House Press, 2020)

Ramos, Graciliano, trans. Ralph Edward Dimmick, *Barren Lives,* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989)

Rolnik, Raquel, *Territórios em conflito,* (Sao Paulo: Tres Estrelas, 2017)

Ruffato, Luiz. *There Were Many Horses,* (Kindle Edition: Amazon Crossing, 2014)

Schwarz, Lillia Moritz and Murgal Starling, Heliosa Maria. *Brazil: A Biography,* (London: Penguin, 2019)

Sorenson, Danielle and Labbe, Andre, *Handbook of Megacities and Megacity-Regions,* (Cheltenham, Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020)

Smanioto, Sheyla, Desesterro (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2015), translations by Sophie Lewis and Laura Garmeson

Stovell, Tyler, *The Rise of the Paris Redbelt,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

Woolf, Greg, *The Life and Death of Ancient Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

Articles

Carvalho, Guilherme, 'Social Architecture: The Misunderstanding that led Ruy Ohtake to improve Brazil's second largest favela', *Archdaily.com,* July 2018, https://www.archdaily.com/897700/social-architecture-the-misunderstanding-that-led-ruy-ohtake-to-improve-brazils-second-largest-favela

Eralldo, Douglas, '10 Perguntas inéditas para Sheyla Smanioto', *Listas Literarias,* June 2016, https://www.listasliterarias.com/2016/06/10-perguntas-ineditas-para-sheyla.html

Downie, Andrew, 'They Twist The Message: Brazilian Writer faces Ire of Bolsonaro Backers' *The Guardian,* September 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/06/brazilian-writer-julian-fuks-faces-ire-jair-bolsonaro-backers

De Oliviera, Ana, 'Interview with Caetano Veloso', *Tropicalia.com.br,* http://tropicalia.com.br/en/ilumencarnados-seres/entrevistas/caetano-veloso-2

Franchetti, Paulo. "Poetry and Technique: Concrete Poetry in Brazil." *Portuguese Studies*, 24, (2008)

Foster, David William. 'Mário de Andrade: On Being São Paulo-Wise in 'Paulicéia Desvairada', *Iberoamericana,* 5, (2005)

Itamar Harrison, Marguerite. 'Sao Paulo lightning: Flashes of the City in Luiz Ruffato's *Eram Muitos Cavalos', Luso-Brazilian Review,* 42, (2006)

Ito, Carol, 'A Palavra e Deles', *UOL Online*, March 2018, https://revistatrip.uol.com.br/tpm/jessica-balbino-criou-o-projeto-margens-para-dar-visibilidade-as-mulheres-perifericas-na-literatura

Leonora, Paulo. '*Eles eram muitos cavalos*: Challenging the Regulating Fiction of the Global City' *Romance Notes*, 54, (2014)

McCaul, Kathleen, 'We are Favela!', *London Review of Books Blog,* July 2016, https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2016/july/we-are-favela!,

McCaul, Kathleen, 'Urban Protest in Brazil: The City and The Politics of Luiz Ruffato', *Asymptote Journal*, August 2016, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2016/08/25/urban-protest-in-brazil-the-city-and-the-politics-of-luiz-ruffato/

McCaul, Kathleen, ‘In Conversation with Ferrez, Father of *Literatura Marginal’, Asymptote Journal*, October 2016, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/by/kathleen-mccaul-moura/

Mirglia, Paula. ‘Safe Spaces in Sao Paulo’, *LSECities*, December 2008, https://urbanage.lsecities.net/essays/safe-spaces-in-sao-paulo-1

Nielson, R. P, ‘Dispatch from Brazil’, *Mester*, 42, (2013)

Perla, Hector, ‘Here’s Why Some People Think Brazil is in the Middle of a Soft Coup’*, Washington Post,* April 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/04/16/heres-why-some-people-think-brazil-is-in-the-middle-of-a-soft-coup/

Bione, Carlos Eduardo, ‘Desesterro de Sheyla Smanioto, Ficar partir resistir, trajetórias do corpo feminino’, *Revista Dialogos*, 8, (2020).

Caldeira, Teresa, ‘Gender is Still the Battleground’ in *Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016)

Goertzel, T and Kahn T, ‘The Great São Paulo Homicide Drop’, *Homicide Studies,* 13, (2009)

Levine, Robert M, ‘The Cautionary Tale of Carolina Maria de Jesus’, *Latin American Research Review,* 29, (1994)

López, Laura Álvarez, ‘Who Named Slaves and Their Children? Names and Naming Practices among Enslaved Africans Brought to the Americas and Their Descendants with Focus on Brazil’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 27, (2015)

McCaul, Kathleen, ‘Rolling with the Rolezinhos of Sao Paulo’, *Al Jazeera English*, February 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/2/24/rolling-with-the-rolezinhos-of-sao-paulo

McCaul, Kathleen, ‘Poetry and poverty on the margins in Brazil’, *Al Jazeera English*, April 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/4/8/poetry-and-poverty-on-the-margins-in-brazil

McCaul, Kathleen, ‘In Conversation with Ferrez, Father of *Literatura Marginal’*, *Asymptote Journal*, October 2016, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2016/10/17/in-conversation-with-ferrez-the-father-of-literatura-marginal/#more-10381

McCaul, Kathleen, ‘We are Favela!’, *London Review of Books,* July 2016, https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2016/july/we-are-favela!

Miraglia, Paulo, ‘Safe Spaces in Sao Paulo’, *LSE Cities*, Dec 2008, https://urbanage.lsecities.net/essays/safe-spaces-in-sao-paulo-1

Nelson, Lin, ‘SP: Centro de Tradições Nordestinas comemora o Dia do Nordestino’, *Agencia Brasil*, October 2021, https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/geral/noticia/2021-10/sp-centro-de-tradicoes-nordestinas-comemora-o-dia-do-nordestino

Oliveira, Lucas Amaral de, ‘Speaking for themselves: Observations on a “marginal” tradition in Brazilian Literature’, *Brasiliana Journal for Brazilian Studies*, 5, (2016)

Ouroussof, Nicolai, ‘The New New City’, *The New York Times Magazine,* June 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/magazine/08shenzhen-t.html

Ruffato, Luiz, ‘A final, quem matou Marielle?’, *El Pais,* June 2018,

https://brasil.elpais.com/autor/luiz-fernando-ruffato-de-souza/

Wejsa, Shari and Lesser, Jeffrey, ‘Migration in Brazil: The making of a multicultural society’ *Migration Policy Institute*, March 2019,

https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/migration-brazil-making-multicultural-society

Websites

United Nations, *World Urbanisation Prospects: The 2018 Revisions,* (2018),

https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-KeyFacts.pdf

Images

Vieira, Tuca, *Paraisópolis,* (2004)

Oiticica, Hélio, *Seja Marginal, Seja Herói,* (1967)

June in São Paulo

……..

Dedicated to my husband Filipe Alves Moura

…….

'And to the city from the backland would come ever more and more of its sons'

Vida Secas, Gracilano Ramos

'They call themselves writers because that's what they do. They write their names, among other things, everywhere,'

Style Wars, Directed by Harry Chalfant

Chapter 1

June. June Pacheco is my name. June, the month I was born, my mother's choice, pining for Suffolk apple blossom in the port town of Setúbal. Pacheco from my father, who got it from his father, who got it from the Azores, who was always sailing off and one day did not return. Your name is the only thing you own, given to you at birth, so why not write it down? Write it on a wall. Begin a story with it? I was given this piece of advice in São Paulo and did not forget it. When I was young, I lacked confidence in myself and so I ran off to that enormous city with a man I hardly knew. I had an overwhelming urge to create something and to understand things back then, although I didn't know exactly what.

My first glimpse of Sampa was from the icy black cave of an airplane, in the last crusty minutes of a sleepless night flight from Heathrow. I had zoned out for a small portion of the 12-hour journey, exhausted by the tension of leaving, soporific from the warm and tangy wine that I had drunk too quickly. Somewhere over the Atlantic, dinner over and the lights dimmed, the AC got aggressive. The temperature in the cabin dropped and I woke up shivering, shocked, as if I had been dunked into the dark ocean below. Where was I? What was I doing in this cabin, so far from my normal life? I looked around. Eye masks and open mouths, those funny curved pillows that make people look like chickens with their necks wrung. I had taken countless long-haul flights but had never been prepared enough to invest in one of these pillows. I never would, I decided to myself.

Marcio was in a stupor beside me, chin creaked into his chest, Panama hat over his eyes. He snored louder than I imagined he would have, loud enough to make the smart air hostess hurrying past smirk. His face was bent up into an unattractive double chin, he didn't look beautiful at all. I worried this was what he would look like when he was older, which was disconcerting. When awake Marcio had an elegant old-fashioned face. At first, I had not been able to decide whether it was very handsome or not at all but after a while I fell in love with it. He had long and slightly sunken cheeks, very black hair and very black eyes that were edged with thick lashes, as if he'd curled them and doused them with mascara. His crowning glory was an enormous nose, hooked and long. If it had been smaller, or less shapely, it would not have been attractive but as it stood it was fabulous. His skin

was deeply brown, as if he lived on a ship, although he told me his people were not from the coast of Brazil but from the North, from the difficult, drought-ridden interior. I first met him in a sandpit of an art exhibition in Whitechapel and decided, as we dug side by side and I cast sideways glances at him, that his was the kind of face you could have probably met with three hundred, four hundred years ago. The kind of face that travelled for years on end, across the desert, with business in every trading post. Or the face of a pirate maybe, Arabic or Portuguese. Either way, it was the face of a man my mother would have begged me to avoid which of course only made me want him more.

I pulled his head slightly upwards to rest upon his shoulder so he wouldn't get a bad neck. He moaned but did not wake. I took out the squat black Posca pen I kept in my pocket and greedily examined his forearm, its fine black hairs, the long and frankly gorgeous bones rising up under butter skin. I hooked two fingers gently round his wrist, surprisingly heavy given how slim he was, pressed the Posca into flesh which gave way unexpectedly, the point of the pen gliding between two small indents. He jerked away from me though didn't wake up. I stopped. Our journey together had just begun, would it really be a good start if he woke up to find I had written June in indelible pen right across his arm? I considered writing his name, Marcio, instead, but decided he probably wouldn't appreciate that either. I was an addict. I had a hole inside me where other people thought certain things and felt certain things, but I didn't know quite where it was or what I needed to do to fill it, so I ended up scribbling my name on whatever I could, wherever I could. When the urge came upon me it was almost impossible to live with. This was the first time I'd ever felt the need to tag a human being though. I hoped it was a one-off or things could get difficult for me. I put the pen in my mouth and bit down hard on the end, heard a small crack and took it out. I only had two Poscas with me and I wasn't sure if they were available in Brazil. I shouldn't wreck the first one only hours into the trip.

The air hostess came clicking down the aisle with two miniature gins and a bottle of tonic for a man sitting in front of us. I decided that that was probably what I needed too, to take the edge off, but when I tried to get her attention, she turned and fled. As I leant over to wave, I saw Marcio's book had fallen from his lap out into the aisle. I arched over him carefully and picked it up. *Backlands* by Euclides da Cunha. I groaned to myself. This was one of two from a list of books that had been essential reading at university where I had studied a joint degree of Portuguese and English literature,

but which I worked hard to avoid. The other one had been *Ulysses* by James Joyce. I rummaged around in my rucksack for my own book but then groaned inwardly once more. *Inside the White Cube, The Ideology of the Gallery Space,* by Brain O'Doherty. It had been recommended me by some artist I'd been sniffing coke with in the toilets of an art opening in Old Street, when I'd been talking too fast about how I didn't understand what made videos of lost spectacles found around London art. I wished I'd bought my old copy of *100 Years of Solitude* instead, something that could envelop me in its beautiful, familiar images, it's small village of adobe houses built on a bank of a river of clear water, running along a bed of polished stones which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs.

I saw my air hostess coming towards me once more, another round of gins for the man in front. I waved Marcio's big black book at her, but she flounced off without meeting my eye, just like before. This time I was sure she had seen me and I was even sure she knew I wanted a double shot cocktail but just didn't want to give it to me. I nudged Marcio, knowing he could easily charm something up for us. He just gave a small moan, clutched at the air, then snorted back into his dreams. I let him sleep, it was bad enough that he'd had to pay my airfare, I should at least get my own drinks. He hadn't even really wanted me to come home with him, I'd had to suggest it myself. I didn't think it had been unreasonable of me to think that he would want to take me along. And he'd seemed so settled in London anyway, why did he suddenly have to leave? There had been one terrible moment in Café Italia, sitting hot in the window, pale pistachio ice-cream, tiny sugar-dumped espressos, ordered to sweeten his refusal. In the end, I guess, my shocked, collapsed face was too much for his conscience. He said that maybe it was a good idea for me to come with him after all. He thought that maybe I would get on with his mother, who needed cheering up and so did I. It would only be for a few weeks, anyhow, and then we'd be back in London. Maybe. Something changed between us that day. After that it was never quite the crazy love it had been in those first weeks.

We'd met on an unusually hot evening in early May, at a retrospective exhibition of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica at the Whitechapel Gallery. I'd cycled over there after work and was hot and flustered by the time I arrived. It was almost impossible to find a place to lock my bike and by the time I located a spare lamppost I was already muttering that this would be a waste of time, that I should quit my job and just write a novel or something. I worked as a copywriter for a hard-core

conceptual art gallery in King's Cross. I had studied literature not art and had originally planned to go into publishing but just couldn't get a job. In the end my tutor from university advised me that art parties were so much more fun and sent me over to an old friend of his, Nicha Mittel. She was looking for someone smart to write up the significant explanations needed to accompany the difficult art displayed in her new space and I ended up being rather good at it. Sometimes the job was easy, the artist had done all the work for you and you just had to cut and paste what they had written into a neat paragraph to go on the wall. Other times they were obscure, or not particularly communicative, or just didn't make much sense and then I really had to earn my bread, explain the work from the point of view of either 'The Spectator', 'The Eye' or 'The Observer'. I usually went for the Spectator and ended up feeling quite sorry for this poor guy, constantly thrown into a white cube, forced to stand in front of these strange installations and expected to come away transformed. That's what Nicha always wanted. You need to make it feel transformative, she would say, it needs to transform people. I did what I was told and I even tried to get transformed myself but this almost never happened and that made me feel like a fraud. I did what I could to educate my feelings, roamed around the city visiting whatever art I could in the hope it would move me. Sometimes it really did, just not as often as it should apparently have done so.

Well, though, the Oiticica exhibition, as soon as I walked in, I knew that it was gonna do it. I got these tingling feelings in my fingers and around my cheeks. The lobby of the gallery had been turned into an enormous sandpit, shacks made from lops of coloured fabrics and tropical plants in large terracotta pots. It was kind of ramshackle and didn't make sense but you were just allowed to go in and hang out and do whatever you wanted. It felt like a big relief. I lay myself down in a high bed of sand, made soothing shapes with my arms and legs. After a while I got up and begun to dig into the fine yellow grain to try and reach the bottom, to feel the cool polished concrete floor which I knew was beneath. Another guy, close by, seemed to be doing the same and we ended up not finding the floor but each other's hands. He told me his name was Marcio and his mother had worked for Oiticica, in São Paulo, as one of his models, before he himself had been born. She was very beautiful, he told me, and I could believe it. He said he wasn't interested in the art though, he'd just come because it wasn't often this gallery was open in the evening and he'd wanted to see how the light fell

at this time through the windows. He wanted to be an architect although when I asked him where he studied, he said he just worked in Tesco. He didn't need a course to understand buildings, he told me, he'd been born in São Paulo, been born knowing buildings. I laughed and he got upset, looked at me with serious eyes and told me I would never understand until I'd been to that city myself.

I knew a party in Hackney Wick, asked him if he wanted to come. He stole an exhibition poster from the shop before we left which I said was wrong. He told me I was bourgeoise, that he'd show the picture to me later and I'd understand why he did it. He had a bike so we cycled over to the party, got some pills and danced until the night got grey, wandered out, cycling anywhere, found ourselves outside a half-built mosque in Bethnal Green. There was no security and he led me through the building site threading between cement mixers and piles of Arabic tiles, to a ladder which led up to the first floor, onto a dusty half-finished women's balcony. Up another ladder again until we were in the roof and then up again, a final ladder, climbing towards a hole that shone a cylinder of dawn upon us and then, I gasped, there we were sat upon a dome of gold between rainclouds and the almost blue sky. We were so high in the city skyline that we could even see the Thames, a black snake just starting to glimmer.

'See,' said Marcio, 'all you need to build a tower is faith.'

I smiled and nodded. My head knew that he was talking bollocks, but my heart was overwhelmed with the beauty of it all. I couldn't help myself, I ended up reciting one of the only poems I knew by heart, the one Wordsworth wrote at dawn on Westminster Bridge in 1802. Marcio kissed me and told me I was special and would I marry him when the registry office opened that morning. I refused, of course, but mostly out of propriety. I started to cry and told him about my abortion the year before. He got as upset about it as I was. We went back to the overstuffed house he shared with a crowd of Brazilians in Canada Water. The guy Marcio slept in a bed with wasn't there, we had the room to ourselves. He put on *Moondance* which took my breath away as I'd been listening to it all week and then everything was, well, it was, it was perfect.

He asked me to marry him every day for a couple of weeks after that. I kept refusing but decided I would say yes at some point. Then he stopped asking me. Then he said he was going back home to Brazil. Who wouldn't be upset? He had got me, he got me so good, and then he just turned

away. It had been heartbreaking; I couldn't stop the tears. He couldn't stand to see me cry and so now here I was on a plane with him going back to São Paulo where he told me the buildings grew like weeds.

I shook my head at our impulsiveness. I knew it could end badly but maybe it would all work out. I put my book on the White Cube back in my bag, ended up opening *Backlands* finally, after so many years of avoiding it. I had held it in my hands many times before, in libraries, at seminars, packing up bookcases. The blurbs always proclaimed it to be one of the most important books in Brazilian literature, but it had never appealed to me. A non-fiction report on a government massacre that had happened in a settlement called Canudos in the very north of Brazil just before the turn of the 20th century was always, I thought, going to be a grim read. I sighed, skipped the very long introduction and dove into the first lines. It was surprisingly good. Nothing to do with politics or society or armies or anything like that. Just beautiful descriptions of the geology of Brazil and of the way in which the land had originally been forged. The south was formed of a coastline of steep cliffs which waved back across the land in peaks and mountain ranges. Further north the country became flatter and lower and the coastline a series of beaches and inlets and islands. Ragged was how da Cunha described it, scree left behind from the eternal conflict between land and sea.

That was when I saw São Paulo. Coming into view on the red-rimmed horizon, just as dawn broke, a great mass of shimmering lights. On and on and on it went, so far and so wide that it seemed to curve around the very surface of the earth. A tacky orange glow suffused the air around. My very earliest memories were of waking in the grey dawn of the Setúbal marshes, the silhouettes of herons and their shaggy nests that I saw from my window, the flocks of small birds rising high in the sky. We left Portugal when I was five. My father had always spent long spells away from my mother and I, working on cargo ships as second and sometimes first mate. One day he just did not return. I remember: tears, red faces, tears, phone calls, tears, even screaming. A flurry of grandparents, clothes all over the place, tears, books piled up in corners, plates and cups where they shouldn't be, tears, everything a big mess. We moved to a commuter town outside London and my memories from then on were not so rich. When Marcio spoke to me in his singsong Portuguese I had gone back to those

quiet marshes but he was not from the countryside at all, he was from one of the biggest cities in the world. I would not see the grey dawn down there; it would always be yellow.

The smell of reheated reconstituted bacon came thickly towards me and my heart sunk at the thought of the disgusting breakfast to come. I resolved to refuse it but knew that when the time came, I wouldn't have the willpower. A group of women behind me laughed softly together, exchanging notes on their trip to London, the luxury presents they had bought themselves. One of them explained to the others that they could expense all their lingerie and perfume and receive twenty percent of the retail price back in tax returns. I realised they were prostitutes. I glanced behind in a frisson, swirls of sleek hair and muted cashmere. Confidence, independence, chic grey doves. My own outfit had been horribly unsuitable for the flight. My jeans were stiff, getting strangely smaller, digging into me. My blue cardigan with the comforting holes worn into the sleeves, through which I stuck my thumbs, was too thin, too short to protect my back from the draft. I hadn't worn socks which had been the worst mistake, just my old, battered Converse. I looked a mess, really. What did that air hostess have against me? I was no competition to any decently dressed woman.

The overhead lights began to flicker on, the cabin crew jerked up and down, stacking their trolleys, looking tired and put upon. The air smelt of dead skin. Marcio breathed heavily beside me. I peered through the seats at the man in front, thick knuckles clasping his double gin, murmuring in spurts to himself. He was watching the local news on the screen in front of him. I watched over his shoulder to see a little of what would greet me when we landed. Images of flooding, red water running thickly down roads. A young boy with a parakeet perched on his head drove a car which floated on a river of mud, an old woman in an apron stood on sandbags, a leopard skin umbrella in one hand and in the other a fishing rod, which she had dunked into the fast streams surrounding her. The story switched to a heist on a supermarket. CCTV footage showed silent piles of mangoes, pineapples and papayas displayed in a shop window. Then a crash, the smashing of glass, fruit everywhere, squashed flat, in pools of juice. A van had smashed through the window and out jumped men with t-shirts wrapped around their faces. They took out sacks and began piling them with fruit.

'Bloody hell,' I said to myself, 'it's a jungle. It's wild.'

The air hostess swung towards me once more, this time with a large steel kettle brandished aggressively over passenger's heads. Marcio was still snoring. I elbowed him. He spluttered. The women behind twittered like birds. Morning traffic news. A reporter high up in a helicopter, lipstick and microphone, gesturing down to the lines of cars below. Like an enormous tapeworm the traffic spread out and out, north and south, east and west. The roads were bloated, the city constipated, stuck, belching fumes.

'Coffee?' barked the hostess.

'I'd like a gin and tonic,' I said.

'We're about to land. I don't think that's a good idea,' she said.

'I want one,' I said.

She frowned and shook her head. Marcio finally opened his eyes, so happy at the sight of her kettle.

'Ah, you're an angel. Coffee. Just in time,' he said.

She smiled and poured a cup, handed it to him smartly, two sugars and a flimsy plastic stick.

'Milk?'

'Just black.'

She nodded approvingly before turning once more to me.

'Coffee?'

'I want a gin and tonic,' I said.

'I don't think that's a good idea. Just before we land,' said Marcio.

The air hostess laughed conspiratorially.

'That's just what I said. Your wife's being rather wild! You should control her!' she tittered.

'She's not my wife,' said Marcio.

The air hostess shrugged happily.

'I don't like coffee. Do you have any tea?' I said, unable to fight the two of them together.

'You won't get far in Brazil if you don't like coffee,' she said, 'Egg or bacon?'

'What?'

'Breakfast.'

'I don't want anything,' I said.

‘You need to eat something,’ said Marcio, 'I'll have bacon.'

‘Egg,’ I said, unhappily.

The women at my back refused breakfast, insisted they were bought fresh orange juice from first class. Where did they find their poise, their nerve? A new story, on a wave of weighted dice infiltrating the gambling dens of the city. The studio presenters demonstrated the illegal dice under the hot camera lights, laughing, amazed, as they threw the same number, again and again.

'Bandits,' I said, 'they're all fucking bandits.'

Breakfast arrived. I poked at the slick grey lozenge.

‘This is even worse than I expected it to be,’ I said.

‘You should have got the bacon. It’s good,’ said Marcio, happily forking the food into his mouth. I tried a piece. It didn’t sit right; my stomach was all twisted up.

‘You’ve got my book,’ he said.

‘You dropped it. It doesn’t look your kind of thing.’

We were supposed to read it in school. I copied my essay from someone else.’

‘What, and you’re suddenly guilty about that?’

He shrugged.

‘I visited Canudos, the site of the massacre, on a road-trip to the North just after my father disappeared. Backlands, that’s what we call it. *O sertão.* Dry, hot scrubland in the middle of nowhere. There’s this dark feeling there. Eerie,’ he said.

‘It’s probably just because you were thinking about what happened there,’ I said.

‘It’s more than that. You get a shiver. You can feel the ghosts. I cried, thinking of all those people that could have been my family,’ he said.

‘That’s awful.’

‘It is.’

‘I’m sorry. About it all, about your father,’ I said.

‘We can change the subject now,’ he said.

'That air hostess is a bitch,' I said.

'I thought she was fun,' he said.

'I wanted a gin and tonic; she knew I wanted one and she wouldn't look at me. The man in front had four or five.'

'Look, you're meeting my mother soon. It wouldn't be good if you smelt of booze.'

'She wouldn't smell it on me after one.'

'She would. She's got an incredibly acute sense of smell. Like, like a…'

'A dog?'

'A bear. Bears and sharks have better senses of smell than dogs.'

'You're not making her sound very hospitable.'

'I never said she was.'

'Women don't like me.'

'Oh dear,' he said, 'that's not a good start.'

……

'What first appear are the mighty granite masses that begin in the south and curve into a huge amphitheatre. This gives height to the wonderful panoramas that so enchant and deceive the inexpert eye of outsiders. From there the seashore proceeds in successive chains without spurs up to the edge of the shoreline of São Paulo.'

Euclides da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands*

Chapter 2

The smell of São Paulo airport, it was different to Heathrow, to Gatwick, to Luton, where the air is hermetically sealed, chain-produced, strip-lit. Boots, Costa, M and S, Duty-Free, it's the absence of

any unique flavour that tells you you're home. An icky wall of heat smacks you in the face stepping out of the aeroplane and into São Paulo Guarulhos. Humidity seeps in through the yellowed windows of the arrival corridor. The air has a different colour, it hangs, drips, around you. Marcio and I waited crustily for our bags, eyes hurting from lack of sleep. The enormous suitcases crammed full of presents came jolting down the conveyor belt. Marcio hauled them off onto a trolley. I took my pen out ready to write my name across it.

'Oh, put it away, June,' said Marcio.

We kept our eyes down as the crew tripped-trapped past, looked at our feet going past Customs. The heat truly hit us as we exited the sliding doors, the heady tang of cooking rubber, hot petrol, fried snacks. A new noisescape of car horns, soaring planes, snippets of goodbyes, rushed at me. Marcio shouted, smiled a wide smile, pointed across two lanes of taxis, buses, trolleys, luggage, to two women standing by a glittering blue motorbike.

'It's them,' he said, needlessly, taking my hand, threading our unwieldy trolley through the airport debris.

'Oh my god,' I said to myself.

Marcio's mother was gorgeous, tall, with enormous eyes, just like his, except hers were a startling tiger-yellow instead of black. Her features were like those of a cat who lived under water; aquiline, feline. I wondered what she ate. She appeared almost ageless although she must have been in her fifties, her skin was lined but her bone structure was so good that it just didn't matter. She was tall and slim and strong, dressed in a denim jumpsuit and delicate *Havaianas*. Her black hair was very short and wrapped in an orange bandana. She fell upon her son like he was a favourite meal after a period of great hunger, enveloped him in her arms, kissed his neck, kissed his hands, kissed his forehead. She was overwhelmed with emotion, with love, with happiness. It was uncomfortable to watch.

I stood back with his twin sister, who appeared bored by this display, chewing on her finger, trying to bite off a hangnail. She was as startling as her mother although very different. Tiny, light, like a hummingbird, she was paler than her brother and had a bright blue bob which made her look as if she belonged in a fantasy world. I smiled at her, but she ignored me, now licking away the blood

she had drawn, trickling down the crook of her hand. After longer than I thought was necessary, Marcio extracted himself from his mother's embraces and turned to his sister. They looked at each other knowingly, with a good amount of distaste and also a sense of homecoming, before kissing one another lightly, in a flutter, like two butterflies. Marcio then turned to me.

'My family; Mercury, my sister, my mother, Ursula. I've told her all about you,' he said.

I nodded enthusiastically, although in truth the details were sparse. We hadn't really known each other long enough to have talked much about our families. I'd told him my mother lived outside London, that she had her own life, wasn't particularly interested in me. This had horrified him. Families in Brazil were close, Marcio had pronounced, his mother was his best friend, such a cool amazing woman, I would love her. When she'd been younger Oiticica had introduced her to Roberto Burle Marx and he'd done a portrait of her. She spent many years working part-time in the university archaeology department as a secretary. She was retired now and spent most of her time collecting and selling what Marcio described as old things the city threw up which no-one wanted but were valuable. I took this to mean antiques. She had done this as a hobby for many years and sometimes made good money from it. He was dismissive of his sister Mercury and didn't tell me at first that they were twins, as if to put as much distance between them as possible. She was trying to make it as a photographer, had refused to sit the University of São Paulo entrance exams which he said she could have easily passed, went to an arts college, but not the best one. She worked now taking photos of pastries for the Facebook page of a posh French-style bakery called *Baudelaire's.* His father wasn't around. He was from the North of the country, like his mother, and some years ago he had disappeared. Marcio seemed frightened and confused when I asked him about his father and so we didn't talk about it.

The women looked me up and down. Mercury twisted her mouth up into a smile, Ursula stared.

'She's bigger than your other girlfriends. She's kind of red,' said Ursula

'Ma, she speaks Portuguese,' said Marcio.

Ursula put her hand to her mouth, shook her head, watching me, but didn't say sorry.

'I forgot,' she said, 'welcome.'

You didn't forget, I thought, smiling widely once more.

Ursula had booked a taxi from her local rank to take us home and she called for it to come round to arrivals and collect us. It was a beat-up, two-door white car which, it became clear very quickly, would not fit both us and the luggage. I had watched Marcio over the past week fill two enormous suitcases with clothes from Primark, Swiss chocolate, Scottish biscuit tins, Nike trainers and enormous Taschen books on extreme sale. Everything was more expensive in Brazil, he explained, twice the price of the UK. I was surprised. Brazil was an emerging economy with a huge population; the UK known as one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

'We call it *Custo Brasil.* The expense of being in Brazil. It's because we're doing so well,' he had said to me, 'everyone wants a part of us now. We've got the Olympics coming, the World Cup coming, we have the biggest oil reserves in the world.'

I had googled *Custo Brasil* later, worried. I was no longer working and even when I had been my salary as a copywriter in a small London gallery was pitiful. I had very little savings and if the country was as costly as Marcio was telling me I would run out of money sooner than I had imagined. It was true the country was very expensive but not for the reasons Marcio had given me. Absurdly complex tax laws, business cartels and endemic corruption all made Brazilian products far pricier than they should be. I applied to my bank for a credit card and kept it in my washbag for emergencies.

Our taxi-driver, a short man with a gold chain and nicely pressed shirt, did his best to fit at least one suitcase in his tiny boot, repeatedly slamming the lid down upon it as hard as he could. I winced, thinking of the biscuits. Marcio stopped him, suggested we split up.

'I'll go with Mercury on her bike. You can go with my ma in the taxi,' he said.

Ursula's eyes flashed. She didn't like that idea.

'Or,' said Marcio, seeing the same look that I had seen, 'ma, you go with Mercury and I'll go in the taxi.'

Ursula stuck her lip out, like a child about to cry. She wanted to stay with her son. I wondered how long this journey was. It couldn't be that far. I decided that Marcio's mother must be spoilt in the way that very good-looking people sometimes are.

'I'll go on the motorbike,' I said.

'No, you can't do that. You've just got here. It's hot. It's not for beginners,'

‘You ever crashed?’ I said to Mercury.

She smiled slightly, shook her head.

‘Never, I never crash. I’m blessed.’

‘That’s what you always say,’ said Marcio.

‘She’ll be fine,’ said Ursula, ‘Mercury, you drive slowly.’

The taxi driver put the first suitcase in the front seat, belting it in carefully. It was the same case he’d been bashing with the boot lid a few moments earlier. I was quite glad not to be riding with him or indeed married to him. Marcio and his mother sat side by side in the back, next to the second suitcase. As they drove off Ursula put her head on his shoulder and Marcio put his arm around her.

‘They look like they’re married,’ I said, laughing.

‘I wouldn’t laugh if I were you,’ said Mercury.

Mercury only had one helmet, sparkly blue, just like the engine of her Yamaha motorbike. She offered it to me.

‘It’s yours,’ I said.

She shook her head.

‘I don’t need it. I told you. I never crash. I have a tooth from a desert saint that protects me.’

She swung her legs over the bike, gestured for me to do the same. The muscles wrapped round my dog-tired bones began to sparkle with fear but what else could I do? I jumped on and grabbed tightly onto her t-shirt.

'Press yourself into me,' she said.

I squeezed my thighs around hers. He body was light and strong and enticing, just like her brother's.

The journey was terrifying. Mercury drove fast and didn’t stay at a safe distance from any of the concrete mixers, buses, cars and motorbikes that thronged the six lane motorway. On either side of the road were huge garages selling yet more cars, vans, even off-road jeeps. Everything was grey and shiny with recent rain, except the sky, which veered between bright blue and cloudy violet. Mercury’s engine roared underneath me, she revved it loudly as soon as she saw a spare slot of road to speed up

into. When we came to a roundabout, she swooped to the left without pausing to glance at the oncoming traffic and we almost collided with a bus. I screamed; Mercury laughed. Great dirty trucks, unsteady loads, crowded us out, loomed down upon us. I felt more unsafe than I had ever felt, tiny and unprotected, physically sick, adrenalin in all parts of my body. I didn't want to die but I felt at any moment as if I might.

Finally, we turned off the highway, onto smaller, scummy A-roads, still dense and heavy with traffic but slower and lined now with shops selling double-door fridges, fake Nikes, bags of broken biscuits, thick hunks of meat. A glimpse of a street market; striped awnings, bargains in fluorescent pen, shoppers dressed in cheap grey and black, fake gold chains, just like Deptford. The steep streets acted as enormous waves; up and down, up and down they rolled. Telegraph wires looped above our heads. Mercury did her best to keep up her pace, weaving her way through the gridlock. I could feel her body tense with frustration when she came to a section of road impossible to navigate at speed or when she came up to a traffic light turning red. It was a small relief to me to be stopped at the lights. The noise of the engines, the burning smell of the smoke and the oil, the eyes staring into no-where, the waving heat of the fumes. It was all awful. When we revved off again, I continued to cling as tightly as I could to her, pressed my breasts into her back when she accelerated suddenly. I did not trust her at all and had the feeling that she was taking risks just so I could turn her on. It was impressive how well this tiny woman commanded such a powerful machine. I was amazed she had not yet had a crash. Was that true? She was wild and reckless. If I was her mother, I thought, I would take this bike away from her. Of course, she was an adult, 27, nearly 28, but she didn't drive like one.

The streets became narrower, no more than rat runs, low dark houses lined the way, bars and barbed wire everywhere. We emerged onto a crest of a hill in which we could look down at the city below. It went on and on and on, just like it had on the plane, but it was far uglier now, in the morning light. At the foot of the hill was a new construction, a large residential tower-block, brash and white, shining between the sun and cloud. Large billboards with pictures of smiling families, healthy looking children, meals on balconies, announced the apartments were made by São Paulo's favourite construction firm, Domingos Sertão*,* and were for sale with 0 percent deposit available. This perfect invitation was marred by strange black graffiti. Runic letters, unintelligible to me but clearly

aggressive, had been scrawled across the building, about two thirds of the way up. It was very impressive that anyone had been able to scale the sheer face like that. Mercury abruptly stopped the bike, took out a camera from the courier box perched at its end. It was a decent camera, not an SL but digital and up-to-date, and must have cost her some money. I thought about saying something nice to her about it but I was too shaken up and nervous from the ride. She put the camera to her eye and clicked the graffiti.

'My boyfriend,' she said, 'that's his tag.'

I wasn't surprised, really, just thought they must make a crazy fucking pair, cooler by far than I would ever be. Mercury showed me the fingernail image in her camera. It looked like Old English but the message was clear and modern. Fuck You. There was something brilliant about it, just like the city itself, hard and high and rushed and desperate.

'How does he do it? Isn't it dangerous?' I asked.

Mercury laughed.

'Yeah, of course, it's dangerous. People die. But it's not worth nothing if the wall is easy to reach.'

'It's mad.'

'It is what it is. Some of them say it's protest. Some of them say it's writing. They get addicted though, all of them get addicted.'

We arrived soon after at the family's home, an unassuming block named Tremembé tower, tall but not nearly as tall as the newer towers we had driven past, which appeared to reach to the sky. The lot next door to Tremembé tower was empty, surrounded by clapboards on which were pinned computer generated images of another new Domingos Sertão condominium. This complex would boast landscaped outside spaces and even a tiny forest dell. There was a theme to this development and there was a slogan: 'Your private countryside retreat in the heart of the city.' I felt good to see this not because I particularly liked the idea of an elite and secure rustic complex in one of the most dangerous cities in the world but because it meant that Marcio had been telling me the truth when he told me he was going home because his apartment was under threat by property developers. This was the news which had completely ruined one of those very rare and perfect summer evenings in Soho,

smoky and hot, creamy sun cutting through the streets, cigarettes and cans of beer, rickshaws and sundresses. I hadn't believed him, had plonked myself down on the kerb and refused to move, took my pen out and began to write my name all around the gutter though it was so dirty down there I could hardly see the letters. Marcio crouched in front of me, said that he had no choice, that his mother was in trouble.

'Can I come with you?' I said.

'I'm not going back for a holiday. This is serious. We'll lose our home if we don't do something about it.'

'What can you do about it?'

'I don't know yet. But I can't just stay here. I need to help. My mother needs me.'

'That's what you say.'

'Don't make this difficult.'

'My heart's all thick in my mouth right now.'

'What's that weird looking ice-cream you like?'

'Pistacchio.'

'That's it. Come on, let's get some.'

The apartment was opposite a police post. Men in uniform lent back on stools, sub-machine guns slung over their shoulders. Mercury waved to them as she waited at an electrified fence. To enter the building was a complicated, mediaeval process. The steel gate was wide and tall, operated by a man wearing a large Fedora who sat in a small glass box. There was a tannoy at the side of the building into which Mercury spoke. The man seemed to know her very well. They laughed and chatted for a minute or so before he pressed down a button which slowly lifted the metal portcullis. We entered a vehicle holding pen with a second gate in front of us. I had a flashback, of a short and tense holiday in Wales with my father when I was about ten. We were touring an old castle; the guide was bloodthirsty and took delight in explaining to us the concept of the killing field. This was the space between the two great gates of a fortress, where raiders who had managed to pass through the castle's first defenses would then by picked off by archers.

A wave of nausea passed over me as the first gate clicked shut. I asked her brightly what Tremembé meant. She told me they had been a famous tribe of Indians that were all dead now. There was a pause and then a loud buzzing sound as the second gate opened and we slid slowly inside to an underground car park. Mercury stopped by a line of other motorbikes, next to kids bikes and carts and trikes. Pink and blue, they made me feel a little closer to normality although the dirty bright plastic was kind of sinister too. The car park led straight to a tight steel lift. The face that stared back at me in the tarnished mirror was covered in grit and dust. Mercury pushed herself right up beside me, her hip on mine, kept on picking at her loose nail. The corridor onto which the elevator opened was dark except for one overhead light that flashed on and off.

'This building, it's not as good as it was, management letting it go on purpose' said Mercury, banging her fist hard on the wall. The light stopped flashing.

The door to the apartment was dark brown, cheap wood stained to appear noble. A Rococo style door handle doubled as a lock. Mercury fiddled with a key and then we were finally inside Marcio's home, just without Marcio. The door opened directly onto the living room and I stood for some moments, taking it all in. It was a small space filled with many objects. A large flatscreen TV was the newest thing, incongruously stuck to the wall. Two overstuffed muddy-coloured sofas had been covered with pieces of embroidered cloth. Above these sofas were shelves, many shelves, filled with all kinds of objects; old statues half covered in thin, silky moss, a large copper locket engraved with the Virgin of help, chipped enamel plates, parts of what looked like a 19th century chemistry set, brass weighing scales. Detriment of the city; samba records wavy from the heat, iron horseshoes, a dusty bird's nest containing one pale blue egg, two stuffed iguanas whose skin still had a golden sheen, a large jar of defunct coins, half full. An almond-shaped helmet that had oxidised into an icy green patina, hung by a string by an open window. A wreath of laurel leaves had been worked in delicate metal around the metal crown. I knew laurel was meant to symbolise victory which was ironic as there was an enormous and vicious looking gash around where the left ear would be. The helmet groaned rhythmically to itself as it waved in the breeze.

'*Arrapirente*,' I said.

Mercury smiled slightly, in agreement, it seemed, although she did not want to

appear friendly.

'She hangs it there, as a reminder, of where we come from. Where we are going,' she said, 'just to frighten us, really. You never stop feeling like you're being watched round here.'

…….

'A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so the windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white…in this context a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object.'

Inside the White Cube, Brian O'Doherty

Chapter 3

Mercury wandered off into a side room which I assumed was the kitchen. I heard her clatter around with a tap. It sounded like she was making coffee, although she hadn't asked if I wanted any, or if I wanted any water, or if I would like to sit down. She appeared completely uninterested in making me feel welcome. A monkey, a mother, with two little babies, sat in a tree outside the window of the house. Her babies were tiny, wrinkly and thin, clung viciously to their mother's fur. She herself had a tired far-away look in her eye and held loosely onto the branch, as if she was wondering whether to jump. I felt homesick. I took my rucksack off my shoulders, got Marcio's *Backlands* book out to pretend to be doing something, focused all my attention on dense geographical descriptions of the hot, scorched backlands. They were full of a scrubby, spiky bush called *caatinga* which seemed to reflect too well the parched and difficult situation I found myself in at that moment. I picked up my White Cube book instead. It wasn't as difficult as I'd expected it to be and in fact was surprisingly funny and

down-to-earth. I particularly enjoyed the description how a gallery was constructed like a medieval church. I laughed at that, despite everything. The helmet above creaked strangely. I looked up. The black gash went back and forth, back and forth. It really did feel like someone was watching you.

'Where the hell did your ma get it?' I shouted into the kitchen.

'She's got this magnet. Very powerful, neodymium. She likes to go fishing with it off the bridge of Bandits. She found it in the river, tangled up with another helmet. Like they'd died fighting,' Mercury shouted back, still clattering around.

'God. What happened to the other one?'

'She sold it to the museum of São Paulo, bought this place with the money.'

'What about all this other stuff?'

‘Just things she’s found that she can’t let go off. She’s a hoarder, my ma.’

I heard the whoosh of boiling water and was suddenly desperate for a cup of tea. A gentle glug glug, the tinker of a spoon as Mercury prepared her own drink. I listened out for a second cup but there was none, just silence gently pitted with whispering sips. I wondered how I could get some basic hospitality and decided now was as good a time as any to give the girl the present I had bought her, although she didn’t really deserve it. I wondered how many girlfriends Marcio had bought back with him before me.

It was a large book of photography by Sebastião Salgado which I had picked up in a second-hand book shop just off Holborn. The photos were beautiful although the subject matter was miserable - the poor, landless people of the arid North of Brazil, men and women who eked out their living, their survival, on almost barren homesteads. I had wondered if this was really the right thing to buy Mercury but the book was a fraction of the price it would have been new and I just couldn’t resist the bargain. I gambled that it was the kind of art book Mercury would not be able to afford herself. I hadn’t quite been able to gauge, back in London, what level of society Marcio came from. He told me he had a Maths degree although he explained that public university was completely free if you passed the exams. Arriving in their home, I still didn’t quite understand where they came from, what this apartment signified.

I hovered by the door of the thin kitchen, lined with more shelves. Hundreds of tea-towels, jars of this and that, old coffee tins planted with Holy Basil and Oregano, a stack of chewed biros in a broken cup, a medal engraved with a tiny black Madonna swinging above the cooker, a dusty cactus in a plastic pot printed with the words, 'Welcome to Bahia'. The soup dishes were creepy, made from red earth and pinched with staring faces. Every available space was used except a tiny table with three stools which was where I assumed the family must eat and where Mercury was now hunched over a glass of black liquid and a stack of biscuits which she rhythmically dunked and then swallowed, catching them with her mouth before they disintegrated, like a baby bird. There was no space for an extra chair. I took the huge book out of my rucksack and laid it on the table. There wasn't room for much else.

'This is for you,' I said.

Mercury looked shocked, which pleased me.

'Salgado,' she said, downing the rest her coffee and shoving her glass up on the shelf above her which literally groaned with the weight of old tins of food.

She went through every page slowly and carefully, examining each image, the old, ravaged women, the sleepy children playing with dried-up bones, the group funerals. It had been the right choice. Mercury's face lost its pinched, annoyed look, she appeared even younger. She tapped a picture of a young man and woman. The woman had a turban wrapped around her hair, the man a bag slung over his shoulder. They leant against one another, skin tight and eye sharp, standing in front of an open-back truck filled with watermelons.

'That could have been my father and my mother, they were both from Belo Monte,' she said, 'they came down here in a truck like that one.'

One of the very few things I knew about Marcio's father was that he was from the North. He had told me proudly that his father's great-grandfather had founded the town in which he had been born, in the poorest, hottest part of the country, the backlands, where even the earth was the colour of fire. Why had he left? Marcio didn't really know. His parents had come to São Paulo like so many other people. Where was he now? Marcio didn't know. Something happened, one day he disappeared.

Marcio found it too upsetting to talk much about. I didn't have any problems tapping his sister for the story though.

‘Your father,’ I said.

Mercury closed the book.

‘People from Bahia are good looking but always hungry,’ she said, ‘it’s better to be a slave in the city with a full belly then free and starving up there. You want a coffee? You can have a shower too. I’ll get you a towel. Do you like it hot or cold? I’ll fix the temperature for you. Don’t try and do it yourself, it’s an electric shower. You can kill yourself if you don’t know what you’re doing.’

Mercury laughed.

‘I’m not sure my mother would have told you that,’ she said.

The shower was no more than a trickle of lukewarm water, but it was enough to remove the grime of the journey. The soap smelt horrific but was very effective and left my skin gleaming in subtly different colours. I learnt later it was made from iguana fat and the ash of burnt lemongrass, from a native tribe living at the very Southern tip of the city, whose tiny reserve had been swallowed up by the sprawl. I rubbed myself over with the towel Mercury had given me, monogrammed ornately with the words Hotel Bittencourt. My clothes and my washbag were in the suitcase returning with Marcio. We had been back nearly two hours and there was still no sign of him. Where was he? My mouth felt horribly scummy, I was desperate for a toothbrush. I opened the little mirrored cabinet in the hope that I could at least find some paste to rub over my teeth. The cabinet was stuffed with dusty bent-up shoes, mostly leather, but also mostly odd. I managed to close the door once again and studied my face in the mirror. I was clean, at least, but still grey, looked as sick as I felt.

I had made a friend in Mercury at least, who was sat on the sofa now, solemnly studying her glum new book. She insisted that she lend me some of her clothes until the suitcases arrived. It was a horrible experience; her t-shirts rode over my stomach and her jeans were all too tight for me to even attempt to do up. She was so tiny, so light; she made me feel like a monster.

'You have a large stomach,' she said, before going off into her mother's room to search for anything that would fit me.

She returned with an ornate white dress belonging to Ursula. It looked like it was saved for special occasions. I desperately tried to refuse but Mercury was headstrong. Since I had given her my gift she was determined to be as nice as possible. I couldn't make her see how embarrassed I would be when her mother arrived to find me wearing her clothes. She was blind to my arguments, thinking I was just being polite. I couldn't believe she was the same age as Marcio. She looked five years younger, and she acted, well, she acted like a child. In the end she pulled the dress over my head herself and I let her, nervous of the whole thing ripping. The smell of synthetic orchids was overpowering. I felt as if I was drowning in scent, the fabric frothed around me and itched my skin. The monkey babies were now clinging viciously to their mother who was feeding them both, simultaneously, from her saggy depleted boobs. She looked bored and exhausted. What kind of mother has two babies at once? There was something witchy and mysterious about twins.

Mercury sat a cup of black coffee down beside me. The rusty helmet creaked back and forth. I realised I hadn't bought any teabags with me and felt teary.

'Are you alright?' said Mercury, 'your face has gone very red.'

I decided I'd preferred this girl when she'd been completely uninterested in me.

'Fine,' I smiled, shutting my laptop, 'I'm allergic to coffee, all English people are, slightly. That's why we drink so much tea.'

'What are you doing here?' asked Mercury.

'What do you mean?' I said.

'Why did you come here?'

'I came with your brother.'

'Why, though?'

'Why? I mean. We're…we're together.'

She shook her head, picked at her nail.

'You should have stayed where you were. He's a bad one.'

'A bad one? What do you mean?'

She smiled, winked at me.

'Only joking. But really, why did you leave London to come here? Everyone wants to

go to London. It's not easy. You need a passport, a visa… money.'

'It's not that great, really, when you live there. It's just…London.'

'Didn't you have a job or anything?'

'I worked in a gallery, writing the descriptions of the artworks.'

Mercury's eyes widened.

'Oh wow. I would love to do that. I would love it. How did you get the job?'

'My tutor from university got me the job, the director was a former student of his.'

'I would love to work in a gallery but it's so hard here, just to get in, just to see the art is hard. They're all surrounded by walls, you know. Great big walls everywhere.'

Mercury stretched her arms outwards pushing the walls away, concentrated frown on her face, bitten lip, bitten nails, a bit wild, a bit desperate. She was just like me, I decided, and so told her the truth.

'Look, it was shit, to be honest. The pay was shit. The art was shit. And then I got the sack.'

Her eyes widened, delighted by my fall as I knew she would be.

'How did you get the sack?'

'It was your brother's fault, really.'

'How?'

'You know he's into buildings?'

'Yeah.'

'He likes breaking into them more than anything. Being a building that's not supposed to be open. Finding a way to enter after they've shut, you know. Or getting into worksites. He wanted to go see my gallery one night and I just, I said alright, I had the code, you know, and the key. It's a big alarm system but I was usually the first one in anyway in the morning, so I knew what to do. We went in and… well, it was a horrible show. This artist had taken two prostitutes to a hotel room and got them to graffiti the room and then took photos.'

'That was it? That's not art.'

'Who knows. Who gets to say?'

'Us. Human beings.'

I laughed. I liked her, really, even though she was kind of mental.

‘Yeah, well, anyway, your brother, he hated it too. He said it was wrong. We got ourselves worked up about it, wanted to protest. I ended up writing my name on one of the pictures. Across the wall of the hotel room.’

'No! Why? That’s stupid.'

I shrugged, looked out at the monkeys.

'I just, I get this urge, to write my name on things. It's difficult to control. It happens when I am feeling stressed out. '

'You feel like it now?'

'Yeah, actually, I'm feeling like writing on that helmet. It’s so creepy, like a green metal hood. And that gash. What the hell happened? It’s just like, you can see the guy thought so much of himself, those laurels he had, but then, it didn’t work out, did it? Because someone got him on the side of his head and probably killed him.'

Mercury put her hands to her mouth. I thought she was horrified but when she put them down she was grinning.

'Do it. Write your name on the inside.'

'Won’t your mother go mad?’

'She'll hate you anyway. Let's do it together. I'll hold it still. Then we'll share the blame.'

'You can't be serious.'

'I am. I am. Just write it on the inside. It'll be so funny. She'll never know. It'll feel so good after so many years of that thing watching me. Like her spy.'

I took my pen out my pocket, explained to her that it didn't look much but it was a special, a Posca, indelible and permanent. She took it from me like a precious weapon with mystical powers, which is just how it felt like to me.

'It's so cool, so small. My boyfriend should get one of these,' she said.

'Hmm,' I said. I only had two pens and didn't want to have to give one to Mercury's boyfriend.

Mercury held the helmet steady. I wrote my name, June, on the inside. It wasn't a particularly good tag, the pen couldn't really get any grip, the metal was rusty and soft and flaked away as I wrote.

It was a rush though, a real rush. I was just finishing the E when we heard Marcio and Ursula arriving. Laughter and loud, excited conversation, echoing around the corridor. Mercury and I fell back on the sofa breathless. She put her finger to my lips.

'Don't tell my brother. He's hers. 100 percent hers.'

Mother and son burst happily into the apartment, stared with their mouths open at me, sitting on the sofa still dressed in the frothy white dress. I could completely understand their surprise. I had almost forgotten I was wearing it but now remembered that I must appear as a bride waiting to be taken to church. I felt my face turn redder whilst I waited for Mercury to explain. She said nothing. The helmet swayed and creaked. Creak, creak, creak, it went.

‘That’s my mother’s New Year’s Eve dress,’ said Marcio.

I looked down at myself. I was really burning up now. Mercury still said nothing, absorbed with her new book, tracing her finger over the torso of one particularly good-looking cowboy. Ursula crossed her arms, tried to seem relaxed.

‘She can wear it,’ she said, ‘just don’t spill coffee over it please, it is very difficult to clean. It took me so long to get it like that. It used to belong to a priestess from Salvador who expelled bad spirits from tower blocks. It got very dirty.’

Mercury finally looked up.

‘You took so long,’ she said, ‘where were you?’

‘We stopped for a coconut,’ said Marcio.

‘She needed some clean clothes. They were all in her suitcase. Why the hell did you take so long when she was here alone Marcio? You’re supposed to be looking after her.’

‘Oh Mercury, of course it was you. Why did you choose my best dress? There’re so many others that would have been better. You do it on purpose,’ said Ursula.

‘Oh, don’t start,’ said Marcio, ‘not today.’

We ate lunch on our laps in the living room, watching the monkey mother trying to balance her sleeping children on her belly so she could sleep too. Rice, beans, cold fried chicken. Everything was very salty.

‘I watched that monkey give birth to those babies,’ said Ursula, ‘they just slid out. Not like humans. I gave birth very easily. No pain. The midwife said it was strange, how quiet I was.’

‘Food’s salty, ma, really salty,’ said Mercury.

Marcio and Ursula ignored her.

‘What is she going to do here?’ Ursula asked Marcio.

‘Ma, she speaks Portuguese,’ said Marcio.

'It's just a couple of weeks,' I said, 'I don't need to *do* anything.'

The lips of Ursula's mouth turned down at the corners and she shook her head a few times before turning back to her beans.

'We need a family meeting,' Marcio said, 'about what to do about the apartment.’

'There's only three of us, why do we need to have a meeting?' said Mercury.

'You live for contradicting me,' said Marcio.

'If you want to have a meeting it’ll have to be tomorrow,' said Mercury, standing up, leaving her food almost untouched, 'I've got to work. I want to go see Amaral before.’

Ursula began arguing with her daughter, told her she didn’t want her going out there to the periphery, that if she wanted to see her boyfriend he needed to come and see her here. Mercury told her mother that she didn’t own her and slammed the door behind her.

‘What’s the periphery?’ I asked.

‘The margins, kind of like the *backlands,* but all concrete. Badlands,’ said Marcio.

‘Sounds fun,’ I said.

‘No. You can’t go there,’ said Marcio.

‘I hate that boy. Amaral. What kind of a name is that?’ said Ursula.

Marcio, Ursula and I spent the rest of the afternoon watching the São Paulo grand prix. I whispered to Marcio to get me a drink. He whispered back that his mother was teetotal.

'There's a bottle of Amarula in the kitchen. It's covered in dust. What about that?' I hissed, desperately.

He frowned, shook his head, put his fingers to his lips, pointed at the screen, the roaring, weaving, racing cars. I felt like crying. Night dropped suddenly, like a black carpet. Once it did my

exhaustion was complete. I tried to read *Backlands* for a while. The book had moved on from geology and geography and was now going deep into plant biology, climate and the terrifying droughts that plagued the Northern interior. Interesting to read that *favela* was originally the name of a certain plant that thrived in arid, difficult conditions. Their fuzzy leaves collect tiny drops of dew from the driest of airs and often fused together to become what the author called, strangely, 'a social species.' Shortly after this passage I fell asleep on the sofa in the dim light of an ivory lamp shaped like an elephant's foot, to the pitter-pattering sound of Marcio and his mother showering together in the tiny bathroom. The whole family were so fucking weird. My last thought before sinking into mindless black was that I had to stop falling for guys simply because I loved the way they looked.

……

Chapter 4

The days were long and the nights were short in that first weekend, living on the first floor of Tremembé tower. The only time I had Marcio truly to myself was in the small black hours after midnight, when Ursula had finally stopped reading and the sounds of her breathy snores carried through the thin walls of the apartment. Our bed was a mattress squeezed into his strip of a room which Marcio informed me was exactly half the size of a standard São Paulo prison cell. Caged by the bars on the window, lit in stripes by the light of the moon, my skin shone pale blue against Marcio's navy limbs. He kissed me with a possessiveness I had not experienced in London. I needed him so much more than he needed me in those first days, and it showed in the way that we touched.

We slept together surrounded by Marcio's particular passion, a madness that I should have seen before but hadn't because he had been a traveler in London, just passing through. He was a hoarder like his mother and his room was made tinier still by piles and piles of books stacked up against the walls. Paperbacks, hardbacks, books of uncut pages wrapped in cellophane, mistreated

romances, bloated with rain, floppy free newspaper guides, Everyman Brazilian classics: *Dona Flor and her two husbands, Diary of a Small Winner, The Slum, Child of the Dark* by Carolina Maria de Jesus, a woman from a São Paulo favela whose diary went onto become Brazil's biggest selling book ever, *Capão Pecado,* a cult classic from the 90s about life in the periphery of the city. He had no less than four different editions of *Backlands* by Euclides da Cunha. In case I lost the one I stole from him, Marcio joked.

'I'm borrowing it,' I said.

'You robbed it,' he said.

'I'm just having a read. It's not like when you stole that poster from the Oiticica exhibition. I should have walked away right then. What kind of guy steals art posters for a laugh?'

Marcio shook his finger at me.

'You don't know what you're talking about. Come on, we'll put it up. Then you tell me I was wrong.'

I lay on the mattress watching as he cleared off a couple of towers of books, unrolled the white tube, stuck it to the wall with an old roll of sellotape he had perched on his windowsill. A dead man on a red background lay on the floor, his arms outstretched. Beneath him were the words *'seja marginal, seja herói'* - 'to be a marginal, to be a hero'.

'This is art I like,' said Marcio, 'that says something important. Puts itself on the line. Not like that sandpit shit. 'To be a criminal, to be a hero.' You see, I had to steal the poster.'

'Yeah, but *marginal* doesn't really mean criminal, does it? It just means from the margins. A marginal person. So, he's saying to be from the margins is to be heroic, which, I guess, it is, in a country like yours.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Weren't you the last country in the world to abolish slavery?'

Marcio coloured slightly. He loved Brazil and didn't want to talk about these things.

'You don't know. This is about the military dictatorship; it was the flag of the resistance. I've got a book about it here somewhere,' he said, turning back to his towers of books, running his finger down the spines to find what he was looking for.

‘Where do you get all these?’ I asked, ‘you steal them too?’

Marcio told me that he searched for books everywhere he went, in city squares, outside libraries, municipal bins, cultural associations, park benches. Some he found simply lying on the street. There was no rhyme or reason to his library except for the fact that he had not, he told me proudly, paid for even one of these books. People said it was so expensive to live in the city, but Marcio said he had free entertainment to last someone for years. He had a whole collection of academic books he’d scavenged from his university library, including an enormous history of corruption in Brazil. Other books: silvery thrillers by Sidney Sheldon, a boxset of 20th century philosophers, the Penguin *Karma Sutra* translated by Richard Burton, a guide to the birds of São Paulo state, VS Naipaul’s *Among the Believers*, three copies of *100 Years of Solitude* in Portuguese, Spanish and French, an essay by Roh on Magic Realism as well as poetry by Pablo Neruda and a host of other Latin American writers: Asturias, Carpentier, *War at the End of the World* by Vargas Llosa, Borges. Russian fairytales, an illustrated guide to breastfeeding. It was towards the end of the witching hour, Marcio lazily kissing my own violet chest, when I asked him, cat-like, jealous, why he needed a book full of women’s breasts. He mumbled that you never knew when a book would come in useful. They were his security, these books. Against what? I pressed him. Everything and nothing. It was just so nice, he said, to have some things of your own, some things that you own.

'I don’t own a thing. I’m nearly thirty and I don’t own a thing, just my rucksack, some clothes, a couple of pens. I don’t have a job now either. Nothing coming in, nothing going out, nothing to do except hang around with you.’

'That’s OK. You’re free,’ he said.

‘It doesn’t feel like freedom. It feels like failure,’ I said.

Marcio shook his head, it was late, he told me, pulling a t-shirt across his face. Ursula got up early and expected us to do the same. I turned over and he tugged me into him.

‘It’s weird, how you smell of milk,’ he whispered.

‘It’s weird,’ I replied, ‘how your mother picks the wax from your ears.’

I found it disturbing how much Marcio enjoyed being woken up with both his mother and his lover by his side. Ursula's gurgling alarm clock, silver-plate, fished from out of the river but never

quite dry, would begin its burble at 5.45 am. I'd cover my head with Marcio's childhood pillow, a thin thing covered with Mickey Mice sun-bleached to girly pastels. Not long after, around six am, Ursula would come into the room with his unsweetened black coffee, whisper to her son, stroke his head to wake him up. I pretended to be asleep. Marcio waited for her to close the door before kissing me on the back, all down my spine. At first he would dress himself as normal in the European labels he was so proud to own; Zara, Primark, Topshop. As he settled into a routine of almost never leaving the apartment, he mostly stayed in one very ugly fur onesie. The mangy bear outfit showed a side of Marcio I really didn't like - an urban recluse who reveled in completely tasteless comfort.

The morning after we arrived, I put my shoes on and told Marcio that I was going for a walk. I'd studied a little of São Paulo street art and was excited to see it for myself. He laughed at this and then he stopped laughing and looked grim. He told me I was not to go out on my own, ever. It wasn't safe. The streets around his home were dangerous, there had been several recent kidnappings. I argued, told him I'd got a guidebook and there were loads of people in the streets, there was even a whole chapter on self-guided walking tours. That was in the centre, Marcio told me, which was very far away. It would take hours for us to arrive there by bus, which also was not safe. Hold-ups were common, especially around the full moon. We needed a car but we didn't have one. I gritted my teeth. Marcio brooded. We should content ourselves with staying at home, he said, whilst we still had one. It's not my home, I reminded him, beginning to wonder whether I should just cut this misadventure short and go home early. Still, I had nothing to go back for, no place to even live and the thought of staying with my own mother was even more depressing that staying with someone else's. I only half believed in the perilous cityscape Marcio painted for me anyway, and knew that when his terrible mood lifted he wouldn't be able to help himself, he would need to go out and have some fun. He was just like me in many ways. Mercury was continuously slinking in and out of the apartment, off to work photographing croissants, off to a sound-system party, off to the periphery to see her boyfriend. Ursula and Marcio would argue with her about where she was going but they couldn't do much about it, she had a motorbike and was completely free to move through the city whenever she wished, unaffected by rush-hour, gridlock, bus timetables. Ursula circulated around a smaller territory than Mercury but had created her own autonomous walking trails around the North Zone, a track besides

the gridded dead river, across patches of wasteland, down the winding sides of quiet rat-runs, constantly on the hunt for the discarded or lost objects with which she made her living. It was just amazing, Marcio said, what she found, the strange things that people misplaced or just chucked away. Once she found a bag of yellow bones that clacked in a rhythm as she walked along. Even Ursula couldn't stand this, left them amongst the mewing cats in the *Chora Menino* cemetery. It was irritating to learn how Ursula was able to roam safely around the city at all hours of the day and night whilst I could not even catch a bus. She must know the landscape so intimately, I concluded, that any sign of danger would be immediately apparent and she would know exactly what to do and where to go. A bit like the Amazonian honey hunters I'd read about in one of Marcio's old *National Geographics.* They spent half their lives high up in thick jungle canopy and knew instinctively how to find the bees through the thick and often dark vegetation and also how to stay safe from their sting.

The night-time was the worst time for me, reading about the famous city nightlife on my laptop, trapped in a tower-block like the Lady of Shallot. In my first days in São Paulo, when the sun set hard and the night dropped in with no relief from the thick heat, I found it almost impossible to settle or to keep my cool. What was I doing stuck in this tiny apartment in the very far north of the North Zone of São Paulo with this strange family? I'd lost all my independence, my direction, my sense of self. When I'd rung my mother to tell her I was off to Brazil she'd dismissed the trip as a gap year but I knew that I was too old for that now. I hadn't spoken to my father, we rarely called one another, but I knew he'd be wiser and tell me to get a ring on my finger or come straight home. He'd tell me my mother had a child by my age and would want to know what I saw in this young man. It would have been hard to explain it to him without sounding foolish. What was it that got me about Marcio? I couldn't answer it logically. At first it was the way he looked and his wildness but after that it was just overwhelming feelings rolling on me thick and fast and that only he could relieve, with his hand threaded through mine, or his lips on my forehead, his leg pressed down onto my waist as I fell to sleep.

And there were other reasons for winding up here too, I knew that, running away from everything back in London. I'd got the sack, but I'd done it to myself. I had wanted to leave for some time and wasn't even sure if I'd ever been happy. I'd been tired of sitting in the windowless gallery all

day long, the first in in in the morning, the last out at night. It was my job to push the bell to let people into shows during opening hours. I would watch them compulsively whilst pretending to write at the computer sat upon my discreet desk. It gave me a kick how carefully many of the visitors read my explanations, staring and frowning at the little texts as much sometimes as the artworks themselves. Except for the ones with kids that is, who didn't read anything, just tried to desperately stop the little monsters from touching anything. I always found this kind of ironic because really the whole point was to get touched. It was enchanting though, the sheer variety of men and women who made it through the door of the gallery: not just the obvious art-lovers but tube drivers still wearing TFL badges, boys with bright white Nikes, ill-looking couples with dirty tote bags, a handful of addicts, acidheads, an outing of students with Downs Syndrome, teenage girls from South London with gold looped earrings. They made a pilgrimage to this out of the way place, all looking for something from the video installations, the hyper-real paintings, the lauded photographers. What? What did they think they would find in here that was worth more of their time than having a coffee and talking with someone? I saw a lot of them leave, shaking their heads, murmuring about cappuccinos, confused and unmoved and that made me feel guilty, like I hadn't done my job properly. It also made me feel kind of angry, like maybe I could do better, like maybe I could reach those people, or teach them something, or just make them look, properly, if I had a chance.

However, if I had seen going to São Paulo as an escape, an opportunity to shine, or grow, or discover, then things were not going in the right direction. I had assumed Marcio and I would be going out most evenings, as we did in London, not yet at a domestic stage in our relationship, still shy of one another's private spaces. Here though we ate dinner every night with his mother in front of the TV news, all lined up together on the sofa, Marcio in the middle with his arm around both of us. We had the same meal every day: rice and beans and something else; fried fish, fried chicken, fried beef. After dinner Ursula would kiss her son several times before going to read on her bed. I could hear the turning of the pages - swish, swish, swish - only pausing to listen when Marcio and I argued. We passed away the humid nights drinking cans of Brahma beer by the blue light of my laptop, squeezed together on his mattress, watching old *Cinema Novo* films. Marcio's loved *Deus e Diabo no Terra do Sol* which told the story of Manuela and Rosa, a young couple who live in an isolated shack

surrounded by cacti and dry brush. I could tell that Marcio believed these two characters to be just like his parents by the shining trancelike state in which he watched their fates unfold. Rosa, a striking dark-eyed woman, is first introduced pounding corn in the searing sun with an enormous pestle and mortar. When Miguel, shorter and less beautiful than his wife, comes to tell her he has seen a saint, she gives him a look of total apathy before returning to her pounding, staring mindlessly towards the sunbaked horizon. The two of them then begin working together on an archaic hand-powered wheel to grate *mandioca* which is finally turned into an evening meal of what appeared to be a kind of watery porridge. As Miguel leans against a wall using his hand to spoon the slop into his mouth, he tells Rosa that he's going to go to the market to sell two cows. With the proceeds he'll try to buy some land from a local boss, Moraes, so they will be able to plant something to harvest next year. Rosa, leant up against another wall with the same vacant exhausted expression on her face, simply replies 'What's the use? There's no point.'

'God she's so bloody miserable,' I said to Marcio, trying to lighten the mood. He put his fingers to his lips, completely enchanted.

Some minutes after this it became clear that Miguel should have listened to hopeless Rosa. The landowning boss Moraes hoodwinks him out of his cattle profit before he even gets onto the subject of the land. When Miguel tries to argue Moraes shuts him down by telling him he has the law on his side, which he had, because he was wealthy and had lawyers who could do anything he wanted. This sends Miguel literally mad. He takes up his machete and in the crowded marketplace begins to hack the guy to death. Amazingly, he escapes, only to find that his home is being attacked by *cangaceiro* bandits that roam all over the region. His old mother is killed in crossfire and Miguel decides to join the mystic Saint Sebastian, gathering other poor souls from across the backlands to lead them to a promised land. This adventure ends, some might say predictably, in tragedy, with a dead baby, a dead saint and a whole load of dead followers. Miguel and Rosa find new careers as bandits.

'It's…melodramatic,' I said, when the film finally ended in the desert merging into the waves of the sea.

Marcio shook his head.

‘It’s like that.'

‘What happened to your dad? Why won’t you talk about him?’ I asked.

Marcio shut me up by kissing me and I let him. Strange but I fancied the guy even more now I was completely dependent on him. We drowned ourselves in intimacy, let the dingy mattress transform into a magic boat, the Mickey sheets blowing like sails.

During the day Marcio would sit around with his mother having long often tearful conversations in heavy accents which I found hard to understand. I suspected they were both talking slang to stop me eavesdropping. When I asked Marcio what they needed to talk about so intensely he told me they were discussing the apartment which was in danger from the construction project next door.

‘I don’t see why it’s in danger,’ I said, ‘it’s your place.’

‘Look at the plans of the new condominium. The forest dell is right where our apartment now stands.’

‘They can’t just chuck you out and knock the place down.’

‘You have no idea.’

‘What can you do about it anyway?’

‘Break into the building site and leave some animal sacrifices around. The workers are all from the countryside, gullible. They would be terrified. A bush-fox would be good. They’re seen as very bad luck. Usually mean a flood is coming. They live off rainy-season crabs.’

‘Are you joking?’

‘Of course.’

‘I’m not ever sure you’re telling me the truth. Your ma seems to be able to look after herself. She didn’t really need you to come back.’

‘Don’t be so suspicious. It’s not attractive.’

‘I just don’t see that things are as urgent as you said they were.’

‘You don’t need to see anything. You just need to believe in me.’

‘What? Like Jesus?’

‘Yeah, kind of like Jesus.’

It was just over a week after I arrived, although it felt far longer, that the threat to Tremembé tower got serious. Marcio had been watching *Deus e Diabo no Terra do Sul* for the second time that week, this time with his mother, eating hot sugared popcorn and dressed in their matching fur outfits even though it was a hot, close, late afternoon. Mercury as usual was off having fun somewhere whilst I padded through the tiny rooms, bored, caged. I took up *Backlands* for a while, interested enough to go back to the introduction that I had skipped at first. Poor old Da Cunha made being the most lauded writer in Brazilian literary history look shit. His life was like one of those *telenovelas* that Ursula said she hated but always liked to watch while we were having dinner. His mother died when he was three and he was bought up in a series of boarding schools, ending up in Rio's military academy. He then got expelled for throwing down his sword in front of the king's war minister. A few years later when the king was gone and the Republic had begun, da Cunha returned to the army and made a fantastic match, marrying the daughter of a general, one of the founders of the Republic no less. On the surface of things, life for da Cunha should have been good. But he didn't get on with his wife and his dreams of becoming an academic studying mineralogy and geology did not come to anything. He somehow got into journalism, sent to cover the Canudos massacre. He was, unsurprisingly, a big supporter of the army but the terror of what he witnessed - drought, the wildfires, the desperate and defiant town of refugee believers, the cruel inhumanity of the military campaign - changed him. He began writing *Backlands* when he returned home. It was published two years later and became an instant success. After failing as a geologist and failing as a husband, da Cunha became Brazil's foremost man of letters. Then it all went wrong. He was sent to the Amazon to write another book and whilst he was there his wife took a lover. Da Cunha arrived home to find her heavily pregnant. The baby died but his wife carried on with her boyfriend and had another baby. Da Cunha tried to kill the lover but ended up getting shot dead himself. He was forty-three, which seemed old enough, but not old enough to die.

I closed the book, heard Ursula murmuring something quietly to her son about the film, soft laughter, lips on cheeks. My throat closed up. It was so hard to even breathe in this place. I took my

pen out, ready to write my name across the whole wall, stopped myself, sat back down at my laptop, googled apartments to rent. The prices were eye-popping, almost as expensive as London. I slammed my laptop closed, took a sheet of the pad of paper that Marcio kept by his bed, wrote my name in the middle of it, spread out words and thoughts from around it - desire, corruption, conflict, indignation, battle, conciliation, love, hate, justice, journey, change, humanity. Transformation - that word Nicha repeated again and again until it was hollow. June. Just a name but it was everything, really, the whole person, the first thing you are given, the thing you never loose, not even when you die. Tell me about me, tell me about you, tell me about what it all means, help me feel something today, help me hear the ebb and flow of the perfect song. I heard nothing but the sounds of Rosa wailing and crying on the television in the next room.

I went to stand at the bars of the bedroom window, stare out at the afternoon sky, which often went an astonishing doughy gold. Pollution apparently. It was then that I heard a horrible yowl. Something flew past the window and smashed onto the cement floor below. I screamed, knowing instantly that something alive had just died. Marcio came into the bedroom. I told him I didn't want to look but he should go down and see what had happened. He came back grim looking, it was a small mutt, dead now. He thought it belonged to a neighbour who lived on the very top floor and often let his beloved pet onto the roof for some exercise when he was out at work. We stood together in the lounge, frightened and unsure what to do.

'You need to go up to the roof, Marcio' said Ursula, 'you need to see what's happening up there. '

Marcio nodded but looked pale.

'Poor man,' I said.

'He'll be OK,' said Ursula, 'he'll get over it.'

'It's his dog,' I said.

'He’s a librarian now but he used to be a prison guard, ' said Marcio, 'beheadings, massacres. He's tough.'

‘Are you joking?’ I said.

Marcio shrugged.

‘They always say it’s the prisoners who do it, but the guards are just as bad.’

We took the service corridor instead of the elevator, raw breezeblock, dark, damp-smelling. I hung back, suddenly frightened, but Marcio kept pulling me up the steps.

'People smell it, if you're scared,' he said.

We reached a fire exit which swung open onto a flat cement rooftop. Nothing but the sky. The relief to be there, outside, in delicate shades of early evening, tumid clouds, white and gold felt immense after so long inside the apartment. Sounds rose to me; the cry of a baby, the chuk chuk of a helicopter, the wheeze of traffic as it made its way out into the scrappy grey haze of the periphery. The lilac hills beyond beckoned peacefully. I imagined my name spelt out in happy clouds.

‘Better than the wall of your bedroom,’ I said, as I scanned the flat roof.

A tripod stood close to one edge; a surveyor camera attached. We walked over to it.

'Developers,' said Marcio, 'making plans. The dog must have got in their way.'

We peered over the edge. There was the dark stain of blood and a person on their knees now, cradling the animal. The high whistle and heave of a grown man's sobs carried up to me. It was a difficult scene to watch, I looked back towards the horizon, concentrated on the grimy hum of the backs of towers, washing hung over balconies, dusty creepers growing from damp cracks, windows plastered with racing car magazines. A young father tied a balloon the size of a small blue moon to the wrist of his baby boy, held him too far out the window. Marcio called out, motioned to the man to take his child inside.

‘That’s fucked up. The kid could fall. Guys like that, they shouldn’t be allowed to be dads,’ said Marcio.

‘I don’t think there’s an exam,’ I said.

‘My father would never have done that,’ he said.

'I think mine would have,' I said.

'We're going to need to have that meeting, about the apartment, whether Mercury likes it or not,' said Marcio.

'I feel sick about the dog. Poor man.'

'Worse things can happen. Could have been that kid. We have to concentrate now.'

'They can't just chuck your ma out though, can they? Even if they are surveying the site. There're laws, there must be.'

Marcio laughed.

'You don't know where you are. Laws only work if you can afford a lawyer.'

Marcio squinted out towards the hills beyond the smoky grey waves of the city.

'I wish my dad was here. He'd know what to do.'

'Oh,' I said, 'I know.'

I put my arm around him and he put his arm round me and we stood there together, letting the cheek-by-jowl life come to us, the lines of warm evening concrete breathing out at last, lights flickering on here and there, the smell of frying garlic, a hairdryer blowing, Saturday night. It would have been an almost gentle scene except that across almost every visible surface was spread the same black runic graffiti that Mercury had stopped to photograph on my journey from the airport, like an angry, contagious rash.

'Is this the stuff that Mercury's boyfriend does?'

'*Pixo.* Yeah. Amaral.'

'I love it.'

'Most people hate it, they fucking hate it. It ruins everything.'

'Yeah, but can't you see how powerful it is, to make people feel like that? The graffiti in London, you mostly just walk past it. I'm used to it, it's kind of nice, brightens the place up a bit. I don't see it having much effect on me, it's just part of the landscape. This is different. It's sort of, how can I explain, its shows what the city is really like. How people are feeling here. How I am feeling. You see what I mean?'

'You aren't from where they're from. You can't really understand.'

'I think I can. Where are they from?'

'The periphery, almost all of them are from the periphery. They train surf into the centre to tag, climb as high as they can. What gets you respect is the climbing of the walls, reaching parts of the city that are you're not supposed to be able to reach in a million years.'

'I want to meet Mercury's boyfriend.'

‘Come on, let’s go down, we need to make a plan now.’

……

The life of the cowboy of the North is marked by continuous swings between happiness and cruel suffering, plenty and lack. The ever-present threat of the sun hangs over his head and through the seasons ushers in cycles of devastation and misfortune. He spends his youth experiencing a chain of catastrophic events. He becomes a man without ever having had a childhood. The spectre of drought intrudes on the happy hours of childhood like an unwelcome ghost. He has to face a harsh existence too soon. His life is cursed. He learns that he is caught in a relentless conflict, imperiously demanding, every ounce of his energy. He grows strong, clever resigned and practical. He is a state of constant alert. He is a perfect translation of the environment at work around him.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

Chapter 5

It was Monday mid-morning by the time Mercury sidled into the apartment, whilst Ursula and Marcio were in the kitchen making the oily black coffee which they loved to get high on and which made me feel like throwing up. She flicked the helmet, making it yowl, winked at me before sitting way too close and putting her hand on my own.

'Family meeting,' she said, 'what does that even mean?'

Her breath smelt, ash and butter and mud, her face so near to mine I could feel the warmth, the wetness of it. I turned my head slightly but didn't move away because I liked it.

'Fernando's dog. Now a letter,' I said, pointing to where a screwed-up envelope sat in the middle of the floor, throbbing there the whole of the morning, ever since Ursula had tossed it away in

anger. Mercury crouched down, smoothed out the heavy cream paper, kept very still, hunched over the words. A central law firm representing the developers Domingos Sertão had written to residents of Tremembé tower to inform them that although their homes appeared to be official and legally acquired the original contractors had not owned the land on which the tower was built and the case was now being investigated. Residents who could produce the official deeds for their homes and who were happy to move the burden of doubt onto Domingos Sertão would be paid the market value for their properties and helped in the relocation process.

'*Merda*. Crap.' said Mercury.

Ursula made cries of agreement as she sat down on the floor by her daughter, gripping her fingers round the girl's bird-neck, handing her an almost solid cup of coffee. Marcio followed, giving me my own mug of tea, a weak perplexed Brazilian version of English Breakfast which he had finally tracked down after days of calls, in a 24-hour hypermarket back near the airport. I took a sip. Barely warm. Disgusting. Like dishwater, my mother would have said. So many nights she had sat at my grandparent's table, red eyes, talking about all the hurts and the slights and the injustices she had suffered. There were many and they were various but the fact that her husband had never boiled the water properly for her tea was the worst. My grandmother would shake her head and cluck with horror at the thought of her daughter stranded in Portugal, forced to drink tepid, half-brews.

'Nice?' said Marcio, smiling at me.

'Lovely, thanks,' I whispered, 'but have you got any sugar? I like to have sugar.'

'We don't have sugar in this house,' said Ursula. Her sense of hearing was as acute as her sense of smell. I wondered if heightened senses were a mark of some types of madness. Only psychopaths could drink such industrial strength coffee without ever adding sugar.

'No sugar?' I repeated.

Ursula shook her head.

'No. No way. We don't have sugar in this house. Get used to it. Or find somewhere else to live.'

She laughed happily at this thought. Marcio put his hands up.

'Ma, please. Look, we need to check the deeds of the house. Can you go and get them?'

'These people don't own the land either,' she said, 'It's just a show to scare us.'

'Doesn't matter. They have lawyers. We need our documents in order. Where are they?'

Ursula put her hand on her head, took another small sip of her moon juice.

'I just, I don't know. It's been so many years.'

I looked at Marcio. He half closed his eyes, shook his head slightly. I bit my lip, took my Posca from my pocket and wrote my name across the letter, then, underneath, the word *Bullshit* in English. Ursula frowned, perplexed.

'She's like a child, really, isn't she?' she said to Marcio as if I wasn't there. He ignored the comment.

'You too, ma,' said Marcio, 'how can you not know where the deeds are? You know where everything is.'

'That's your life, keeping tabs on us, on your things,' said Mercury.

Ursula stood up, took up the soft cloth bag she used to collect her bits in.

'I need to go.'

'Are you kidding, ma?' said Marcio.

She put her hands up in the air, just like Marcio always did.

'There's a fair in Jardim França. If I don't go now I'll miss out on all the best things.'

Marcio, Mercury and I watched the door close behind her.

'We need a lawyer,' said Marcio.

Mercury hit the helmet.

'We'll have to sell you after all, *baby*,' she said. The helmet gave its normal emotional cry in response.

'She can't stop trailing round the city,' said Marcio.

'She doesn't know what else to do,' said Mercury.

'You didn't drink your tea,' said Marcio.

'I need some sugar in it.'

'Get the honey, Marcio,' said Mercury.

Marcio looked at his sister, hesitated.

'Ma doesn't tell me where she keeps it,' Mercury said to me, 'only Marcio knows. Come on, Marcio. Just a bit,' she said.

'A bit of sweet would help, I guess, with the search,' he said.

'What search?' I said.

'The documents. They must be here somewhere.'

Ursula kept the honey in a large white yogurt pot above the fridge. The three of us gathered round the molten amber, dotted with tiny bees, suspended dead in their produce, spooned slick dark viscous trails into our mouths. Mercury licked her fingers. Marcio looked guilty but even he couldn't help smiling when he slid the spoon clean from his tongue. The twins looked at one another, looked at me.

'We'll have to buy more. I can't stop eating it,' I said.

Marcio closed the lid, told me it wasn't that simple. This was wild honey, collected by hand. It could be found all over the city, in beehives attached to deformed trees, petrol-black creepers. Very few people harvest it though. The local bees were a new crossbreed of African bees bought over by an Italian apiarist with the native variety. They were dangerous and could sometimes kill.

'Ma, though,' said Mercury, 'she's fearless. She doesn't care. She's made a smoker for herself. She found a hive in a haunted house near the cathedral, bees half-drunk on rotten papaya.'

'Still, she got stung last time. It's only meant for when we're sick. We shouldn't eat too much,' said Marcio, 'we have enough energy now, to get to work.'

We divided up the living room's loaded shelves, working our way methodically through the piles of objects. Marcio was fully focused, Mercury couldn't concentrate for more than a minute at a time. She kept going over to the helmet, warning the thing it was going to get sold and then flicking it so it squealed. However many times she repeated this she still found it amusing. My level of commitment to finding the documents was somewhere in the middle of the two. I soon realised that the papers would not simply be folded under a statue of a saint or screwed up in an old coffee tin. They wouldn't be in the bathroom either and they weren't in Marcio's room. Mercury and Ursula's doors were kept shut but I had glimpsed their insides - one a crazy mess, the other perfectly ordered. They were tiny spaces, hard to misplace something for long, despite the way Mercury seemed to

spread her clothes over every available space. There was a small door, just off the kitchen which was always kept closed. I suggested to Marcio that we try there but he told me that that was Ursula's storeroom, designed as a maid's room, although the family had never had the money to employ one. It was private and she would be angry if we went poking around her things.

'But of course, that's where the documents are going to be,' I said, 'let's go.'

Mercury agreed with me, but Marcio was adamant, warned his sister to stay out of the room or else. Mercury rolled her eyes; told us she was off to work and she'd catch us later. Marcio turned back to the shelves and I sloped back to his room saying I needed to do some reading. I picked up my book on the White Cube first but then put it down and continued with *Backlands*.

Droughts cauterised the whole of the North and the backlanders lived in terror of blue endless skies. The white-hot air sterilised almost everything, killed the animals, turned the ground into cracked rock. Only the tough favela plants seemed to thrive. The fertile woodland that had once covered the region had been burnt down to make pasture for the cattle and it was this that had calcified and exhausted the earth. The age-old martyrdom of the land, da Cunha called it, which seemed remarkably forward thinking. He described these men as strong but not at all good-looking, hunched, awkward, ugly, constantly fatigued with poor posture and a look of dogged humility. This was nothing like Ursula, or Mercury or Marcio. However, something strange, da Cunha described how the backlander liked to lean against any doorframe or wall that he came across and I had noticed the same thing about Marcio.

I put the book down after another few pages, took up my laptop to check my emails. I was delighted to receive a message from a Brazilian-British curator, Francisco Moura, another contact of my tutor at university. I'd finally found the courage to tell him I'd got the sack, and then the cheek to ask him to help me find another job, preferably in São Paulo. Of course, he knew someone, as he always did, another old student of his who last time they had talked was living in São Paulo. The guy was friendlier than I'd imagined he would be. He sent me a link to an art intervention happening in a central neighbourhood which he was visiting that afternoon, suggested we meet there. Reading about the project give me bubbles in my chest, made me desperate to get the fuck out the apartment and into the city. A local sculptor who had studied in London and who had visited Roger Hiorn's blue cave in

Elephant and Castle had decided to try the same thing in São Paulo. He had completely covered a small, terraced house in the Italian neighbourhood with blue copper sulphate crystals. The pictures of the dark sparkling bathroom, the spiky crystallised stairs, were haunting and beautiful but the old house had been slated for destruction - making way for another residential tower - and there was now a legal tussle going on between the artist's gallery and the construction company. There would be a protest to save the house this afternoon by the local art community which Francisco would be attending and which he had now invited me.

I found Marcio surrounded by shelf-debris, begged him to take me down there, told him I was meeting a guy who could give me some work. He refused, didn't like the idea of me meeting another man at all, told me it was far too difficult a journey and anyway he had to find these documents. I told him I'd go my own.

'How?' he laughed.

'Bus,' I said, 'like the millions of other people who live here without a car and who manage to get around every day.'

I had seen a barely there bus-stop through the bars of Marcio's window. It was just a pole, really, painted orange, only obvious because of the line of women dressed in white that waited there in the very early morning, as well as a man who sold glistening yellow cakes under the shade of an umbrella. This was where I would wait, I decided, as I tied up my shoelaces for the first time in a week.

'June,' he said, 'it's dangerous. You don't know what you're doing, where you're going.'

'I'm going to catch a fucking bus. How hard can it be Marcio?'

It had been rainy and overcast in the early morning but the sun had burned away the midday cloud and steam rose now from the pavement. There were no other people waiting at the stop but the guy who sold cake was still there, half-asleep under his umbrella. He didn't seem too worried, I reasoned, less sure of myself now I was out on the street. The police post to the back of me was reassuring and at the same time troubling. The two officers carried the kind of machine guns that were used in war zones but with a sleepy, bone-deep lethargy. I scanned the surroundings myself, doing their job for them. A simple pock-marked road, a shabby palm tree. A woman with a young child in a

buggy outside a small shop barricaded in steel grids, a man splattered all over with white paint, a kid with Nike trainers and a rucksack. A bakery stood across from the bus stop, piles of fresh rolls stacked in the window. A very old lady slowly wheeled a shopping bag towards the entrance. It was just the kind pensioners use in England. I glanced back towards Tremembé tower, to the tiny, barred window of Marcio's bedroom. I thought I saw a shadow move, tossed my head back towards the road, focusing on catching the first bus that came along, wherever it was going. Then, a hand on my shoulder, pulling me back.

I screamed, a terrible scream that shook everyone - the cake-man, the police, the baby in the buggy - awake. The kid started crying and the mother looked really pissed off.

'It's me,' said Marcio.

'Fuck you,' I said.

'Look, I don't want to keep you caged up,' he said.

'That's not what it looks like.'

'It's going to take you hours to get there, on the bus. This stop is just for local routes. Come back. Let me just put the stuff back before ma arrives home and then we'll get a taxi down to the metro, go from there. OK?'

'Let's go now. Why do you need to put all the stuff back?'

'She'll be upset. She doesn't like things to be moved around.'

'You're doing her a favour. You came back here to help and she just went off when you tried to talk about it.'

‘I need to be kind to her. She's my mother. It won't take long then we'll go, I promise.'

I pretended to think about it, pretended to be unsure of my decision, but I was relieved not to have to make the journey on my own. We went home and I helped Marcio arrange all the crazy batshit back on the shelves. It was a couple of hours later when we finally got to Parada Inglesa metro station, taking a local bus instead of the taxi that Marcio had promised but could not bring himself to splash out on, despite my lamentations that we would be too late. I picked up a thin map of the São Paulo metro as Marcio bought our tickets. It looked very similar to the London underground, simplified, abstracted, in bright colours that gave no clue to what lay above. It beckoned to me, whispered my

name, told me it was possible to move around, that if I could just master this map then I would be free. I wrote my name on top and the year too, which I always found funny as it looked like someone had just written the date. It was the right date too as we really were in the month of June now and my birthday was coming up very soon although I didn't want to think about it too much. I folded it up into a tiny square, fitted it below the loose sole of my tennis shoes.

The city metro was a hulking, ugly beast whose lines cut through the city on concrete plinths. Street kids lived in their eaves. We shared headphones on the way down, listened on his phone to a singer called Caetano Veloso who Marcio told me was probably the most famous person in Brazil though I'd never heard of him. He put on the song Tropicália because the singer had been inspired by the same Oiticica exhibition at which we'd met in London. Amazing, what different things the same experience does to people. The show had got me hooked up to a stranger I wasn't sure really whether I should trust. For Caetano it had kickstarted a whole new musical scene and one of the most successful careers in the history of Brazilian pop. The song begins with a high jarring whistle, a yowling clatter. An old man talks of the road, of the forest, of the *sertão;* those vast Brazilian backlands where order had not been forgotten but had never existed. The horns intone ominously. Caetano sings of witchy things: a child, ugly and dead, holding out his hand, the high plains, the green forest, the deep pool of blue, the emerald eyes of the *mulata* girl, the glittering carnival, the gardens where vultures stroll all afternoon. That heat, an everlasting spring. *Viva Mata, Viva Mulata.* I said I'd never heard anything like it. Marcio said it could only have been written by an angel-faced boy, the fifth of seven children, from a river town of African temples and colonial churches and ecstatic faith that shimmered and shivered just above the tropic line. We emerged from the blue line into Barra Funda station. The crowds appeared dreamlike to me after so many days without leaving the house. Out on the platform conversations and faces flitted around me with *Tropicália* still echoing in my head. I saw a perfect trio of dark-haired triplets following on leads behind a tall woman in a flowing pink skirt. A bald man, his skull shined like a mirror, wore a delicate blood-coloured snake around his neck. The scent of cheap perfume and stewed sweetcorn hung in the air.

We were already late for the protest and the metro was busy. I suggested it would be quick if we walked but Marcio didn't like that idea, as we would have had to go through a place he called *cracolandia* – crackland.

'It's safer underground,' he said.

But the train didn't stop at Republica. An announcement came over the tannoy explaining there had been an infestation of coral red snakes on the line. The zoo had been called but the driver would only be stopping at stations with the names of saints for the time being. It felt like hours although Marcio pointed out that it was only actually twenty minutes to Santo Amaro metro. It was an enormous new station, the size of a cathedral, freshly built, gleaming concrete, shiny earth. I saw the station's namesake, Santo Amaro himself, a wily bishop carved in bright white stone, arms outstretched towards vaulted steel. The train door beeped open, Marcio and I stepped out holding hands although we were both tense with the delay.

'We're not going to make it,' I said, tightly.

'It'll be fine,' he said, 'just chill out. We'll get there. These things always start late anyway.'

'These things? Protests?'

'Everything. Everything in this city starts late. Hours and hours late.'

'Why?'

'It's cultural. And you know…gridlock.'

The station air sparkled, crystalised by the mirror-like river flanking its side. Beyond the water was a tiny cluster of glass skyscrapers each stamped with a bright international header: HSBC, KPMG, Clifford Chance. A crane made its awkward descent to rest upon a grassy tuft of bank, stood still as the statue blinking, oblivious. It bought tears to my eyes, watching the flight of that bird, so simple, so timeless. I told myself to get it together and stop being so bloody emotional. I really found it difficult being late. The stench of the water was bright, chemical, completely modern. I looked around at the other passengers, a mixture of *Paulistas* dressed in suits, avoiding the rush hour and a handful of others, denim shorts, crop-tops, jeans and trainers, not working in the centre, not working in Santo Amaro, but like us, making the journey from West to East at a strange time of day. They did not appear to notice the smell at all.

'Do you guys just get used to it?' I asked.

'It's not that bad. Probably better further down the platform,' he said, pointing to a pipe swilling out dirty water directly in front of us.

We wandered further from the waiting crowd. At the very furthest edge of the station was the stone sculpture of Saint Amaro and a bronze plaque which told the legend of the saint himself. He was a sailor as well as an abbot who had crossed an otherworldly Atlantic, enduring Odysseus-like challenges along the way; intoxicating valleys full of beautiful women, sea monsters who carried sailors to the bottom of the ocean, deserted islands of savage beasts, air putrid with the stink of the corpses they had ravaged. At the end of his journey Amaro discovered an earthly paradise from where he founded a city. The new metro station was built upon the site of one of the first villages the Jesuits had founded in Brazil, a place they called Santo Amaro because it seemed to their eyes like a paradise, river gleaming with egg-like stones, all kinds of thick and mysterious green. And now: bored kids in fake designer jeans clinging to smart phones, bluebottles sunning themselves on white-hot metal, mechanical elevator pings, concrete baking in the tropics. Everyone sleepy and enchanted by their screens and the skyscrapers. I took my pen out and wrote my name in tiny letters across the saint's forehead.

'June,' said Marcio, 'have some respect.'

'I'm a Catholic, just like you. But I hate Jesuits. You should too,' I said, 'they're land-grabbers worse than anyone.'

We listened to Caetano's song about São Paulo on the way to Bixiga, about him arriving from the North and being frightened and disorientated but falling for the city in the end. Marcio told me it was one of the most famous songs in the world. I disagreed as I had had no idea it had existed but placated him, saying it was still beautiful, which it was. By the time we arrived in Bixiga the sun was setting. We asked about the protest at a deli selling wedges of parmesan from enormous rounds. The cheese-man told us he had seen some people in black milling around a few hours ago but there hadn't really been a protest. He was a local, born and raised in the neighbourhood, had known the blue house when it had been an elegant home to three generations of Venetian diamond cutters who returned to Italy after a second very nasty robbery. It had been taken over by Korean gang masters, used as a

hotbed *cortiço* for the Bolivians who sewed together fake Louis Vuitton handbags in Bom Retiro. The Bolivians revolted and decamped to a squatted tower nearby. Then the strange man with a spindly pink bike and thick black glasses arrived at the house with smoking buckets of blue powder which spread magic crystals through the house. And after him the lawyers, the surveyors, the men in suits and finally, today, the workmen with their yellow excavator rolling down the street like in a war movie. They had started to demolish the house this morning and it was almost all gone by lunchtime.

We wandered down the road to see the site anyway, led by blue glitter caught in the wind, tunnelling through the corridors of streets, eddying through the air in swirling patterns. The house was rubble, a smashed-up toilet, half a stairwell, all covered in sparkling blue powder. We stared for some time. There was so much to see.

'It could be our apartment. We need those documents,' said Marcio, coughing from the dust, already lodging in our eyes, our throats, tasting salty like the sea.

My first time, finally, in the centre of the city, I thought we'd go out and see some of the night, but the mood wasn't right. We just turned back for home, watched our spangled reflections in the metro window. No-one else gave us a second glance. Crazy city.

……..

At first the cowboy prays, eyes lifted to the horizon. His first refuge is his faith. Holding their miracle-working saints in their arms, crosses raised, bearing litters carrying icons and fluttering pennants, entire families may be seen carrying their saints from one place to another. Not just the strong and the healthy but also the aged and infirm, the sick and the lame, walk along with stones from the road on their heads and shoulders. The sertão wasteland echoes their mournful litanites for long days as the supplicants wind their way through the wilderness. During the long nights, the plains glow with the lit tapers of wandering pilgrims. But the skies retain a sinister clarity - the sun scorches the earth and the frightening spasm of the drought grips the land.

Backlands, Euclides da Cunha

Chapter 6

That night I dreamt of Mercury. She came to me as a strange combination of motorbike courier and little god with wings, speaking to me in a sing-song voice as we flew together above the city, gliding along on her bike. The roads, she told me, were her home. She knew their textures, sticky asphalt, rain-bloated brick, flaking cement. She knew their smells, the tarry hot stink of particular drains, where to suck in the scent of night jasmine. She felt it all like a sailor on the sea; the stop and breath of her bike, the wheeze of the street, the currents of cars, tidal traffic, lapping pavements. The constant flux of this landscape calmed her, as did the light, hot red sunsets across the highways, pink dawning over the sprawl, creamy yellow at the end of the afternoon. As we soared above the towers Mercury lent around, taking her hands from the flying handlebars to hold my face and kiss me on the lips.

I woke up, hot and bothered and guilty. I turned quickly to check that Marcio was sleeping, worried I had called out his sister's name in my sleep. He was breathing gently, placid on his pillow, smooth lids, the flicker of eyeballs moving through dreams. He looked like his mother, he looked so much like his mother. Who was he with there in his head? I hoped it was me. I suspected it was Ursula. Perhaps it was his father. I looked at my phone. It was only just past midnight, not even the witching hour. I was hungry. I thought about the honey on top of the fridge and then could not stop thinking about it. I crept out of bed, past Mercury and Ursula's closed, silent doors, into the kitchen, the counters and shelves and myriad of objects lit by the thin blue glow of the moon. I carefully took down the yogurt pot on top of the fridge, unscrewed the lid as quietly as I could. It was like opening a jar of thick black night, sweet and voluptuous. I didn't even wait to find a spoon, just stuck my paw straight into the glorious stickiness, licked it off my hands in a honeyed trance, stuck my fingers in once more, sucked them clean, went in for another dip. I knew I shouldn’t, but it was so good I just couldn't control myself. Only when I realised I was using my fingernails to scrape clean the corners of

the pot did I understand what I had done, which was to eat all of Ursula's precious honey. I stopped, gasped, released a little wind. The kitchen clock now said 12.20. I couldn't believe I had done something so awful in only ten minutes. I resolved to find some wild bees tomorrow and somehow replace the honey before anyone knew it was missing. I couldn't help smiling to myself when the urge to write my name at bottom of the pot came over me. That would really have finished off the crime. My pens were thankfully still in the bedroom under my pillow.

I could not have really felt that guilty because once I returned to bed I slept deeply for many hours, waking only with white lines of bright day slicing through the shuttered darkness. Marcio was not beside me. I heard low murmurs from the kitchen. I got up to use the toilet but before I did I stood on the seat and peered through the small vent that backed into the washing area. Between the sheets and the drying clothes I could see Marcio and Ursula cradling their coffee cups and cringed to see the empty pot open on the table between them.

'I don't know what to say,' said Marcio.

'Don't blame it on Mercury. I've already asked her. She said it was June, straightaway,' said Ursula.

'June doesn't have much control,' said Marcio.

'What is she doing here? Why did you bring her?'

Marcio held his hands up.

'I didn't ask her. She wanted to come and I couldn't say no. She's so lost.'

'She's just one of those girls who drifts around until she finds a man stupid enough to look after her. Don't let it be you. You're better than that.'

Marcio shook his head, sipped his coffee. I licked my lips, watching him saying nothing. He took up the empty pot and stared into it.

‘I thought you’d gone to London to study, not to work in a supermarket,’ she said.

‘It didn’t work out. The fees, they were too expensive with rent and everything else.’

‘Don’t go back there. I want you here with me now.’

‘My visa’s run out anyway. I can’t go back.’

Ursula let out a guttural sound of contentment. Marcio flicked his head in irritation.

‘Don’t we have any Italians, any Portuguese in our family at all?’ he said, ‘No-one else in London needed to worry about visas, they all had European passports from their grandparents.’

‘We aren’t that kind of family,’ said Ursula.

‘The only way I could stay was to marry a resident,’ he said.

‘Don’t tell me you asked her.’

Marcio shrugged, went back to staring at the empty yogurt bottom.

‘Why not? She’s alright. It would have given me time to sort myself out.’

Ursula put her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. Marcio picked up the pot, used his finger to wipe at the dregs.

‘What are you going to do with yourself, Marcio?’ she said.

‘I’m going to build buildings.’

‘No, you’re not.’

‘Yes. I am. I’m just trying to work out what’s the best way to do it. That’s all. Finding my own path.’

‘You won’t find anything out hanging around with English girls.’

'She ate the whole lot, didn't she?' he said.

‘That tea she drinks, it smells so disgusting. Like breast milk,’ said Ursula.

Marcio laughed. Ursula smiled happily, put her fingers to her lips, pointed towards where I was supposed to be sleeping.

‘She does smell of milk,’ he whispered, winking at his own mother.

A sick punch in my stomach. I’d been duped, that’s how it felt. What shame, to have thought he loved me enough to marry him when all he had really wanted was a visa extension. And then to talk about me like that with his mother while I was sleeping his bed. I crept out of the bathroom and back into Marcio's room, burrowed myself under his hot cover, waiting for him to come back so I could fight with him. He didn't come. I heard instead the sizzle of batter hitting a pan, the clatter of plates, Mercury's sleepy morning whine. I felt the corners of my mouth turn down in pure unhappiness, the opposite of a smile. The only thing to do was to go home I said to myself. It was the very worst thing to stick around where you are not wanted, my mother had always told me that. She

often imagined she was not welcome and we would leave places before we were supposed to, unexpectedly, even at my grandparents, where there would always be fights. I could hear the clicking of forks and knives, the buttery smell of a special breakfast, a quiet satisfied laugh from Ursula. I took out my emergency credit card from my washbag, opened my laptop and began searching for the cheapest flight back to London. There was one flying through Dubai with a sixteen-hour stopover. Not a nice trip but a bargain price. I clicked away and had got to the stage of inputting my passport details when I heard Marcio at my back.

'You want some pancakes?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I heard you, talking with your mum.'

'About the honey? That you ate?'

I flung myself round.

‘You asked me to marry you to get a visa.'

Marcio put his hand on my shoulder, but I tugged myself away.

'It wasn’t really like that.’

'How was it not?’

‘I just fell in love. On top of that golden dome.’

‘Don’t lie.’

Marcio closed his eyes and after a few moments began to recite the poem I had spoken out loud up there on the dome. I was astonished.

‘How do you know that?’

‘I learnt it. The day after I met you. I looked it up on the computer and I learnt it.’

‘You never told me it.’

‘I was embarrassed, I guess.’

I covered my face in my hands in terrible confusion. He was so full of secret things.

‘I'm going home. I'm booking my flight now. So, that's it.'

Marcio laughed and tried to close my computer. I took his hand and bit it. He looked black, like he wanted to hit me but instead he put his arms around me while I typed in my passport number, burrowed his head into my chest as I selected my date of birth. He told me he loved me which I just laughed at because how could I ever really trust anything he said to me now? As I was about to click the final button to purchase the flight, he gripped my forearms and pulled me back to stop me typing and we both ended up laughing even though the whole thing was so dreadful. Then Ursula cried Marcio's name. We both stopped still in our fight positions, looking at one another. He clicked my laptop shut with his foot.

'Marcio,' cried Ursula once more. His hold on my arms loosened slightly and he watched me carefully to work out what I'd do. I stared back levelly, daring him to leave me for his ma.

'I don't want you to go,' he said.

'Why did you say those things about me?'

'I didn't say anything much,' he said.

'Why do you treat me like you do?'

'Like how? I treat you well. I paid for your ticket here,' he said.

'Like a child. Like a thing.'

'I'm just trying to keep everyone happy. Can't you see that? It's not easy for me.'

'Marcio, please. You need to see this,' called Ursula.

'I'm coming,' he yelled.

Marcio dropped my arms, stood up. I pulled over my laptop, opened it right back up again, already committed to all those hours in duty-free. As the internet reconnected he pushed something into my hand. A gold ring, old and worn, a small, soft green stone in its centre. Later he told me it had been his father's grandmother's. The thing he got instead of the motorbike, which had been his father's too but which he didn't have the nerve to ride. Not a marriage proposal, just a gift, he said, to prove he wanted me to stay, to show me that things weren't quite as he'd told his ma.

'Don't wear it when she's around though,' he said, leaving me once again alone in his disheveled bed.

Ursula was upset because she'd seen the surveyors herself now, this time in the courtyard, brazenly measuring up the land. Marcio told his ma that there was no other way, they needed the documents that proved they owned the house. He forced her to come with him to the archive kept at the central library in Anghanbau to see if they could find at least a copy of the original paperwork. Ursula argued against it, there was another fair in Jardim Franca and she was sure it would be as good as the one the day before, but Marcio wouldn't budge. They would go together and find the deeds. I would have liked to go out into the centre of the city again but not with Ursula. Instead, I stayed behind in the bedroom, told myself that now I had the metro map I could go whenever and wherever I wanted although I knew really that it wasn't going to be like that. I watched the two of them jealously through the bars of the window, standing together at the bus stop in the twinking midday sun, Ursula's head hung like a sad and knowing cow. Marcio stood apart, squinting towards the waving horizon, hands on hips, watching for the enemy, whatever that was. A drought, an army, Domingos Sertão. I put on the ring. It fitted well, not too tight and not too loose. I wondered about the woman who had first worn it, who had been buried a while now, whether she could have ever imagined someone like me from a far-off land wearing her jewellery. I held my hand up to the window, watched the green stone flash out of the striped light and shadow, smiled despite myself as I went back to the laptop and closed the booking page of the Dubai flight as I promised I would.

I read *Backlands* for a while. Things were starting to hot up. A holy man, Antonio Conselheiro had appeared in the *sertão* and had gathered many poor broken-down people around him. They built up a productive self-sustained settlement in Canudos - one of the many abandoned estates in the region. The authorities didn’t like the place. It was an alternative to the landless, state of semi-slavery which most families wandering the backlands found themselves in and thousands were migrating there. Canudos quickly became enormous, the second biggest town in the state. Still, the holy man seemed quite mad from da Cunha’s descriptions. Not someone I would entrust my life to. I closed the book and went to check my emails. One from Francisco. The protest hadn't happened in the end, it had been too late to save the house. Tonight though, there would be a street party to launch the São Paulo biennial, where he was right now working as a curator. It would be held on a flyover near the centre called the Big Worm and if I could make it down then we would finally be able to talk. I

didn't hesitate, replied with a carefree exclamation mark - I'll be there! I hid the ring in the pocket of my jeans, knocked on Mercury's door, found her curled up on an unmade bed amongst her personal trash - a broken hairdryer, fake leather biker jacket flung on the floor, several old cups of dried-up coffee. The only thing she seemed to be looking after was the book of photos I had given her, placed neatly beside her bed, and her camera which she was now cradling, squinting at an image she had just taken. She beckoned me in and showed it to me on the tiny screen: a sky of such plain and simple blue that it was frightening, intersected by the dark bars of her window.

'This is an obvious one,' she said, 'but it's different every day, every hour. I've got a large collection now. I'll put on an exhibition one day. People say we don't have nature in the city but all you need to do is look up and you have it all. And it's free, it's completely free.'

I told Mercury I had a party to go to, with an art curator, at a flyover with a strange name, The Big Worm. She told me she knew it. It was a place Amaral liked to *pixo.*

'You want to go with me?' I asked.

Mercury flicked her eyes out towards the sky and then back again.

'Sure, let's go. We got to pick up my boyfriend first though.'

'The one that lives in the periphery?'

'Yeah, the same one. I only have one, whatever ma told you.'

'Marcio didn't want me to go there,' I said.

Mercury shrugged.

'That's where I'm headed now. After we can go to the party. You can come or not. It's up to you, not Marcio.'

'Is it safe?' I asked.

'What does that even mean?' she laughed.

I decided to fuck it, reasoning that Mercury went to the periphery all the time and she was fine. I badly wanted another ride on her motorbike. The first time had been terrifying but since then I could only remember it as freedom. I got my rucksack together to go, my phone, my two Posca pens, a toothbrush and a tube of mascara for the party, checked Marcio's ring was safely in my pocket. We made our way out into the ocean sprawl, over spaghetti flyovers, through avenues, past shopping

malls and garages and scrubland. It was a hot grey day, musty drain smells, cars and flyovers as far as the eye could see. The ride to the periphery was different to the trip from the airport. Maybe I trusted Mercury more, though she'd done pretty much nothing to make me feel she was a safe pair of hands. Still, this time it felt great, seeing the road reel away beneath me, the speedy blur of the tarmac. So free, so powerful, weaving in and out of the wheezing traffic, as if contained upon a flying carpet, some kind of magic speeding you along just above the city. Balmy air flushed my face. You can't buy this rush, I thought, you can't get it from a helicopter or a taxi or a car. I saw that in the wing mirrors of the jammed-up traffic as we sped by. Faces, eyes, black looks, jealous, angry. Gridlock pressed in on all sides. Not for us. We were on a ship on the ocean, a knight on a stallion in a green forest, or just what we were; two girls, riding so fast on a bright blue Yamaha in one of the biggest cities in the world. Heroines. As we drove towards the river I saw a billboard advertising the mayor's *Beautiful City* clean-up programme. Someone had graffitied over the smiling people in thick black letters: The City Only Exists for Those who Can Move Around. Yes. I thought. Yes. That is so true.

Suddenly the city began to disintegrate. Tower-blocks thinned and then all but disappeared, replaced by low red breezeblock with makeshift security, steel bars and cement, fortified gates, as if the houses themselves were frightened. The streets were home-made; hand-poured concrete, corrugated iron, tumour-like growths of electrical cables. This was it, I realised, the periphery. The locals seemed laid-back, cycling and walking along the scrappy edge of road, lounging in bars and cafes like they were in their own living rooms. A tall woman in tiger-print dress with a tiger-printed baby on her hip stood basking in the afternoon sun. I made a face at the child; it frowned haughtily back as if I was an ape. The periphery was not what I thought it would be. Not frightening or threatening, just full of local people going about their daily lives. No parks however or libraries or squares, simply many shades of grey, cement and asphalt, metal and concrete. We passed about a single tree which had survived somehow, perhaps too old and large to be felled by the people who had first made this road. It dropped a large heart-shaped red leaf down which landed softly upon Mercury's handlebars and then shivered away into the gutter.

As we reached the furthest edges the city seemed to decompose yet further; a slop of marshland, one single concrete garage, a bright white condominium by a scarf of dense jungle.

Nothing made sense, it was not the city and it was not the countryside but some strange meeting place in between. Long grasses waved next to a group of plywood shacks, helicopters thudded overhead, a silver Mercedes slid in and out of the scrappy traffic, surf boards strapped to the roof.

'Off to the beach on a Monday,' shouted Mercury, as if that was something she did too.

Finally, we swung onto the Gabriel da Silva flyover, an elegant curve across green swampland. Up ahead the São Paulo racetrack appeared, monumentally, as if a mirage. It took me straight back to a difficult family holiday in France, a failing attempt at reunion, my mother and father arguing in the front, hot and tired, the wrong road, the wrong time, the wrong everything. From no-where Chartres rose up before us and we all went quiet. We took a detour to visit the cathedral and it was beautiful, but my parents bickered and it was nothing compared to that first vision across the flat fields of pale swaying wheat. Mercury slowed. This was it, I realised. At the furthest edge of the racetrack was the neighbourhood of Over There, Amaral's home, a dense mass of tiered dwellings that seemed to float upon swampland, rising upwards towards the track as if the whole neighbourhood was leaning over to watch the races. The road stopped and Mercury parked her bike on a patch of scuffed land. The only way to continue was by foot.

'It can't be that bad,' I said, 'if you can leave your bike just like this.'

'There's rules,' she said, making her way towards the first line of haphazardly grand houses.

Red earth, white sun, shot-hot, the sky still that aggressive, endless blue. Steam rose from the swampland behind me. A flock of rainbow-coloured chickens pecked in the soil. A lady in antique frills sat behind bars in her courtyard, shelling peas into a blue plastic bucket shaped like a shark. Two boys in board shorts leant up against one another in the scant shade of a peachy bougainvillea, eyed me silently. The back of my neck felt cold. This was simply and obviously not my place. A bus appeared suddenly, stopped by the boys, which reassured me that they were just catching a ride somewhere although they didn't get on. My mind flashed to Marcio buying beers at the polished bar in Soho and then to me, here, now. The lanes ahead were so steep and so dense, I couldn't make out what would meet me there except from what I could hear and smell. I followed quickly on Mercury's heels, frightened of losing her. I sniffed the now familiar hiss of bubbling beans, garlic, salt, sweating the air, heavy and rich, cloaking the heat. Further in, funk on the stereo, some rapper whistling about

all the gold chains and cars and helicopters and girls he could afford. It was lunchtime and the air was full of the echoes and strains of all our home-lives: an impatient clatter of plates, the bright cry of a new-born, some cloying refrain from the latest daytime soap. The steep terraces reminded me of the Northern mining town where my grandfather had been born and where his first parish had been. I played a game in my head, funk or Irish songs? Irish songs were more romantic. Ice-cold lager or warm beer? Lager, definitely, cold lager. Chips and gravy or rice and beans? Neither, please take me to Naples, please give me pizza. Sun or drizzle? Sun. Guns or kitchen knives? I didn't know and decided to stop playing my game. My grandfather had hated *The Road to Wigan Pier* and had taught me to hate it too. The book was by George Orwell and described the poverty of the mining communities around Bolton and Wigan.

'He makes out like we're just animals,' he had said, 'it's disgusting. You should never reduce humanity as he did.'

As we rose higher through Over There the houses got smaller, scrappier, the concrete lane bloated with humidity, streaked with moss and blooms of rust-coloured flowers. Mould flourished beautifully in the humidity of the swamp. Mercury led me down a tight alley between two breezeblock homes.

'These are good houses, well-made,' I said.

'Yeah,' she agreed, 'George, he's a bus conductor and Rodrigo makes a load of money. He's rich. He runs the slot machines round here. He's got a four by four parked by the track.'

We reached a metal gate cutting the alley in two. Mercury rattled the key back and forth until it finally caught. Along the other side of the alley was a slither of a cage, home-made from steel bars, in which sat a small, ragged jaguar. I cried out in surprise, in sorrow. The poor animal looked in a bad state.

'Don't be scared, it's Tiger,' she said proudly, 'he won't hurt you.'

'Is he yours?'

'Rodrigo won him. At a fair that comes here once a year, from the Northeast. It's amazing. They have a parrot who plays cards, a midget witch who can cast curses for 2 reals, a jungle raffle with baby animals; a little cobra, a toucan chick, and Tiger, who was so fluffy back then. Rodrigo

won him. He gave him to Amaral cause his dad's dead and he always feels sorry for him, tries to do nice things. We look after him together,' she said, putting her fingers through the bars of the cage, beckoning over the cat. He padded over, licked her fingers.

'He likes *pain au chocolat* best,' she said.

'What?'

'I feed him on pastries from the bakery. He likes them. Sometimes we give him meat, when his fur starts to shed, but it's too expensive.'

The alley emerged onto a small yard in which stood a toilet and shower block covered in tiny glass tiles that made the white-washed concrete sparkle like a mirror-ball. On either side of the yard were two single-story houses. The right house had several terracotta pots holding rosemary, sage, parsley, coriander and a large holy basil. A cage hung in the barred window held two lilac lovebirds which twittered to one another. Yellow curtains gave the place a fresh, welcoming air. Mercury turned towards the left house.

It was dark inside and not very clean. A mattress on the floor, a mess of blue velvet motel sheets. On one side of the bed was a tall pile of books stacked against the wall on top of which sat a lighter and half a spliff. Amaral did not have as many books as Ursula or Marcio but he had, it seemed, more focus, amassing a small library of philosophy in Portuguese translation; Socrates, Aristotle, Wittengenstein, Jung, Freud, Tagore. His favourite writer seemed to be Nietzche; he had three copies of different titles and a collected works. A single gas-ring and a large white paper bag emblazoned in Italics - *Baudelaire's Bakery* - sat upon a red *boteco* table. I never really liked Baudelaire, I thought. He always seemed a little over-emotional and sleazy to me. He was incredibly into his mother, I suddenly remembered. Absolutely obsessed with her. His stepfather had to send him off to sea. I bit my lip. I wished I could send Ursula away to sea. Or even better, smuggle Marcio and I away on a boat bound for Tahiti which my father had always told me was the most magical island of all. Mercury gestured for me to sit down on a plastic garden chair patterned ornately with large daisies. She busied herself filling a small pan from a battered water bottle, lighting the stove. The place smelt of decaying food. The bin, I noticed, had sticky liquid seeping from the bottom.

'Does Amaral live on his own?' I said.

‘Yeah,’ she said, 'yeah. His ma she lives in the South Zone now. She went away, after his dad died. Amaral stayed. It's his home, he didn't want to go to any new place.'

‘How did you meet him?'

'I wanted to photograph the grand prix, a couple of years ago. I couldn't get a pass though, the press officer was corrupt, charging whatever price he wanted. I came here to look for a spot to see the race even though everyone told me not too. Amaral helped me find the best place. I got some good photos, sold them to a magazine. We had a great few weeks, living on the money.'

‘What does he do? For a job?'

Mercury shrugged, stared at the water. I looked out towards the small, barred window, the yellow sky beyond. I wondered what time it was. It must be getting on for three pm, midafternoon, intensely hot. Marcio would probably be arriving home. He’d wonder where I was. I didn’t want to be here. It smelt bad. Where was Amaral anyway? We would miss the party if we didn't go soon. I wanted to text Marcio, ask him to come and get me, but then the picture in my mind of his black, disapproving frown. Opposite the door of the room I saw what looked like shot marks in the wall. I walked over, put my finger in one at the height of my shoulder. Someone had painted over the holes thickly with whitewash to try and disguise them. The paint flaked off on my finger as I pushed through the paint to the red breezeblock below.

‘What’s this?’ I asked.

Mercury turned, narrowed her eyes.

‘Leave that,’ she said.

‘What is it?’

‘From a break-in,’ she said.

‘What happened?'

'Amaral's dad got shot. In the shoulder.'

‘Fuck.'

‘He was OK, but he couldn't go back to work, at the racetrack. He was too frightened of the loud noises. He wanted to move but his wife didn't want to go. He got depressed and then he got sick and then he died.'

'That's terrible.'

‘There are so many other stories,’ she said, clutching at her throat.

The water had boiled. Mercury handed me coffee in a glass smeared with lipstick stains. We drank in silence. Something in the distance that sounded like gunshots quietly cracked the air.

'Where is Amaral anyway?' I said brightly, 'We don't want to be late for the party.'

Mercury handed me a rock-hard Danish, folded hers in half with a creak, swilled it around in her cup.

'Dunno. There's hardly any phone reception here so I just have to wait for him to turn up. He knows I'm coming.'

I gulped my coffee, took my Posca out of my pocket, clicked the lid off. It was soothing to think of my name in capitals wrapped around the bullet holes.

'Don't,' said Mercury, 'not here. This place is Amaral's.'

Black flies buzzed around the bin, silhouetted by the hazy white square of the door. More sharp cracks in the air. Were they closer this time?

'Can we go back?' I asked, 'I just, I think I want to go back.'

'We're here now. I told Amaral I would see him today,' she said, 'have a nap if you're scared. That's what I always do.'

We lay side by side. Mercury went to sleep straight away, too close to me, her hand over my leg, like a child. It was suffocating, her hot little palm, the clammy blue velvet sheets, the distant gunshots, the endless wait for her boyfriend. I thought of her poor pet Tiger, whom she seemed to love so much, taken from his jungle and trapped here in a tiny makeshift cage. I got my phone out to call Marcio, no longer caring about the argument to come. Mercury had been right though - zero bars - zero reception. I tried anyway but the call failed instantly.

'Out of the fucking frying pan, June,' I said to myself.

I took my pen and wrote a J on an edge of one of the synthetic pillowcases but forced myself to stop before I started on a u. It was funny how protective Mercury had been of Amaral's walls considering that he seemed to spend almost all his time writing on places that weren't his. That gave me a small laugh at least. Talk about someone not being able to take their own medicine. Still, I really

didn't want to piss of my host or his girlfriend. I put my pen back in the rucksack, replaced it with the green ring from my pocket. I slid it onto my finger and was pleased to find that despite the heat and the sweat it still fitted very well. I twisted it nervously around, hoping Marcio would somehow sense that it was far from home and would come and find it. I wished he'd been honest with me about the visa. If he had only told me the truth that he needed to get married to stay in London I'd have done it straight away and we'd still be together there now instead of in two very far off parts of this enormous, frightening city.

……..

It was not surprising that our deep ethnic strata pushed up the extraordinary figure of Antonio Conselheiro, 'the Counselor'. He is a like a fossil. Just as the geologist can reconstruct the inclination and orientation of the very old formulations from truncated strata and build models of ancient mountains, so can the historian deduce something about the society that produced this man, who himself is of little worth. His ferocious mysticism contains all the popular beliefs of the lawless backlands: from barbarous fetishisms to a warped Catholicism.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

Chapter 7

In the end I dozed off too, just for a while. When I awoke Mercury was in a stupor beside me, her mouth drooping open. She could have slept all day. The ring was still on my finger but it had not magicked up Marcio so I ended up looking through Amaral's books once more. Beneath all his philosophers was another copy of *Backlands.* This one had a school stamp on the cover. I took it out and strummed my fingers on it, found my page, around where the Canudos settlement had suddenly

mushroomed and was now the size of a small city. It wasn't a simple holy commune with prayerful residents living in clean dormitories but a far more complicated place. It was dirty and difficult and dangerous and home to many of the region's bandits as well as simple families who just wanted a piece of land for themselves, free from abusive overlords. It was hard for me to read that when the counselor was told of the rape of a virgin, he simply replied that she was only fulfilling the destiny of all women.

I had a funny sensation in my nose which I recognised but could not place. I stared into the hazy square of the door, sniffing, wondering. I finally placed it from when I had got the sack from my job at the gallery. The smell was fear. I didn't like working there, my boss Nicha had been a pain, but at least I had had somewhere to go, somewhere to be, on the inside of things. Without a job I was just another London no-one and worse, couldn't pay my rent. I was a no-one here in São Paulo too, I guessed, but so was everyone else, at least in the margins where Marcio lived and especially here, on the furthest edges of the periphery. It wasn't that bad really, I considered, except for the guns. You still had coffee, books, croissants, even if they were days old. I looked at my phone. Six pm. The party would be starting soon; we'd been here for hours now. I decided to have another go at leaving, shook Mercury awake. She rubbed her eyes.

'What'd you do that for?' she said.

'It's late. We're going to miss the party. It starts at seven pm'

She laughed at me.

'You think anyone is going to get there at seven?'

'Francisco will be expecting me to be on time. We're supposed to talk. He might have some work for me.'

Mercury looked into the distance, bemused.

'Marcio told us the English are obsessed with this thing - *on time*. So weird.'

'It's respectful. It's polite.'

'It's not. It's rude. It's completely rude to turn up *on time*. The later you turn up the better.'

'Mercury, I want to go. We've been here hours. There's no phone reception. Your boyfriend has not turned up. Does he even exist?'

'Of course.'

'Well, he doesn't seem too bothered about you. He's kept you waiting here for hours.'

She didn't like that, knotted her eyes together, squinted at me.

'You don't know him.'

'No. And you don't know where he is.'

Mercury yawned.

'Look, he's probably at the truck, getting high.'

'Let's go there then, what are we waiting for?'

She rubbed the sleep from her face, lay back on the blue velvet, watched the glittering pattern of the mosaic tiles which had infiltrated the house as the sun had lowered.

'I don't think Marcio would like me to take you up there.'

'I don't see what the difference is, between there and here.'

'There's a difference, I can't explain. I don't know how to,' she said, tracing invisible lines in the air with her hands.

'Mercury, I just want to get out of here. Let's go get Amaral and leave.'

'Alright, OK. Don't tell Marcio though, OK?'

Mercury did up her jeans, rolled herself up and out the door, cocked her head for me to follow. I hesitated, before getting up myself, sneaking Amaral's *Backlands* into my bag. He wouldn't miss it, I didn't think, I hadn't got anything to read with me and I didn't know when I would be getting back home. Mercury led me through lanes, up to the highest point of the neighbourhood, where the charred skeleton of a burnt-out truck stood. I could not understand how it could have possibly arrived there, but Mercury just shrugged, said joyriding was an art in these parts. Two boys perched on the lorry's rusted head, gazing across to the racetrack. They were light, birdlike, as Mercury herself, dressed in black t-shirts and black shorts. One of them had a shock of red hair, around which a violet-capped hummingbird bobbed and weaved, as if the boy were a delicious rose on which it could feast. The other boy was haloed by a bright white afro.

'Amaral!' called out Mercury, smiling, shining for him.

Her boyfriend looked down, cracked a grin of happiness to see her. From no-where a mango stone came shooting towards Mercury, smacked her on the forehead.

‘Fuck that monkey!’ she cried.

A white marmoset, mostly camouflaged by her boyfriend’s hair, sat upon Amaral’s shoulder, gnawing on a dripping mango. It bared its teeth at us.

‘Urgh,’ I said.

‘I know,’ said Mercury, ‘It’s in love with Amaral. Hates me.’

Mercury shimmied up a single rib of the charred old truck smoothly, with practise, squatted with the boys, staring out across at the racetrack. I realised she expected me to follow but that wasn’t so easy. I grabbed one of the iron bars, the metal flaking beneath my hands. Mildewy greens, yellows and pinks swam amongst the rust. I tried to swing my legs up and around as I’d seen Mercury doing but ended up falling to the floor. I took a breath, tried again and failed again. Mercury jumped into the belly of the truck. A bamboo ladder came flying, landed at my feet. After that it was easy.

The view from the top was spectacular. The racetrack was enormous, silent, like a Roman circus, row and rows of empty seats. Two cars swooped around the track, weaving in and out of one another in an elegant high-speed dance. The heat had by now exhausted itself, leaving in its wake a rich and poignant end-of-day warmth. An ochre ball, low in the sky, spread itself like creamy butter across the boys, across Mercury, across the track and behind me, over the flyover to the city beyond. I squinted my eyes to see further afield, past a beautiful naked witch painted over an old residential block. After that came the cranes, the girders, the gaping black holes in the half-built high-rises, and then the hazy line of crystal skyscrapers, reflections in the sky, glistening pink and gold and red. They were so impossibly thin and tall, taller even than the small black gnats of helicopters that buzzed between them. A plane roared overhead, leaving a golden trail of smoke behind it. I felt a rush of happiness, to have made it here, to be experiencing this unique place, this unique view, gratitude to Mercury for sharing it with me. Who knew you could take so much joy in the way that a shadow falls?

Mercury told me to show Amaral my pen, which I did.

'It's permanent,' she told him, 'it can't ever be rubbed out.'

He held it solemnly before handing it back to me.

‘You’re a tagger,’ he said.

‘Kind of, not like you though. I love what you do. I love it.’

‘Not many people think that. Almost no-one, in fact.’

‘It makes me feel something, makes me think. I’d love to do that myself.’

‘You can do then,’ asked Amaral.

‘It’s not that easy,’ I said, ‘when did you start?’

‘15 years old, *mano*. 10 years now, I’ve been at it. 25 now. Old man. Couldn’t stop. *Pixo* is what I think. It’s what I do. My way of escaping.’

‘You don’t mind that people hate it?’

Amaral flicked his head towards the centre.

‘I prefer to be hated than ignored. This city where no-one sees us. I don’t want to be invisible. The walls are meant to keep us out, but I use them as my canvas. That’s what I like best, finding a wall so high, so full of itself, of its power, bringing it down with my words.’

‘Why don’t you write using normal letters? Just strange shapes, like runes, like witch's spells?’

Amaral and his friend laughed.

‘It’s just our names. That’s the first thing you are given, your name, it’s all we really have, why not paint it on a wall? Anyhow, people understand how we feel. They know we’re angry and that’s why it scares them.’

‘Why you have to climb so high though? Don't you get scared?'

‘*Mano*, of course. Look at my hair. It’s fright what turned it white. Never know if I’m coming back. The police shoot at us. But I can’t stop. It’s my voice. It’s me.’

Mercury waved her hands in the air, pulled her boyfriend towards her.

'Enough talking now,' she said.

The practise was over, the drivers were slowing, the long shadows of their cars weaving together and apart in the last pink of the day. Amaral sat close with Mercury, his hand at the back of her neck, the same place her mother always clasped her, both watching the track. He started to say my

name to himself, trying it out in his mouth, like a new flavour. I felt myself blushing. Then, from the houses below us, a clap of gunshots. Far louder, far closer, than they had been in the house.

'What's that?' I said.

'You don't know?' said Amaral, curiously.

More shots from somewhere nearby.

'We should go home,' I said.

'Better just to stay where you are, until it stops,' he said.

'I'm scared,' I said.

Mercury took my hand, jumped down into the bed of the truck, lay herself amongst the wildflowers that grew there and pulled me towards her.

'I told you, whenever you're scared you should get into bed, any bed,' said Mercury.

The shooting went on. We stayed there for some time. I didn't know what had happened to Amaral and Red. The sky turned lilac and I spotted Orion's belt for the first time since arriving in the city. In London the stars were all gone and round where Marcio and Mercury lived too. When you looked up you just saw a toxic haze of cheap cosmetic light, hotels and motels, streetlights and car lights, the piled lit windows of the discount superstores. I got teary, thinking back to when I was a child and my father had first taught me the constellations in the marshes of Setúbal, where the night was always jet black and the stars sharp and beautiful. How did I end up here when all I had wanted was to go back there?

Someone began to bang the spindles of the truck and it echoed all around us. I widened my eyes at Mercury. She put her finger to her lips. The banging got louder and then stopped. Whoever it was was going away. But then, the sound of the ladder that I had used, clacking against the side of truck, soft steps up the rungs. I cried out in fright. Mercury clutched herself in fear. But it was OK, it was good, because it was Marcio.

'Come on, get out of there. I've got a taxi booked on the metre. Do you know how much it's costing me?'

Marcio insisted that we walked and didn't run through the lanes, his hand on my neck pushing me along and pulling me back.

'Was it the ring?' I said, 'did it lead you here?'

'Don't be stupid. I just know you,' he said, 'keep your head down. People know you're here. You shouldn't have come.'

'I'm sorry.'

'We're nearly at the car. Let's just keep going.'

I moaned with relief at the sight of the taxi, quietly humming by Mercury's bike, at the edge of the scrubby field where we had first arrived. Its pale-yellow glow lit up the surrounding darkness with such tenderness I couldn't help but surge forward. Marcio held me back.

'Wait,' he said, watching the two boys in the board shorts that were still hanging round the bougainvillea.

'Don't worry about them,' I said, 'it's just a bus stop. I saw them there before.'

Marcio didn't look convinced, but I'd struck out ahead and he followed on. We were almost at the taxi, just metres away when the boys stepped nimbly forward in front of us. I didn't realise what was going on, kept going on towards the taxi until a small gun was pointed straight at my stomach.

'Oh,' I cried as I finally saw it.

The short boy holding the gun smiled at me nicely.

'Phone please.'

'She's foreign,' said Marcio, 'don't do anything to her.'

'Please don't worry. We just do phones. We don't kidnap, we don't kill,' said the taller one, a redhead with a brand-new Nike cap.

'But please tell your girlfriend she shouldn't try to be clever with a gun at her stomach,' said the short one, clocking me trying to slip the ring off and into the back pocket of my jeans.

'She doesn't understand how things work. She moans at me, saying I'm stopping her moving around the city, that I'm taking away her freedom,' said Marcio.

The boys laughed.

'Freedom? What even is that?' said Shortie.

Marcio collected my phone and handed it over to Red with his own. Red handed them to Shortie who slid them into a bumbag slung around his boardshorts. They both turned to me and took a bow.

'Hope you've enjoyed your time on the margins, *madame.* Please don't forget to tell people how polite and well-mannered we are here in Over There, even when robbing you. Manners are free, you see, so we use them lavishly.'

……

The new town Canudos arose in a few weeks, a city of ruins. It was born old. Seen from a distance, spread out over the hills over an enormous area, split by ravines and rugged slopes, it had the appearance of a city that has been shaken and thrown about by an earthquake. Streets could not be distinguished. Instead there was a desperate maze of alleys, barely separating the chaotic jumble of hastily built hovels facing every point of the compass, their roofs pointing in all directions, as if they had been feverishly constructed in a night by a crowd of lunatics.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

Chapter 8

'Shit happens,' said the taxi-driver, 'you were lucky back there. Nice guys, those two. Could have been far worse.'

'*A cidade é assim*,' said Marcio, lightly.

I found I was too shocked to talk. Marcio wouldn't look at me, kept his eyes turned towards the night outside. I crept my hand closer to his and he finally took my fingers into his, crushing rather than holding. The sediment, soot, dirt, dust, smog of the day had all now receded into darkness leaving only vivid lights. Traffic lights and brake lights, all the Neons, seedy glamour. All I could

really see though was the tiny gun flashing so close to my naval, the smiles of the boys, the palms of their hands, Mercury a flitting blue shadow behind me. I pulled nervously at Marcio wanting some comfort, but he stayed hard by his window.

'He's right. They were nice guys. It could have been…something else. You see now, why I told you not go?' he said, in English, so the driver wouldn't understand, I guessed.

'Yeah,' I said, 'yeah.'

We rode towards the centre, past red tiled bungalows wound round with barbed wire, past sex motels flashing the price of rooms per hour, through Jardim Mirante, famous for their samba school, a graveyard of giant papier-mâché carnival floats looming sadly in the darkness, glimpses of drummers and dancers practising in jeans under strip-lights, circling one another, together, apart, together, apart.

'You were right,' he said, 'about this not working. You should book that ticket home, the cheap one through Dubai. I'll help you if you need money.'

'What? But you gave me your ring.'

'You could have been shot, trying to hide it like that. You should never do what you did. You don't think about it, you give it all.'

'I won't go back there. I see now. I promise.'

'Still, I think you should go home.'

'I want to stay with you.'

'I can't look after you. It's not the same as London.'

'You don't look after me. I'm not a child, I'm new here, that's all,' I said.

We reached the river which marked the end of the periphery and the beginning of the city proper. There wasn't much water left in the Tiete, it was just a ditch really, petrol black and shiny, banked by six lanes of traffic. The new bridges with their burning lamps were the thing to look at now. The lines of lights seemed to be waving farewell, sending me on my way. I felt awful. They were such different things, choosing to leave and being told to go. I stuck my hand in my rucksack, dumped at my feet, pulled out my pen and shook it up, the familiar clacking sound of the ink ball soothing me a little. I took off the lid and went for Marcio's forehead. He put his hand up, swiped away my advances.

'Grow up, June.'

'No. Why should I? Why would I?' I said, doodling a smiling man waving a gun on my knee.

The weird drawing would be there for a good while, if not forever. Marcio shook his head but there was a flutter of a smile around his lips. He couldn't help himself, he liked it when I did weird shit, I knew that.

'Give me another chance,' I said, as we crossed onto the bridge, the flash of headlights in our eyes, 'I promise, I won't leave the apartment without you saying it's OK.'

'You won't be able to do that,' he said, 'you've got no self-control. You have no boredom threshold.'

'I have. I've got an incredibly high boredom threshold. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be able to sit and have dinner with you and your mother every night,' I said.

Marcio opened the window of the cab and let in a terrible, gut-wrenching stink.

'This is where Ma found the helmet,'

'How could she stand that smell? Wind up the window.'

Marcio did as I asked and in the foul closed air he took back my hand, slid his finger over the ring. The thought of my own mother's house, a tight little terrace, my single bed, my old children's books, was just as terrible as rice and beans with Ursula.

'It's Mercury, it's her fault anyway,' he said, 'I've seen the way you look at each other.'

Heat flushed up my neck.

'What you mean?' I said.

'Like you're always about to do something together, something terrible,' he said.

'I asked her to give me a lift. I just wanted to go to this party, the biennial launch. To meet this guy, Francisco. I thought I might be able to get some work with him, but I guess it doesn't matter now. I'll be going home soon anyway. You're right. I can't stay here, it'll kill me. I'll book a flight when we get back home.'

'No. You stay. Stay with me, now,' said Marcio.

'You just told me to go back home,' I said.

'I know. But I love you. So you can't go and leave me.'

‘You lied to me. You said you wanted to marry me but all you wanted was a visa’

‘How can that be true if I bought you back here with me? I even paid for your flight because I earnt more money in Tesco then you did in that gallery you worked in.’

I laughed.

‘Yeah, but you owed me. I got the sack because of you.’

‘You got the sack because you couldn’t stand the place anymore.’

‘I’m hurt. I’m so hurt about what you said to your ma about me.’

‘I gave you my grandmother’s ring. Doesn’t that mean anything?’

‘Who knows if it’s your grandmother’s ring? It could have just been something your mother found.’

Marcio laughed, shook his head.

‘It’s not. You need to have more faith in me.’

‘Faith? You’re not a saint.’

Marcio craned his head in agreement, although there was a sense in his gesture that he believed in some way that he was. I gave up trying to work him out. We held hands, kept our eyes on the lights, the tempting greens and yellows and reds floating past.

'Where to?' said the taxi-driver.

'Where's that party of yours?' said Marcio.

'Really? It's a street party. You don't mind?' I asked.

'You hardly ever get robbed twice in one night. Dunno why. Everyone agrees though, it hardly ever happens.'

'It's on a flyover, the Big Worm,' I said, 'weird name for a road.'

Marcio raised his eyebrows.

'Nice. I like it there,' he said.

He leant towards the taxi-driver, hand on his shoulder.

'Big Worm, my friend, we're off to the Big Worm.'

As we neared our destination Marcio gave close and specific directions to the driver. He didn't want to get dropped off at the mouth of the road but on a small side-street in Santa Cecilia, a

downtown neighbourhood which ran parallel to the flyover. It was dark and quiet. I didn't like to leave the safety of the warm-lit car but Marcio pushed me out onto a wide pavement made up of black and white mosaics.

'Where are we going?' I said, 'there's no party round here. Who are those people?'

'Addicts. They live among the vines that grow under the flyover. Just keep away. Come,' he said, tugging at my hand, 'I want you to have a view of the road first, from above. You can't understand just by walking on it.'

He pulled me along the pavement past old apartment buildings which opened directly onto the street. They had large ornate entrances with scrolls and pillars but were clearly down on their luck, crumbling stonework, stained by pollution, barred and alarmed for security. I heard the crackling of loudspeakers a few blocks away. The party was somewhere back in the direction we had come.

'It's the other way,' I said, turning around.

'No,' he said, 'just wait.'

We stopped outside one particularly disgraced building, errant creepers suffocating the two busty goddesses holding up what had once been a proud porch. Marcio looked from side to side before quickly pressing in a code on the high-tech entrance system. After five metallic pips the old door clicked open. We slipped inside and into a clanking iron lift which took us slowly up through the innards of the building, slices of floorboards, insulation, pipes, dinnertime smells, pizza and beans, landings with open doors, kids putting on their shoes, a strumming guitar, waxy tropical plants, squat ferns, a plaster copy of that famous statue of the twins Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, babies with their heads flung back, drinking milk from the teats of their foster mother wolf. I got a feeling when I saw the wolf, I would write my name somewhere over her. Finally, the lift juddered to a halt and we were out on the roof. A small studio built from wood and glass sat opposite us surrounded by pots in which grew cannabis, trailing squash and rosemary. Marcio knocked on the window.

'Bea?' he called, 'Bea?'

He turned to me, disappointed.

'She must have gone to her parents. They're dentists, they live in a nice place, she goes back a lot. A town two hours south from the city, full of *Pitangueira* trees.'

‘Who is she?'

'Beatrice. A friend, from uni. She lives here, rented the rooftop for almost nothing and built the place herself. She works in a digital commune on the next street. She's brilliant at carpentry and social media.'

'A girlfriend?'

Marcio made a movement with his head that could be no or yes.

'I lived here with her, for a few weeks, when I first went to university, but then my dad went missing. She helped me look. Someone thought they'd seen him by the Big Worm. She came with me, into the vines, under the flyover. They’re so thick, it's like another world in there. I think it’s the best place to hide, to live, if you don't want to be found.'

'You didn't find him though.'

'We looked for two weeks. Then there was this storm that came from the North. It was just the time when the sugarcane was flowering. Have you seen a sugarcane flower?'

'No,'

'It's white and feathery, like pampa grass, if you know that, or dandelion clocks. When I first saw Dandelion clocks in Victoria Park, it was like, I can't tell you, it was like being struck.'

'Why?’

‘These terrible winds got up and carried all the flowers, a whole season's crop, down to the city. The streets were blocked up these tiny white blooms, avenues, metro stations, wedges like snow on top of apartment buildings. It was difficult to carry on looking for pa among them all. Then it rained and the flowers turned to sludge and that was even worse. It took a long time for things to go back to normal. We stopped looking. Mercury went back to her arts college; I went back to university. But I couldn't stay with Bea. Ma needed me, I went back home.'

I watched the veins under Marcio's forehead move as he spoke. His skin seemed stretched so tight and thin, his skull so close to his surface, the first rise in his forehead just beginning to bald. I reached out, ruffled his hair, always so surprisingly wiry, ran my fingers down the ridges of his head towards his neck and shoulders.

'I'm glad you didn't stay here with her,' I said.

Marcio took me to the edge of the roof, not much to stop you from falling, just a calf-high line of crumbly bricks. We didn't care about safety, sat ourselves down, dangled our legs five floors high. He held my hand and pointed out to the mythical road, the Big Worm. It glowed like a living thing, like an enormous snake, ancient yellow lights along its back, winding its way through the dark towers, softly curved, on and on until it reached a large, strange building shaped like an S.

'It really does look like a worm, an enormous worm,' I said.

'Elevado Presidente de Costa Silva,' said Marcio, 'built by the military dictatorship, a road right through the best bit of the city.'

'It just stinks of piss now.'

'This avenue was like Europe, where the intellectuals, artists, professors all lived. When the flyover came these people all got removed - or disappeared.

'Disappeared? Like your dad?'

'No. It was different then. In those days when someone disappeared the generals had got them. There was no point to search.'

The sounds of the city arrived to us in waves like the ocean; the grunts of a fight, São Paulo Hip-Hop, a saxophone practising scales. Smells too, chicken hearts grilled on an old tin on a nearby rooftop, sugared doughnuts frying in a food truck below. I could see him here, with his hip girlfriend, drinking beers and smoking weed, watching the people come and go along the back of the old yellow snake. And then all that drama. Banished back up to the North Zone. It was like one of those dark old English fairy tales which often end so badly. Beyond the Big Worm, the city spread out, on and on and on, a robe of glittering light, a megacity Milky Way, all the pain and the unfairness peacefully disguised. I imagined us both back on Old Street, eating noodles on the side of the road with our bikes locked up to a lamppost, maybe married.

It was hard for me, to walk down dark streets after what had happened with the gun. Marcio told me we should be OK. There were different rules in the centre, in the periphery, it wasn't the same place, the same city. And hardly anyone got robbed twice in the same night. A closed crash barrier marked the beginning of the road. An enormous Japanese woman dressed all in white stood by a cauldron of hot oil, frying pancakes filled with palm hearts. Above her was a large advert for the 19th

São Paulo Art Biennial. People milled around, beers and food, kids and dogs, coming and going, away and towards the sound of a band playing up ahead. We walked up the leathery old ramp towards the heart of the party. Dim streetlamps showed up the fissures, grooves, bald patches, potholes, patches of grass growing in the kerb. I could almost feel the cars on my back, the punishing toil of the old road.

‘It’s worked hard this road,’ said Marcio, ‘people hate it because of where it came from, but it can’t help that. It is what it is.’

We crested over into the main drag which sliced through the city as if it were a layer cake, winding its snake-like path into the very heart of the centre, ending finally by dipping its head towards the glowing Copan building, framed now by the long fissure of the Big Worm. The elegant old residences jammed either side of the road were thick with rain-shadow, the black residue of so many rush-hours, runic *pixo*. The expansive windows, which at one time must have let in so much light, were now shuttered, barred with cheap metal. Some locals had made an effort at privacy, pulling across lacy curtains or boarding up windows completely, whilst others had given up, letting the world walking past gawp into their strip-lit lives, as if they lived in a television. So close we were to these buildings that as we walked along the rolling road I could have lent across and helped myself to someone’s dinner, watched someone’s evening news, rocked the cradle of a crying baby.

‘How can they stand it?’ I asked, ‘I couldn’t.’

‘Cheapest rent in the centre,’ said Marcio, ‘the higher apartments are better.’

I had no phone to get in touch with Francisco but as soon as I saw the tall man leaning against another poster for the biennial, blue-tinted sunglasses, silk scarf, scuzzy red hair, I knew it was him.

'He's not from here,' said Marcio.

'He is. His father runs farms, his ma is from Rio. She was a model.'

'That man does not have a model for a mother.'

'It's him. I can just tell. He's one of Michael's students.'

I shouted out Francisco's name. He looked shocked for a moment but immediately recovered himself, kissed me on both cheeks like we had known each for a long time, took my shoulders and examined my face. Then he smiled, a wide tiger smile.

'Michael said you were nice-looking,' he said happily.

…….

Men on a rooftop, São Paulo, Brazil, 1960, René Burri

Chapter 9

Francisco said we should go and see the band play, took my hand and led me through the crowd, squirrelling his way through to the front by the stage. I turned and beckoned the others to follow. They looked uncomfortable but pushed along too, Amaral so wiry and thin, almost not there. It was like watching a cloud coming through the people, his white afro bobbing amongst the caps and the fags and the cans of beer.

The band was a big line-up, eight musicians altogether, various hairdos and skin colours and instruments, guitars, bongos, *berim-baus* and old tin cans. Their outfits ranged from paint splattered jeans to African print pyjamas. The lead singer was a flamboyant Afro-Brazilian dressed in snake-skin boots, a fuchsia three-piece suit and a silky billowing black shirt. He cleared his throat and put his hand in the air for silence. People seemed to know him and did as they were told.

'I'd like to thank the São Paulo biennial for hosting us here on the Big Worm today,' he said, 'and helping to bring the culture of the periphery here to the centre. It's a sign that the city is changing. When I got a scholarship to study law in Mackenzie University, a short walk from here, the guards on the door would not let me into the building. They thought that because I was black and from the periphery I must be lying about the scholarship, must have faked my letters of acceptance. I got back on the bus to the periphery and instead of law school started this band, *Nochune Soul,* named after the neighbourhood I am so proud to call home. People come often and tell us that Nochune is not a good place. They tell us we don't have doctor's surgeries; we don't have transport links, we don't have proper sewerage or electricity grids. They say we need to move to government colonies to get these things and leave the place we've built on our own. I say to them bring these things to us, you who are so powerful, who can build these tall towers in a few days, is it so difficult to install a water pipe? An internet cable? A bus stop?' he said.

Marcio clapped along with the rest of the crowd. Mercury and Amaral looked bored, whispering to one another. Francisco appeared enchanted, gave a wolf-whistle of support. He leant in towards me.

'He's so right, you know. He's so right,' he said to me.

The band played a whistling, flicking sweetheart kind of music it was almost impossible not to dance to. I took Marcio's hand to swing him round. He shook his head at me.

'I'm not in the mood,' he said.

I looked at him and shrugged.

'He's so boring,' said Mercury, whose tiny hands had appeared around my waist, pulling me into her jerky movements. She had almost no rhythm, replacing a sense of time with almost complete abandon, throwing herself wildly in any direction. She seemed to have no shame or sense of propriety

and ground herself wantonly up against Amaral and I. It looked awful but was strangely attractive. Her outrageous idea of dancing was obviously not new to Marcio. With a mixture of embarrassment and boredom he stepped away from his sister, turned to concentrate on the band, arms crossed in front of him. Francisco on the other hand joined in with no shame, throwing his lanky arms around both us girls, twirling and pinching us to him. I wondered if he was gay and then decided he wasn't. Amaral jumped up and down on the spot, up and down, up and down, like a little white-haired jack-in-the-box. He frowned with effort and seemed to take the act of dancing very seriously indeed. Towards the end of the song Mercury joined in with Amaral's pole-like dance, jumping themselves as high as they could, frightening the people closest to them. Francisco pulled me towards him. He was taller than me and it didn't feel bad. He smelt of sweet roasted carrots. I reasoned that Marcio must see this was innocent if we were both right in front of him, that it was just about the music and that good feeling of bodies moving together. When the song finished, we stood around smiling, breathing in the electrons that were still jumping in the air. Francisco looked beatific.

'You guys are great. I love it. Here, you must come along to the Copan, after this. We have an after-party,' he said, pulling out four flimsy invites.

I took the tickets from him greedily, put them straight in my pocket. In London I went to a lot of art launches, but it was the after-parties which I really loved. It was one of the main perks of my gallery's slave wages, to feel so close to the inside, not an artist but at least brushing past them.

'We're already at the party,' said Marcio, 'why do we need to go to another one?'

'This isn't the real party,' said Francisco, 'you should come, it's going to be wild.'

Amaral laughed like this was one of the funniest things he'd ever heard.

'You're just a playboy. You have no idea what wild is. We're off to the South Zone, new sound system outside Juno's bar. Everyone's going. That's going to be the real party, *não é,* Mercury?' said Amaral.

Mercury squashed her lips together. I could tell that she was torn. She looked at me, opened her mouth to speak but Francisco butted in first.

'I don't buy this whole 'the parties are always better in the periphery'. You guys are just jealous,' said Francisco, 'you're no crazier than I am, you just live further out from town.'

'*Mano,* you don't know what you're talking about,' said Amaral.

'Look, whatever, this is going to be great. There're these two girls from Berlin DJing. I saw them in Paris and they killed it. They literally killed it.'

'I'm going,' I said.

'We can't. We'll miss the last metro. The bus will be impossible,' said Marcio.

'I can give her a lift home,' said Francisco, 'I've got my car.'

Marcio folded his arms up. Mercury yelped with laughter.

'You're kidding, aren't you?' she wailed, 'you think Marcio will let you do that?'

'We're not living in the Middle Ages,' I said, 'what's the problem?'

'What do you think the problem is?' Marcio said to me.

'I'm not going to sleep with the guy, just get a lift home with him,' I said.

Mercury cackled with laughter, hugged herself with glee.

'This is ridiculous,' I said, 'Amaral, what do you think?'

The four of us turned to get a fifth opinion but Amaral had gone.

'Where is he? He was here a second ago,' said Francisco.

'Ah,' said Mercury, 'You said you were just as crazy as he was. I don't think he liked that.'

We turned to see Amaral jumping from the crash barrier onto the ledge of a nearby building. He clung to the edge of the wall. He began scaling the windows, lanky arms and legs swinging themselves in semi-circles, somehow gripping to the very thinnest of holds. It was so dangerous. People were already crying out and pointing at him. He began to shimmy himself horizontally along the last floor of a grimy stucco building, smudgy pink, great slick mossy stains, towards a large banner slung across the flyover. It was an advert for a street art competition, sponsored by our old friends, Domingos Sertão property developers. Pictures of girls with beers laughing and looking out over the city were interspersed with blonde guys in skate gear, holding cans of paint. They all looked so clean. I heard someone close by to me call the police, tell them that a kid was going to kill himself. Amaral jumped from the building as if throwing himself in the air. The crowd cried out together, everyone except Mercury who had taken out her camera and was clicking away. Amaral clutched onto the banner, which sagged and swung across the road, but didn't give. Holding on with one hand he

took from his shorts a can of black paint and began methodically spraying across the poster his tag that made no sense, but which right now didn't look ugly only a profound achievement. Once he had finished one section of the banner he put his can back in his shorts and swung himself like an orangutan towards the next part. He mustached the girls, the guys. After defacing the kids, he began to write a slogan, slowly, one letter at a time. P A R - when the crowd realised what he was writing they began to cheer, no longer so concerned for Amaral's safety, who seemed now like an angel, or someone blessed, at least.

'I don't understand,' I said.

'He's writing *Parque Minhacão,*' said Marcio, 'it's the slogan, for Bea's campaign, to turn the road into a park. Domingos Sertão are bidding to knock the flyover down and turn the whole area into a private condo of micro-studios.'

'He's amazing,' said Francisco, 'he's so fucking real. I wish I had what he had.'

Amaral reached the h in *Minhacão* when we heard the sirens and then the police lights, cold blue flashing all around.

'Shit,' said Francisco.

There was no way Amaral could simply drop and run. He would need to get to the other side and scale down. He continued to work, oblivious to the flashing light, to the police and the guns.

Marcio grabbed my shoulder.

'We should get out of her,' he said.

I turned to find Francisco, but he was already walking towards the little crowd of police in their gun-vests, hands out peacefully, so confident he could smooth the whole thing over.

'What's the problem? We can stay,' I said, 'it's just the police.'

'It isn't London. Let's go.'

I didn't want to, but Marcio insisted. He took my hand, led me down through fire escape steps on the side of the flyover, out into the alleys behind the Big Worm, threading our way past bin chutes and bread smoke, the bare brick backs of buildings, a pile of old gold mannequins and a fat ginger cat feasting on *feijoada*. A thin man with a shimmering lilac Afro, fingers to his lips, warned me of something. Marcio took my hand, pulled me with him, told me we'd head toward Trianon Park.

‘I know a way in, just us and the birds,’ he said.

We flew along, Marcio serenading me with the names of the streets that we breezed down. Into Bela Vista, past Frei Caneca cinema, rainbow flag blowing in the wind that got up strong down those tight roads, whistling past my hot ears. Down an old lane thick with graffiti, husky snakes that hissed and purred, delicate girls with wings and open mouths, a man held down by bars which were roads. Wonderful nameless artists; the most personal, the most creative. Back out onto the main street, past Queen’s motel flashing its price per hour. A big red clock told us the outside air temperature was 35 degrees and almost midnight. We went on, past shops of chandeliers and antique tiles and moldy relics, past thin buildings, fat buildings, glam buildings, bleak buildings, the smells of drains and night jasmine, purple-flowering trees. A fat woman in red with a red handbag and red lips on a blue bus, the roar of a plane, flashing its low way down to the ground, the hum of the traffic stopped on red, the bright green lights of Gazeta theatre, a new Moliere play shimmering down over waiting cars. It made me feel magic and free, like I had wings on my trainers.

We went up through Augusta, by the brothels and the experimental theatres, passed under the black eaves of the Modern art museum, in and out of the kids with their backpacks and skateboards and glue, over the road to the Parque Trianon, grandly and thickly dark, shut and locked up against the fluorescent night. Marcio took us down the side of the park by a fake Greek temple, ran his hands along the bars of the railings until he found one that was missing. He threaded himself through and held my hand tightly in case I escaped without him. I had no choice but to follow, turning my body to the side and squeezing myself between the iron bars, feeling my head compress for a second before bursting out into thick Atlantic rainforest. It was immediately cooler, wetter, blacker. The breath and wheeze of the surrounding roads were muted by plant-life, replaced by the muffled whistle of mysterious insects, the hoo of refugee jungle birds. I felt something drop upon my shoulder and scurry down by back. I screamed out. I could barely make out Marcio in the darkness, only the pale blue whites of his eyes.

‘Why did you bring me in here?’ I said, pulling away from him.

‘I wanted to show you it, like this, so quiet. Virgin Atlantic jungle, right in the middle of the city. Don’t you like it?’ he said.

‘No. It’s fucking horrible. Can’t we just go and have dinner somewhere?’

‘I want to be away from it all. Come on,’ he said, grabbing my wrist, pulling me further into the park. I pushed back, frightened. I counted in my head the months I’d know him. three, maybe four months.

‘I don’t want to go down there,’ I said, ‘I don’t know what you’ll do to me.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ he said, dragging me down a winding path into the deep black. I twisted away and he got irritated.

‘How can you be afraid of me?’ he said,’ you’d think I was taking you to the minotaur or something.’

In the heart of the park was a small square in which stood a lit statue of a faun blowing upon a flute. He was not delicate or classical but a strong, thick, wiry creature who hugged his enormous limbs into an awkwardly powerful pose. He had a smooth long nose, curling beard, fierce frown. The concentration on his art, on his flute, appeared immense. I was jealous, which was stupid, as the man was made of granite.

I sat down on a bench opposite.

‘You like him?’ asked Marcio.

‘I do,’ I said, ‘I really like him. But what’s he doing in the middle of this forest? Why isn’t he somewhere everyone can enjoy him? The *pixo* everyone hates is all over the place and this beautiful statue is hidden away.’

‘People did hate him, at first. Indecent, that’s what they thought. He was meant to go in the garden of the municipal library, but it was right by a monastery and the monks didn’t like it, having to walk past this naked statue of a god that wasn’t even their god. He got put in here.’

‘Things change so fast. Not even the monks would complain now.’

‘Nothing changes. People are still offended. Look how much they hate the *pixo* you think is so great.’

‘Maybe when we’re old they’ll be putting that stuff in a museum, what do you think?’

‘No way. You can’t compare that shit Amaral does with this. This faun is so special. Especially without the crowds, lit up like this. My mother was the one who found the gap in the fence.

It was my father's idea to bring us down at night, show us the statue at night. Ma didn't want us to go, said we could be caught, something could happen. They argued but he did it anyway. We were only nine. I still remember it, how magical he seemed.'

'Did they argue a lot? Your parents?'

Marcio shook his head. That wasn't what he wanted to talk about.

'Is Amaral going to be OK?'

'I dunno. If they catch him he'll get fucked up. They might spray him black, they do that. Maybe he'll get away. Maybe he'll go to jail for the night. He's a bad influence on Mercury.'

'She loves him.'

'What does that even mean?'

'Don't you know?'

'Do you?'

We sat for a while, watched the faun play his silent music amongst the hustling palms. I thought about home and watching *I am Love* at the Curzon in the midst of a Soho winter, the rain glistening in the golden lights of the bar, the warmth of the art and the people.

'What are you thinking of?' asked Marcio.

'The party at the Copan,' I said.

'You like that guy.'

'I just want to go to the party.'

'Why do you like parties so much?' he said.

'They're fun,' I said, 'you like them too, when you get there.'

'I don't understand you,' he said.

'They make me feel like I belong,' I said, 'I don't feel afraid.'

'What are you so frightened of?' he said.

'Not having any more fun, I said.

'What else?'

'Losing my energy, getting old.'

'What else?'

‘Not being the person I thought I would be. Doors closing on me, walls trapping me.’

‘What else?’

‘Disappointment, regret, shame in myself.’

‘What else?’

‘Being alone. Ending up alone. Lonely.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of. My mother too. She is terrified of it. You both aren’t so different as you think.’

‘We’re nothing like each other,’ I said, taking out my pen, shaking it up.

I wrote my name in small letters on the Faun's flute, so small you would have to know they were there and really look for them if you wanted to find them. Marcio was pissed off with me. He said it wasn't the same thing, writing your name on a fake statue of a Roman wolf and writing it on an original Brechect. We argued and missed the last metro. Marcio agreed there was nothing for us to do but go to that party at the Copan after all, though he made me put on his ring before we set off.

……..……..……..

‘Process, then, gives us the opportunities to eliminate the Eye and the Spectator as well as to institutionalise them; and this has happened. Hard-core Conceptualism eliminates the Eye in favour of the mind. The audience reads. Language is reasonably well equipped to examine the sets of conditions that formulate art’s end-product: ‘meaning’.’

Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*

Chapter 10

The Copan was one of the few buildings that my website trawl of São Paulo tourist spots had thrown up. Built in 1951 by Brazil’s most famous architect, Oscar Niemeyer, it was one of the largest

concrete structures in the world, complete with its own postcode, an enduring city landmark. In all honesty I couldn't see much that was beautiful or amazing from the photos. It looked like an ugly giant S, stained from the battering of tropical storms, surrounded by other similarly down-at-heel tower blocks, everything hot, bleak and grey. Still, there were several art blogs that raved about the brutalist, egalitarian vision and it had a good story attached to it. A symbol of São Paulo's heyday, a modernist inner-city dream, by the beginning of the millennium it was in a dismal state of disrepair, like much of the city's central district. As businesses and wealthy residents moved out to the suburbs, the homeless, the addicts, the prostitutes, the simply poor moved in. I particularly liked one article I read that interviewed a professional magician who had lived there for decades and described what a mess the place had been. Topless women, he complained, took drugs on the rooftop. I thought that sounded quite glamorous. I guessed it depended on the drugs and the women and why they had no tops on. In the last few years a new manager had got rid of the old crowd and cleaned up the windows. *Time Out* São Paulo claimed that the Copan was now home to a mixture of tech start-ups, galleries and slick studios for trendy professionals who were taking a punt on the old centre being on the verge of a trendy new epoch. The journalist who wrote the article obviously thought this was a great thing, but it sounded a bit too much like Hackney Central to me. I had rented an apartment off Mare Street when I first got my job at the gallery. They called it murder mile but it wasn't really like that. There was an overland line and the 38 bus went straight into town. You could get yoghurt in 1 litre pots and white cheese and olives from plastic buckets in the Turkish Shops. A massive Tesco sold everything else. You could even get pirated DVDS which Chinese illegals sold in the carpark. Then they opened a Whistles and a Nike shop, and I had to move on just like those topless women on the rooftop.

Marcio and I threaded past a crowd of smokers gathered at the entrance to the building, down a tightly curved parade of cheap shops ending in a coffee bar which didn't appear to have changed since the fifties, where a few stray partyers were sipping espressos. Posters for the biennial led us on down a long and seedy corridor, concrete bloated with damp, more graffiti, scrawls in marker, pornographic doodles, scribbles. I considered writing my name there too but in the end I didn't. I was sick of myself, scribbling June on everything. It seemed so pointless and silly compared to Amaral's stuff. I never put myself at risk like he did, or make people feel anything in particular, except my boss

Nicha, of course, but that was different and also completely negative. In the end I scratched into the damp plaster Wordsworth's poem written on Westminster Bridge. Maybe someone would stop and read it one day. I felt Marcio's hand squeeze my neck.

'Progress, I guess,' he said.

We came to an old-fashioned grille style lift guarded by a bleach blonde bouncer in a black suit, high heels and glitter, taking tickets and stamping hands. I showed him our limp curling invites. He studied them carefully for watermarks before yanking back the folding door with a crash. Marcio stepped inside. I waited for a moment, a little worried. It didn't look safe and I've never liked lifts.

'Stairs?' I said.

The bouncer rolled his eyes at me.

'Pay to get in. Pray to get out. That's what it's like up there.'

That sounded up my street. I jumped in. Small, yellowed buttons displayed the floor numbers. There were a lot. The bouncer pressed for 28.

'Oh god. What if there's a fire?' I said as we began to ascend.

The buttons lit up as we slowly passed each floor. Marcio passed the time by mournfully telling me an Indian folktale of a frog who wanted to go to a party the birds were having in the sky but wasn't invited. He hid in the guitar case of a Raven and thought he was winning but when the birds found him out they threw him all the way back to the earth and he had to spend the rest of his life living in a pond. The lift pinged at 28 and Marcio yanked back the grille to reveal a hall of cathedral proportions. Enormous windows showed up the glittering city below. The blare of a party hit us, the fuzz of chatter and laughing and shrieks and whispers, the sweat, the perfume, the licking of lips, the gulping of throats, sniffing of noses. The clothes, all the clothes, ballerina tutus, silver leg warmers, black cotton cocoons, a tiny woman with red hair and a purple leotard, a man naked from the waist up rippling his stomach for a bevy of grey-haired women in leggings. Everyone drinking: bottles of beer, bottles of wine, bottles of sambuca thrown into people's mouths and then lit by a circus performer. I turned down the corners of my mouth, took out my pen, shook it up.

'I'm going to find someone to tattoo,' I said.

'You need a new party trick,' said Marcio.

'Not here. No-one knows me,' I said, scanning the room for the bar. I saw a swarm of people squirming in and out of one another like a wild-bees nest and knew at once that that was where we should head. I dragged Marcio into the frey, shifting and skewing and twisting and winding us through the writhing black crowd towards the booze. It was one of the densest parties I had tried to traverse but I realised there were little pockets of space in between the bodies and if I headed towards these islands, I would reach our destination in the easiest and least sweaty way. In the centre of these circles were handcarts. Some were wooden, some were metal, some were small and some were bigger. Some were empty and some contained cardboard, some waste metal. Around each one of the carts were a series of spray cans and an artist, carefully painting some kind of vision - abstracted colours, poems, fairy cityscapes, faces and monsters. Next to each cart was a large photo of a person: an old man with many lines and a cocked chin, a young boy with a Corinthians football shirt and board shorts looking out over the city from a hilly viewpoint. Only one of these portraits was of a woman. She had long curly hair, a smile, three children clinging to her leg. She looked like a good mother. I asked Marcio who she was, what all this was about. He told me it was a project that had been going on for years around the city. Artists decorate carts for *catadores* to give them a sense of pride in themselves and celebrate their work. To stop them being invisible.'

'What's a *catadoro?'*

'A ragpicker. Someone who goes around collecting old cardboard, metal, scrap. Sells them on. They're everywhere, they pull these carts along by hand. They do ninety percent of the city recycling. Have you not seen them?'

'I haven't been out much.'

'I guess not.'

'Your mother's a rag-picker,' I said.

Marcio frowned at me.

'What did you say?' he said.

'Your mother's a ragpicker,' I said.

I don't really know why I said it. It just came into my head and then just came out my

mouth. I didn't mean anything by it but then I wondered later if it was to do with the picture of the mother with her kids and Ursula and Marcio and Mercury being so close and me on my own, with no-one who loved me like that. As soon as I saw Marcio's face, I knew what I'd said was terrible. I meant to say sorry but something impulsive and bad came over me. I just laughed and carried on mocking his mother.

'She collects things that people have lost or got rid of. Just like rag-pickers do. She never pays for anything. She scavenges. Not much difference except these guys have carts and she has a cotton bag,' I said.

I guess if it hadn't been so dark maybe I would have seen Marcio's colour change or realised how upset I had made him, but I didn't. I turned to the nearby artist, wanting to know the name of the woman in the photo but he didn't know. I told him he should at least know the name of the person's cart that he was painting. He replied that he didn't even know if the cart was even hers. I took it upon myself to give her a name, Julia, which I wrote just above her curly hair. I gave all the children names too: Paulo, Petulia, Pedro. When I turned to show Marcio my work he had disappeared.

'Where did my boyfriend go?' I asked the artist.

'I'd give him some time. He looked as angry as a dick,' he replied.

It was a surprising turn of phrase, but I knew what he meant. I felt bad but agreed with the artist that Marcio probably needed some time alone. I continued towards the bar where I met a girl whose face was painted like a glittering Ying Yang sign, half in black and half in silver.

'You're beautiful,' I yelled at her.

'So are you!' she yelled back.

'What should I drink?' I shouted.

'Have the Persian lime *caipirinha,'* she screamed, 'they micro-spice with acid if you blow a kiss at them when you order.'

I was unbelievably pleased with this information, ordered two, blowing several kisses at the barman, who shook his head at how uncool I was being. I didn't care.

'Thanks man,' I said to the girl, scanning the room for Marcio who I still couldn't find. I downed one of the drinks and kept hold of the other to give to him. Marcio genuinely didn't like

parties and almost always skulked around the sides of any large crowd, but his saving grace was that he would take any drink or drug that was offered him. I threaded round the edges of the room searching him out. I felt kind of sick and light-headed. I wished I hadn't had my phone stolen. I could have just texted Marcio, told him I was sorry and things would have been better. I saw Francisco in a vortex of older women, the centre of something languid and cool. He still had on his blue sunglasses which I thought was an idiot thing to do in a nightclub but seeing him still gave me a little spark. I drank down Marcio's drink and headed over. Francisco opened his arms out wide.

'I was just talking about you,' he said, 'about Amaral, what he did on the Big Worm.'

The women all nodded their heads, smiled softly to each other, raised their eyebrows, murmuring about real art, real intervention. I saw they all had official biennial passes slung round their necks.

'It was radical,' said Francisco, looking towards the sky.

A short-haired woman dressed in architectural clothes held his hand. He craned his head gratefully.

'This is the girl I wanted to introduce you to,' he said to her, 'she's a copywriter. Worked in Nicha's gallery in London. Fluent in Portuguese and English. I thought we might have some work for her over the next week. With the press releases and stuff.'

Francisco turned to me.

'This is my boss, Monica Alves Cabral. Her great-great-great grandfather discovered Brazil and her great-uncle was president. She's director of the biennial this year.'

Monica tossed her head, smiling but impatient with her amazing pedigree. She looked me up and down.

'A London copywriter,' she said, 'and friend of the *pixadores.* Refreshing combination.'

I opened my mouth to reply but saw that she had already turned her attention away from me and to her drink. Too much ice, she told an attentive young girl by her side, not enough whisky. Francisco looked nervous, whispered in my ear that Monica was normally a pretty nice woman, but they'd had a real problem this afternoon. The body artist from New York that was due to perform at the opening had got a scroll stuck up her vagina and had cancelled her trip at the last minute.

‘It’s a massive, almost unfillable hole,’ he said.

‘Oh my god. It really is,’ I said.

‘It’s not funny. I really don’t know what went wrong. She’s done this performance hundreds of times before. I just don’t know how she got the paper so embedded. I think it’s just an excuse not to come. We’re not important enough. Not New York, Not Los Angeles, not Venice, not Berlin. Just São Paulo. Where the fuck is that? We’re the second oldest biennial in the world. Hardly anyone knows that. One of the biggest cities in the world too. We’re not in the sticks here.’

‘Maybe her vagina just shrunk in fear. It’s a very dangerous place,’ I said.

Francisco shook his head.

‘It’s not that bad. You just need a bullet proof car and then really, you’re fine. We have such good security. Anyway, we’ve given Monica so many ideas today, for a new opening. She hates all of them. Nothing for her will ever beat a scroll inscribed with feminist theory coming out of a vagina.’

‘I’ve got an idea.’

‘What?’

‘I’ve got a good intervention idea. Can I talk to her?’

Francisco shrugged, took his boss by the arm and turned her around to me once more. Monica smiled again, a little more impatiently this time.

‘I’m afraid press releases we have covered. I’m so sorry,’ she said, ‘They were all done weeks ago.’

‘It’s not that. I’ve got an idea. For your opening intervention. Something local, something new, that people haven’t seen before,’ I said.

Monica breathed in heavily, like she needed way more oxygen to deal with this shit.

‘One more bad idea isn’t going to kill me, I suppose,’ she said.

‘My friend, who’s a *pixadore.* What about getting him to perform? He could tag the walls. It would look cool, amongst the art works. You should see him climb. It’s body art. It is.’

Monica frowned.

‘He couldn’t do the walls. That would be too much. It’s a very, very important building. Part of our national heritage. But he could tag a canvas. Which would be new, you’re right. And local. Which would be refreshing too.’

‘Farm to fork,’ I said.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ I said, ‘a canvas would be good. You could sell it then too.’

Monica smiled.

‘I can see you have worked for Nicha. It’s not a bad idea. Francisco, can you take charge? Give her whatever she needs to make it happen.’

Monica blessed me with another one of her limpid smiles before turning away and wandering off into the party. Yellow butterflies spangled from her wake. The acid was working. I wished I hadn't double-dosed. I still couldn't see Marcio and had the spacey realisation that I had hurt him badly.

'I had a fight with my boyfriend,' I yelled at Francisco.

'I thought he was your husband,' he yelled back, putting his hand on my shoulder.

'Why?'

'The ring,' he said, waving his hand in front of my face like Beyoncé.

'No. No! Look I need to find him. He's upset. Can you help me look? You're taller than me,' I said.

Francisco spun his head briefly round the room before suggesting we try the VIP party upstairs. There was a further venue, he told me, on the floor above, one of the original Niemeyer apartments, pockmarked and aged but still with original fittings. It had belonged to a Chilean alchemist who killed himself a few years ago when an experiment with Mercury exploded in his face. The place was now an electronica club with a sulphureous smell hanging in the air and this was where the girls from Berlin were playing. Francisco took me by the hand and led me through the crowd to the fire exit which he pushed open onto an old service staircase. Strobe lights pattered across crumbling walls, thin girls in eye liner shared fags on the tight concrete steps, strip-lit, everything fluorescent and blue. I could hear even before we got to the party that the music was the kind of porn-y dance that likes to build itself up and up until the crowd are really salivating and then drop

something great that really hits the spot and makes everyone go fucking wild. There were more butterflies, grey ones, unfurling from all the cigarette smoke and I knew I needed to dance, or things might go strange, or dark.

When we got to the queue of the club, I saw up ahead another thick-set glittery bouncer closely examining tickets. I showed my hand to Francisco. Bubbles flew off my fingers as if I was swimming.

'Can I get in with this stamp?'

'No. Don't worry. I've got other tickets,' he said.

'But Marcio doesn't have those. He won't be in here,' I said.

'Oh fuck,' said Francisco, 'I forgot that. Sorry,' he said.

He looked genuine but I felt like he'd tricked me. Marcio could be looking for me now and I wasn't where he'd left me. Still, my heart was beating, butterflies were everywhere, I'd go mad, I'd go completely mad, if I didn't dance soon.

'I don't know what to do. The music is so good,' I said.

'Isn't it?'

'I drank some of those acid cocktails.'

'Ah you must come in then. Don't worry about him. He'll be fine. You can find him later when you're not high.'

'Yeah. Good idea.'

Black butterflies glittered around the bouncer. Francisco pushed his hands through his hair. His forehead was so white, I felt like I was seeing his skull.

'Monica never OKs an idea just like that,' he said, 'it's something big, if she likes your work.'

I nodded. When I tried to talk my mouth felt thick and sticky.

'It'll be cool,' I said.

'I thought of something like that myself actually,' said Francisco, 'when we first started preparing. A *marginal* event. But you have to know people like Amaral. You can't just rock up in the periphery and say I want to be your friend; I want to make you an artist. It's exploitative. They know that.'

'Yeah,' I said.

The cloud of butterflies above the bouncer was thicker now. They seem to be interfering with each other's flight. We reached the bouncer. It was the same guy from downstairs.

'You were downstairs. Now you're here,' I said.

'Two places at once,' he said.

'I'm freaked out,' I said as he stamped my hand.

'Just kidding. It's my twin brother,' he said, stepping aside to let us enter the disco-lit lobby.

I could smell the drugs, like musty spores. They were everywhere, in the air. Francisco wound his fingers into mine to pull me in. I took my hand back, stayed in the lobby, told him I'd catch up with him, that I had to find Marcio before I did anything else. I made my way back down the stairs, past the cigarettes and the girls, back into the warehouse, the crowd thinning, the box-fresh old ragpicker carts, the artists packed up and gone home. The night was lifting, not dawn yet but lilac and grey through the windows. Spray-cans of paint had been left carelessly around; all the party clothes looked ragged. It was clear Marcio was not there. I didn't need to look hard; I could feel it in the emptiness of the room. I took the lift down to the ground floor back out into the thick morning air. A couple dressed in angel wings swayed happily past me, arm in arm. Then it was just me and the empty cans and crushed plastic cups and a thin-ribbed homeless man arranging his cardboard beneath the ornate balcony of a crumbling squat. I stood for some moments amongst the debris and pigeons. Marcio had gone. I never thought he would have left without me. Didn't he care? Men in boots came along hosing down the road, asked me if I was OK. I wanted to know if they had seen my boyfriend. They laughed and told me to call him. I had no phone, I told them. One of the men took his phone out for me to borrow but Marcio didn't have his phone either and neither did Mercury. I asked them how I could get back to Tremembé tower. They scratched their heads and talked in heavy slang amongst themselves, told me to get a bus from the central station up to Rodoviaria Tiete terminus and ask someone from there. They didn't seem too confident about their advice, but they had to get on with cleaning the streets.

I went off in the vague direction at which they had waved, through shadowy *centro*, cobble streets and looming art nouveau, the old banks that traded in sugar, coffee, gold, defunct now, turned

into cheap penny shops. Shutters were just lifting, showing their bright skirts to the navy street, half-rows of flimsy carnival costumes, plastic shoes in rainbow colours. I arrived at the crest of a paved pedestrian basin signposted as *Vale do Ahangbau*. An optimistic tourist placard told me that this meant valley of bad water in the native Tupi language. The river had been paved over at the turn of the century, but the name had stayed. The empty dawn heart of the city spread out before me: French scrolls rolling down crumbling plaster, gothic skyscrapers, grim glass squats, brutal cubes of concrete. It was as if the city was a rock that had been cracked open to reveal seams of sediment, fused together over the decades. *Pixo* was everywhere, just everywhere, an angry black contagious rash, creepers too; nature thriving despite it all. I saw the shimmering red rim of sunrise behind the spire of a nearby church. Two black-haired Goth kids kissed leant against a pink-tiled building close by. I thought of Marcio and I, remembered us together in Old Street, pressed together in doorways.

'I thought you loved me,' I said to the space where Marcio should be.

I gave up finding the bus station, turned back on myself, returning to the party. I went back up in the lift, skirted the cool verge of crumbling party, back up the stairs and into the club which was still packed. Francisco was dancing with some girls with biennial passes around their necks. He'd taken his sunglasses off now and was screwing up his face like he'd taken shedloads of something strong and chemical but when I shook his shoulder and he looked at me I knew he was totally sober. He yelled my name at me before taking my face in his hands and kissing me on the lips like we were both on E. I shook my head, led him out into the corridor where we could talk without screaming. I told him that I couldn't find Marcio and neither of us had a phone, asked him if that lift home he had offered back on the Big Worm was still going. A conflicted shadow passed over his face. I could understand, he'd only just met me, I'd wrenched him away from his fun. When he opened his mouth, I thought he was about to suggest I catch a taxi, but I think he caught something in my eyes that made him change his mind.

'Sure, I'm done here anyway,' he said, ‘where do you live?'

'Tremembé.'

'But that's hours away. I thought you lived in Jardins, or Perdizes.'

'Where?'

Francisco sucked at his lip, glanced back through the door at the girls grinding up against one another.

'Look,' I said, 'I can just catch a taxi. Do you know how much it will be, roughly?'

'No. You can't do that on your own, June. It's too far. Do you even have an address?'

'Tremembé Tower,' I said.

He laughed like I was a little girl, sucked at his lip again, thinking things through, before crinkling his eyes up at me.

'Why don't you just stay at mine tonight? We can sort things out in the morning.'

'No, no. I can't do that. Marcio, he wouldn't like it.'

'He's left you here on your own. What are you supposed to do? He's not looking after you.'

'It's not like that, really. We had a fight. But I can't just stay at yours.'

'You don't need to tell him.'

'Nah, he'll find out. I know him.'

Francisco held his hands up.

'I'll tell you what, I've got a friend who manages a hotel in town. A good one. I get a big discount. Why don't you stay there for the night?'

I didn't want to stay in a hotel, I wanted Francisco to help me get home. He wasn't going to do that though, I could see. The butterflies had disappeared and everything was so grey and unhappy and dirty now. I had to go somewhere; I couldn't just carry on here till the very end. What would I do then? I smiled and said thanks. Francisco sighed, took me gently by the shoulder and we left the party together.

…….

The combatants were armed with old muskets, the cowboy's poke, scythes, and poles. They were submerged in a crowd of believers who, unarmed, carried icons of their favourite saints and dried palms taken from church altars. Some processed as if they were on a religious pilgrimage, with stones

from the road on their heads. They recited their coconut rosaries as they walked. They likened the arrival of the soldiers to one of the periodic natural disasters that descended upon the land. They marched to battle praying and singing, as if they were seeking a decisive test of faith.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

Chapter 11

I woke up in a bad way on beautiful pillows. I could feel the expense and care under my banging head, dense duck feather, heavy white cotton, a delicate smell of jasmine. None of it made me feel any better, I just wondered where the hell I was. I didn't want to open my eyes. When I finally did, I could tell it was late in the day by the rim of fierce bright sun around the heavy curtains. I lay in the immense bed without lifting my head, listening to the perfect silence of a fully functioning AC, staring at the thin line of day, piecing things together. The taxi ride to Hotel Fasano, the floor of the lobby, beautiful in a way that had made me cry out, a deep but subtle coloured wood that Francisco told me was the famous pau brasil, the tree after which the country was named. Too expensive for me, I'd said. The receptionist and Francisco had laughed, reassured me they'd take care of it all. I'd felt cocooned, beatific. A final last drink in the cocktail lounge just as the earliest waking guests were making their way to breakfast. Had I written my name across the hardwood bar? I couldn't remember. They'd been an argument over something. Who knows what. I'd probably done or said something inappropriate. Everything was fuzzy and unclear but there was a lurching feeling in my chest which probably meant that things weren't the way they should be.

My mouth was so dry. I badly needed water. I turned my head to the sleek table beside the bed, pau brasil, of course, reached out for my phone to call Marcio. Then I remembered that we'd had our phones stolen and I had no-one to blame for that but myself, or, indeed, for any of this nasty out-of-shape morning.

'Marcio,' I said to myself, pulling on my ring finger.

The ring, it wasn't there.

'Fuck. Fuck,' I said, sitting up and looking around me. When I turned my head it felt like someone was hitting me with an iron rod but the idea that I lost my ring was far worse than that. It wasn't on the bedside table, nothing there but my lacy holed bra slung across the lamp in a way that made me cringe. I threw the duvet back in case it had come off in the night. Only my pale naked body on a great expanse of cream: white stomach, jutting hip bones, long legs. I wailed to myself, a real loud wail. I didn't own anything which came close to being as precious as that ring. I jumped out of bed. A wave of terrible nausea came over me but I held it together. I tried to open the curtains but they seemed almost impossible to pull back. I thought I was going mad until I realised they were operated by a remote control. They came apart with a kind of monied whir. A grey pigeon fluttered clumsily to the ledge of the window, stared at me with its bulging black eyes. There was no difference between this bird and the flocks in Trafalgar square that I had been so excited to feed as a child, or those that hung around the Setubal docks as the second load of fish came in in the early afternoon. That bird could be anywhere, just like me, but we had both ended up here, all alone in the São Paulo skyline.

'Go back to Setúbal,' I said to the bird, 'it's far nicer than here. There's nothing to stop you. You can fly, you don't need to buy a house or find work. Go. I wish I could.'

The bird just stared at me. I turned back to my search. My clothes were all over the floor, so dirty and thin looking against those beautiful wooden boards. I began to throw everything around in a horrible flurry, but the ring was not there. It looked like it was gone. Losing jobs, losing boyfriends, losing presents, that was me. Saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, thinking the wrong thing, that was me too.

'You need to get your shit together June,' I said to myself.

My mouth began to water, and I rushed to the toilet, held myself over the bowl just in time to retch out a muddy brown mix of toxins and half-digested food. The vomit stank, it absolutely stank, it was the very opposite of everything this room represented. I flushed the chain and went to brush my teeth. There it was, the ring, placed neatly by the complimentary wooden toothbrush, wet and clogged with paste. I sighed, almost cried, placed it on my finger with the pure happiness that comes when you

find something you believed you'd lost for good. A washcloth smeared in black mascara was thrown in the sink. I felt a bit better about myself. I'd at least done the most basic ablutions last night so I couldn't have been totally out of it. I ran hot water over the cloth, cleaned off the make-up and placed it back on my creaky face, let the steam sooth my sore exhausted skin. It felt like a positive and grown-up thing to do in the circumstances but when I finally wiped it away and looked at myself in the mirror I was horrified. Facing me was not only my ever-older face, lines appearing almost everywhere, a particularly heavy frown mark between my eyebrows, but also my name written in giant capitals on the lighted mirror. I didn't even try to rub off the letters. I knew it was a waste of time.

'You fucking idiot,' I said to myself, 'you need to grow up.'

'Grow up' was the phrase I had heard more than any other in my adult life - from my mother, from my grandmother, from my boss, from Marcio, but never from my own mouth. I wondered how much the mirror cost. The hotel would be completely within their rights to charge me for it. They had my credit card details which the receptionist had reassured me was just a formality, but still, they had them. Worse than the money was the idea that I would appear to these people who had helped me and given me shelter as just an ungrateful vandal. I covered my face in my hands with shame. I really didn't remember writing my name across the mirror, but it must have been me. I had a sudden horrible thought. Where was my pen? When I'd thrown my jeans across the room, looking for the ring, I hadn't felt the weight of it in the pocket. I rushed back into the bedroom, rifled through my things. Trousers turned inside out, contents of rucksack all over the floor. Not there. I paced round the room, running my hand over every surface, under the bed, under the pillows, everywhere. Was losing my pen worse than losing the ring? Yes, it felt worse. I had left my other pen back at Marcio's apartment. This was my only one and I needed it. It was the only pen I felt comfortable writing with, putting down my thoughts with and I couldn’t be myself without it.

I lay down on the great bed, curled myself up in a ball, hated Marcio for leaving me, wondered if this hotel had a private detective service which would help me track him down. I reached for the phone on the far side of the bed to call reception and ask them if they could find a number for

Ursula or the address of Tremembé Tower at least. There was my Posca pen, resting on a pad of hotel paper, the lid left off carelessly. I clicked it back on straight away. A written note lay beneath:

Hope you sleep like a baby. Call me when you wake up. 987456387 - it's 9 for an outside line. Love (yes!) Francisco xxx

My mouth began to water once more and I knew I needed to run for the toilet. I threw up again, a creamy yellow rotten slime. What had been in those cocktails? I brushed my teeth, wondered when I'd had my last period, sipped some water, went back to sit on the bed, clicked my pen lid on and off, on and off. I felt empty and unhappy. This guy who I hardly knew had used my pen without even asking. It wasn't his, it clearly wasn't his. It wasn't meant for writing on paper, any old biro could do that and there was a lovely hotel pen sat right next to the pad. I felt another wave of nausea come over me. Breakfast, I suddenly decided, might help.

The buffet was as beautiful and considered as the rest of the hotel, set out in a glass atrium on large white platters with silver tongues. It was light - fruit, a select few pastries, fresh juice. I looked around at the wicker chairs, the orchids, the glass tables at which sat confident men in beautiful suits, picking at their breakfast whilst talking into phones, so at ease with success and the trappings that came with it. The guests here were clearly people with lunch plans, but I had none and began to pile up my plate. Small placards described the provenance of each item: papaya from a former sugar plantation turned organic farm near Salvador, harvested only by moonlit rain for maximum taste and juiciness. Curapuçu jam made by one of the few remaining Amazonian tribes, traditionally stewed to celebrate weddings and given to new mothers in honour of the birth of any sons. I gave myself an extra portion in solidarity with all the girls who never got their share. Butter from a herd of rescued Kobe beef cows, imported from Japan at enormous expense by one of the most powerful of the Northern colonels but left to run wild when the landowner was shot dead by a servant avenging the honour of his wife. It appeared the height of luxury to know the provenance of your food like this but what it really made me wonder was where everything else had come from, the things without labels, the cotton cloths, the silver spoons, the orchids, the waiters.

The croissants were a feature, piled up in lavishly in baskets lined with green checked gingham. They were from a famous São Paulo bakery, set up by a Frenchman, Monsieur Benjamin, in the early 20th century. Benjamin had carried in his luggage seeds from the ancient wheat fields around Chartres, blessed especially before his voyage by the Cathedral's famous black Madonna. The wheat flourished on the floodplains of São Paulo. Benjamin opened his bakery, *Baudelaire's*, a few years later and the rest, according to the hotel placard, 'was history'.

'Mercury,' I said, pining for my friend whilst at the same time thinking how odd it was to found a bakery and name it after another man. I would never have done that. My bakery would only ever be called June's. I set upon my plate two croissants, one apricot Danish and a pain-au-chocolat before finally making for a small table in the very corner of the room. The pastries were buttery, pillowy, not rock-hard the way I had eaten them with Mercury. Still, I would have preferred to be with her eating them stale with her then alone here without even my phone to hide behind. Words from another world swirled around me: IPO, CEO, Citibank, contract lawyers, investment clients, bitcoin, business class, bill please, expense account. There were hardly any women. A couple of ladies with hard bobs wore trouser suits. Another girl nearby, not much older than me, dressed in a muted cream dress and matching heels was drinking a black coffee and eating papaya. I saw one man brush his hand against her and count out his room number.

'I work for Mckinsey, arse-hole,' she said.

He coloured up and scurried away. The girl rolled her eyes at me like this was a daily annoyance we both must share. I rolled my eyes too, but I had never been mistaken for a woman who you could pay to have sex with and I realised that that was not because I didn't look cheap enough but because I didn't look expensive enough. I felt some sympathy for the man too as this woman really did dress in quite a similar way to the prostitutes sat behind me on the plane to São Paulo. I ploughed my way through my pastries and then sloped back up to the room to call Francisco. He answered straight away.

'Hey!' he said, 'how you feeling?'

'Fucking terrible. Depressed.'

'At least you got to sleep. I had to be at the gallery at nine this morning.'

'God.'

'Yeah. I know. Look, about last night, I hope you're not upset, or anything.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I really like you.'

'That's nice.'

'You know what I mean. I like you. Have you spoken to Marcio yet?'

'No.'

'Well, you know where I am, if he doesn't come and find you. You've got my number.'

'Yeah.'

'Do you like the hotel?'

'It's nice, thank you.'

'Pleasure. You're doing me a favour sorting out this intervention with Amaral tonight. Monica's really happy, she keeps on saying it's just what the opening needed.'

'What?'

'We need him to be at the atrium of the Ciccillo Matarazzo pavillion at seven thirty tonight. Monica will be there to meet him, take him into our Green Room. The show will start about eight thirty, that's when the doors open. We've got everything set up already, it's going to be great.'

'It's tonight?'

'Yeah, of course it is, what do you think the party was for?'

'I dunno, I knew it was for the opening, but I didn't think that actually meant the next day. Don't you all have hangovers?'

Francisco laughed.

'That's the art world, babe.'

'Thing is, I got my phone taken, I told you, last night, and I don't know how I could get in touch with Amaral anyway, to let him know. I haven't even asked him yet. I don't think this is going to happen, sorry.'

'June, you promised Monica.'

'I didn't promise, it was just an idea, I just suggested it.'

'Monica is not going to take this well.'

'Sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't think it through.'

Silence on the phone.

'I'm sorry,' I said again, 'it's pretty short notice.'

'Yeah, but you made it sound in the bag last night, like you were best mates with the guy. You make me look bad too. I'm the one who's gonna get it in the neck, not you.'

'You used my pen last night, without asking me.'

Francisco laughed again but not in the same way as before.

'How could I? You were totally out of it. Fucking gone.'

I didn't know what to say to that, so we just hung on the phone for a few moments, neither of us talking. I thought I heard Francisco murmur something like 'fucking out of it' again to himself but I wasn't sure. In the end I just tried to fix things for him.

'Look. I've got an idea. Amaral's girlfriend works at Baudelaire's bakery. I'll go there and ask them how to get in touch with her. She should be able to get him there.'

'Oh. Great. You're a star. You're a fucking star. Well done. Seven thirty, OK? In the atrium. Tell him if he wants to get a taxi he can expense it. I can meet you outside a bit later, just before the thing opens. Say eight? There's champagne.'

'I can't promise, do you understand? I'll do my best.'

'You can do it June. See you later. Oh, and tonight, it's a bit smarter than yesterday, OK?'

The receptionist told me the bakery was walking distance, waved me gently off down Avenida Oscar Freire, a street where even the petrol fumes smelt refined, full of glamour, money, beauty that you could buy. I sucked on the wedges of black dirt beneath my nails, drew my stomach in. Globes of light hung from ornate lampposts whilst sleek fronted stores spotlighted gorgeous things from the outside, DKNY, Calvin Klein, Rolex, Hermes, a single grey Prada handbag, so simple and so powerful and so out of my reach. Heels clopped carelessly on smooth milky pavements. Shopgirls held trays of champagne; the idea of a mugging did not seem to exist here. I found Baudelaire's opposite an old-fashioned pharmacy. Smart bottle-green awning, gold-lettered window, street tables with checked cloths. I sat myself down and a pretty girl was instantly at my side. I asked her about

Mercury, she said she usually arrived just as the new cakes were out of the oven, which shouldn't be long.

A couple in matching RayBans sat down on the table next door to me, ordered cafe au lait in such perfect accents we could have been in Paris. But of course we weren't because if we were there would not have been rows of courier motorbikes lined up by our table. Or the security guard at the entrance sipping on a coke, looking lethargic in a bullet-proof vest. The only French thing about him was the colour of his clothes, which were all black. I took out Amaral's copy of *Backlands*. Since the battle had started between Canudos and the government troops the book had become compulsive. It was horribly dark, reminded me of the worst scenes of *Game of Thrones* and I could not help thinking it would make a great TV series. The war started in such an insignificant way, with an order of wood made to the nearby town Juazeiro in order to finish the new church of Canudos. When the wood did not arrive the counsellor's followers took it a breach of contract and an act of aggression and began to march towards the settlement to take the wood by force. The justice of Juazeiro petitioned the government for support and 100 soldiers were sent to put an end to the reign of the counsellor and the settlement of Canudos. Marching in the blazing heat of the flatlands where there was no shade exhausted the men quickly. They lost their way amongst the scrubland and spent too long reaching the semi-deserted town of Uaua, which was more like a camp than a proper village, with only a handful of depressingly badly constructed houses upon it. The soldiers settled down to spend the night here, planning to march on Canudos in the morning. But at dawn the next day the Canudos gunmen appeared on the horizon, followed by an enormous band of believers. A chaotic, violent battle began. The soldiers retreated, arriving back in Juazeiro defeated, exhausted and lame, with their uniforms in tatters. Telegrams were sent throughout the whole country that a backlands war was about to begin - the best in the country's military versus a ragged bunch of countryside Christians. I read up to the third attempt of the government to defeat Canudos. The losses were horrific. There seemed to be no sense or order to the onslaught. Soldiers continued to be sent up to the drought-ridden isolated place to crush the small town of believers. Canudos continued to fight and sometimes win against these young men who didn't really know why or what they were dying for, so far away from their mothers and their wives and their children. Refugees trickled out of Canudos and their state gave an indication

of just how bad things were under the siege there. One young boy, so thin he was hardly able to walk found an old wide-brimmed hat on the road and put it on and was wobbling and kind of dancing beneath it which made all the soldiers laugh. The child looked up and the laughing stopped. The little boy's mouth was a bullet wound which had ripped apart his jaw. I took my pen out of my bag and wrote on the side of margin WAR IS SO POINTLESS, before realising that I had written on Amaral's book which I should not have done. I felt a hand on my shoulder, like a policeman catching me out, but it was just Mercury, wanting to know where the hell I'd spent the night.

…….

Surely it was a paradoxical country whose own native sons invaded it, armed to the teeth, and gutted it with their Krupp canons. They committed these acts, knowing nothing at all about the land. They had never seen it before. They looked in amazement at the dry earth, its rugged, brutal contours and thorny vegetation. The alien land strewn with heaps of rock and crumbled hills torn by caverns and ravines, and all around were the parched, barren tablelands and rolling plains.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

Chapter 12

If Mercury was surprised to see me she didn't show it, slumped herself down in the seat beside me and twined her foot around mine. She said I looked shit, that she'd never seen a face as green as mine, took her camera out to click a few photos, laughed at my sad state captured on her little screen. I offered her half my croissant, but she turned her head in distaste. She couldn't eat, she wasn't feeling great herself. The night before had been incredible, she told me, far better than any party I had been at.

'Did you see Marcio this morning?' I asked.

'He didn't come home last night. We thought he was with you,' she said.

'Where is he? You think he's alright? It's not like him to stay out,' I said.

'It is like him. You don't know him,' she said.

'I do,' I said.

'You don't even know yourself,' she said.

'You're not perfect,' I said.

'I know who I am,' she said, 'I have the things I need to get by.'

'Will you see him today? Can you tell him to meet me at the biennial later? It starts at eight thirty.'

Mercury shrugged.

'I don't know,' she said.

'Will you tell him for me?' I said. ‘If you see him?'

'Where did you stay last night?' she asked.

'Just a hotel,' I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me like I wasn’t telling her the truth.

‘Stop looking at me like that,’ I said, ‘I need your help with something. I need you to talk to Amaral. I got him this opportunity. The biennial wants him to *pixo* tonight, at the opening. He needs to be at the pavilion at seven thirty. Can you get him there? He can expense a taxi,' I said.

Mercury laughed.

'He's in custody, at the Federal Police. He won't be let out till tomorrow morning.’

I put my head in my hands.

'Don't worry. He's used to it.'

'No, it's not that. I promised I'd get him there.'

'Why did you do that? You don't even know him.'

'I was high. It seemed like a great idea.'

'Just tell them he can't.'

'I tried that already.'

'You don't owe them anything.'

'Don't lecture me, please.'

'Just pay his bail,' said Mercury, 'if you're that desperate. I've got half an hour before my shift, I can give you a lift up there if you like.'

The Federal Police station was an ugly bizarrely shaped building completely covered in sweaty blue mirrors. A large queue of people snaked up the steps towards the entrance; Angolans, Haitians, Peruvians, Bolivians, Indians, Chinese, Korean, all waiting in the baking sun to apply for a Brazilian visa. Rice and bread and babies and rugs and wide hats and coloured shawls and dusty feet in sandals. These people looked tired but also used to it. I joined another, smaller queue, passing through a metal detector, for those applying for bail.

The building did not look much better inside, everything cast in an artificial blue light, including all the sleepy looking police in their black uniforms and their guns. I saw a skinny boy like Amaral in handcuffs go somewhere in a lift, two police either side holding tight to his tiny biceps. He looked bored. It was very stuffy. An old AC roared around but the effort it expanded to blow out a small breeze of lukewarm air seemed to heat the place up even further. Black flies hit themselves over and over again against the blue windows. My hangover returned and I was overcome with another wave of sickness. I must have looked pretty bad because the lady in front of me asked me if I would like some water. I took sips from her small bottle gratefully.

'Who are you here for?' she asked.

'A friend,' I said, 'and you?'

'My son. Train surfing last night. You know what happens if you hit an electric cable, surfing like he does?'

'No,'

'You die. You surely die.'

'Why does he do it?'

'He doesn't have anything else to do. He says it makes him feel alive.'

At the front desk a tall lady with short black hair asked me for my passport which took a long time to find at the bottom of my rucksack. Pulling myself up to the desk made my head swim.

‘I’m here for my friend. He’s been arrested for *pixo* but there’s been a mistake. He’s really a street artist. He’s showing at the biennial.’

‘Name?’

‘Amaral.’

‘Amaral what?’ she said.

‘I’m sorry. I don’t know,’ I said,

She looked at me like she couldn't believe me how stupid I was being but she went through her sheet anyway.

‘Amaral da Silva,’ she said, ‘here he is. Bail: 800 reals. Credit card or cash. No cheque.’

‘That’s so much money. I don’t think I have the credit for that. Why is it so much? He’s a street artist.’

‘Says here vandalism. *Pixo*,’ she said, ‘city’s coming down hard on it now. Investing in a beautiful city, they call it.’

She laughed, like the idea was ridiculous. My limbs were watery, I put my hands on the desk.

‘There’s been a mistake,’ I said, ‘he’s an artist, a street artist. He’s showing in the biennial.’

‘Are you OK?’ said the lady, 'you look ill.'

‘I’m pregnant,’ I lied. 'Amaral's the father. I need to let him know.'

Things changed after that. A chair was called for and I was surrounded by water and tissues and teaspoons of sugar. I felt quite guilty, but it had clearly been the right thing to say. I heard someone whisper that Amaral already had a girlfriend. Bail was waved away magically, and the lift opened to reveal Amaral standing between two guards, grinning. He looked like he’d had a far more restful night that I had myself.

'Wipe that smile off your face,' said the lady.

Amaral was hungry, bought a hotdog opposite the station, at a van in a carpark with

red plastic tables and chairs shaded by beer parasols. This place was the best thing about the station, he said, it was where the decent criminals, the ones with lawyers, got their lunch and their lawyers ate here too. It wasn't like any kind of hotdog I'd ever seen before, with mashed potatoes and chips as well as ketchup and mustard. He offered me a bite. It tasted so good that I got one too. When we were done, he screwed up the paper and we sat in the hot pink shade drinking warm coke.

'Mercury won't like what you said,' he told me.

'I just made it up,' I said.

'Yeah, but she gets jealous easily.'

'I've done you a favour.'

'I don't mind sitting out bail. I already got a new phone in there. An Iphone.'

'I don't mean getting you out. I've got you invited to *pixo* at the opening of the biennial today. You have to be there by seven thirty, at the pavilion.'

Amaral unscrewed his paper, screwed it up again, unscrewed it, screwed it, threw it in the bin.

'Are they gonna pay me?' he said.

'You can expense a taxi.'

'I'm not doing it.'

'Why not? That's crazy. I'd be so happy if I was you.'

'Everyone else in there is paid for their work. Why should I do my thing for free?'

'I'm sure something could be worked out.'

Amaral sucked his teeth and shook his head. No.

'Come on man, give me a break. I just got you out of jail,' I said.

'I don't mind going back in. Come on, you can hand me over yourself. I don't owe you anything.'

'Can you just help me out? I promised I'd sort this out for a friend.'

'You can't just promise me to someone.'

My head was pounding. It was just one of those bad days, I realised. I began to cry. Amaral didn't like that, told me to stop, but I couldn't. I told him about having our phones robbed and me saying Ursula was a ragpicker and Marcio leaving me at the party and not knowing how to get

home and ending up in a hotel and Francisco getting me a discount and how pissed off he was when I said I wouldn't be able to get Amaral to the opening. Amaral said it sounded exhausting, being me. I agreed. He said I did it to myself and I agreed with that too.

'I'm gonna change,' I said, 'Start yoga.'

'Why did you say that shit about Ursula being a ragpicker?' he asked me.

'I want him to love me more than her,' I said, putting my hands up. 'I want to be first.'

'You've got a mother too,' he said.

'It's not the same,' I said.

'You women are all crazy,' he said.

'Yeah,' I said.

'Alright. I'll do it,' he said, 'I'll go to the biennial and *pixo*. You can stop crying.'

I told him I owed him one and he said it didn't work like that. I remembered I had his copy of *Backlands* in my rucksack and although I didn't want to, I felt it was only right to tell him I'd taken it and hand it back. He laughed and told me he'd stolen it himself and I could keep it, it was the only book that taught him anything in school. What had it taught him I wanted to know? That the people in charge didn't see people like him as human.

'I'm not sure that's completely true,' I said.

'I think it is,' he said.

'Power corrupts. That's an old saying,' I said.

'It's more like the corrupt are in power,' said Amaral, 'and they're incompetent too. That's another thing you learn in that book. They're like big people, with big houses and big armies but in the end they're just as small as you or me. Small minds. No honour.'

I promised I'd try and finish the book so I could give it back to him at the biennial that evening. I gave him my pen to write his number down on a napkin and asked him to write down the landline for Ursula's apartment too. The pen bled badly on the napkin. He went to write on my hand but I pulled away just in time, told him it was a Posca and it was indelible. He found this really funny, thinking of me with his number on my hand forever, wondering if it would have smudged like a pirate's black spot or stayed true like the digits on the haunch of a cow.

'You'd have been mine forever then,' he said, ‘at least till I got a new number.'

……..

Happenings were first enacted in indeterminate, nontheatrical spaces - warehouses, deserted factories, old stores. Happenings mediated a careful stand-off between the avant-garde theater and collage. They conceived the spectator as a kind of collage in that he was spread out over the interior - his attention split by simultaneous events, his senses disorganised and redistributed by firmly transgressed logic. Not much was said at most Happenings, but, like the city that provided their themes, they literally crawled with words.

Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*

Some of the wounded soldiers walked haltingly, leaning on their rifles. Officers were carried in hammocks. Their hats were pulled over their eyes and they were unaware of their surroundings, stiff as corpses. Occasionally there were large dark stains in the caatinga, which were the remains of burned homes, their beams and ridgepoles exposed, weaving a skein of ruins over the desert wasteland as a stupid reminder of this backlands war. When they left Cansancao, the marshal and his escorts returned to the perils of the dusty trail. It twisted and turned, branching into many side trails. It was bordered by ruined hovels. Once in a while they would come upon another band of refugees.

From Contendas on, everywhere they went, they found graffiti scrawled on every available white wall of any house that was still standing. They were angry protests written with lumps of coals by every wounded man who had passed by there. They described their terrible experiences with complete candour through this anonymous medium. Here the army used its iron hand to write the story of this drama in enormous letters. It produced a graphic image of the momentous conflict - this was the real significance of the crude inscriptions, which so bluntly described their authors’ feelings…

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

Ibirapuera park was the biggest green space in São Paulo and I worried that I would not be able to find the pavilion, that the taxi I had taken would drop me off at a far-away entrance or I would simply lose my way. In the end it was far smaller than I had imagined and there was no way to miss the fact that the biennial was about to open. An enormous billboard stood at the main entrance stamped with the logos of all the companies that had invested in the event: Itaú bank, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Petrobras, Oi, Credit Suisse, Verde Asset Management, Domingos Sertão, Klabin, AES Electropaulo, Banco ABC Brasil, Ultra, Comgas. Then came the list of international art organisations involved: The Goethe Institute, The Danish Arts Foundation, The British Council, Institut Francais, Nordisk Culturefund, among many others. Finally came the organisations that had really bought this whole artfest together: The mayor's office, the Biennial team and the Brazilian culture ministry. The thing was so extremely well-funded, so extremely well-supported, so extremely well-organised that I found it hard to believe that just one little person who was in jail a few hours ago could have become so important to the director of the whole event, but apparently he was.

I'd spent the hours in between leaving the police station and arriving at the biennial on the bed in the hotel, moving between *Backlands* and the phone, calling and calling again Ursula's apartment, but with no answer. It was the last days of the siege of the town. The soldiers had become broken, ragged, ghosts. Their sense of the value of life had been battered out of them, camped among the stinging favela plant in the blasted heat. At least the townspeople had their faith to keep them going, the poor soldiers had nothing much at all. They had begun on their retreat to graffiti the abandoned houses found around the battlefield, horrific images spread all over the walls, inside and outside, in raw charcoal. I saw that Amaral himself had underlined these passages carefully. There was a terrible hopelessness to them that was beyond television violence. I found my chest was heavy with it all. I still had not been able to talk to Marcio. In the end I folded down my page and went back out onto Avenida Oscar Freire, to one of the designer stores, and bought a fancy blue dress with my credit card.

When I arrived at the biennial, I leant across to pay my taxi-driver and saw him look at my legs. I realised that my new dress was far too short and probably not that suitable for an art opening. It was sparkly, not my usual thing at all, not dissimilar to the petrol tank of Mercury's bike. I'd had to buy a handbag and shoes too because the dress didn't have pockets and even I could see my Converse didn't go. It had cost me a bomb but looking at myself in the mirror in the hotel I'd happily imagined Marcio's surprise, Francisco's pleasure. As I walked towards the small crowds waiting for the doors to open, I felt less comfortable, could see everyone else was wearing different shades of grey and black and white. No-one was wearing high heels like me. My heart sort of stopped and then beat really fast but there was nothing to do but carry on. Francisco emerged from the crowd, white shirt, cream trousers, waved me over, handed me a glass of straw coloured fizz. He told me I looked great and ran his hand down one side of body.

'You're tiny,' he said, 'aren't you?'

'Is Amaral here?' I said.

'Yeah. In the green room with Monica,' he said, taking me by the shoulder and moving me through the crowd. He saw a friend from school in the distance and pushed himself over to talk to him. I didn't manage to keep up, got stuck behind a couple in black whom I recognised from earlier today at Baudelaire's bakery. One of the biggest cities in the world and it was still a village, really. I had nothing to do but sip my champagne and eavesdrop on their conversation whilst trying not to appear a loner with no-one to talk to. They were discussing their fertility treatment and how they would fit in with their travel schedule. From what I could make out they were both lawyers working in international construction contracts, pipelines, highways, massive projects worth billions of dollars in countries across the world. They were in São Paulo to defend someone accused of using an illegal slum-razing technique called Hot Demolition that had destroyed a far-out neighbourhood of the periphery. As far as I could tell Hot Demolition consisted of setting a dog on fire and then sending it off into tightly packed favelas built mostly of scrap wood. The couple agreed that in the end most of the residents would be better off settled in newer purpose-built concrete blocks even if they didn't think so themselves. They went on to talk about their future projects mentioning Democratic Republic of the Congo, Belize, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Rwanda and China several times. They spoke of a tall

glass tower half built in the desert near Dhaka. The workers there had not been paid for three months and had set off to Spain in a small boat to make their fortunes. They were drowned on the way and their ghosts were now haunting the building. The owner wanted his lawyers to serve them an eviction order. The couple shook their heads and said it was a shame. I glanced across. The woman was probably just a few years older than I was, wearing a white silk shirt and jeans, her dark hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. A surge of some emotion that could have been jealously, or envy or just awe overtook me, for her style, for her consequential job, for her business class travel, for her husband who also appeared so cool and collected.

‘The Chinese bridge in Kinshasa, the locals say it is cursed,’ she said, ‘that a man with iron teeth is lurking under the girders. They won’t pay the tolls and the boss from Guanzhong is mad. I must go and see next week.’

‘You shouldn’t go to Kinshasa now, with the stress your body is under. It's such a nightmarish place,’ said the man.

‘I love that city,’ she said.

‘How? How can you?’ he said.

‘There are some lines in this book from there called *Mr Fix It* which I read it when I last visited. Wait, I have it here on my phone somewhere. Just wait. Ah, here, Got them. Ah, so good. Listen to this: ‘When a cool breeze is blowing, when the sky in darkening and the sun is setting near the Congo River. The birds all singing, the wind humming a song, and its Saturday and everyone is drinking beer, my dear, it is the most joyful place. You could live to one hundred years but if you have never seen Kinshasa you cannot say you have truly lived,’ she said.

I was so transfixed by the woman’s description of this foreign city that I stopped pretending not to listen. She noticed me staring at her and smiled nicely.

'You know it?'

'I know the feeling,' I said.

The woman took off her sunglasses to wipe her eyes, which were red and mottled and not at all happy.

Then doors to the exhibition opened. There was a small ironic round of applause before everyone began to stream inside. Francisco waved to me through the crowd impatiently, swam through the elbows and the shoulders and the flute glasses, grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the black gaping hole of the gallery.

'This is going to be good,' he said.

'What happened last night? Between us,' I said.

'We can talk about it later, back at the hotel,' he said, 'let's just enjoy the artworks now.'

The inside of the pavilion was made up of gently curving shapes in soft white that led the visitor slowly around its spaces. In the large middle atrium stood a spray can of black paint and an empty canvas. Some people stood around the canvas, thinking that this was a finished work, but most of the crowd slowly dispersed in amongst the forest of contemporary art. It was hard to concentrate, thinking about Marcio and last night and Amaral's stunt. In the end I drifted into the gallery bookshop which was open and selling biennial merchandise: mugs, t-shirts, tote bags and ball-point pens. I decided it would be nice to buy Amaral a book from the shop to say thank you for taking part in this farce just to save my face and also for giving me his copy of *Backlands.* It had been a great help to me over the last days, to be able to take up that book and be completely transported to another time and place. It was a terrible story. São Paulo was difficult, I had found, but I was at least grateful that I did not live in the backlands at that time, or even today. It was no wonder so many of those people turned up here in the city. I spotted a nice copy of the book I had originally been meaning to read here, *Inside The White Cube* in Portuguese translation. I flicked through it and was reminded once more of what a sensible book it was. There was a passage towards the end that I thought was perfect for Amaral. I took it to the counter along with a biro and after buying the book underlined the passage for him. The lady asked me if I would like it to be wrapped and I said that would be lovely but before she began Francisco was by my side.

'What are you doing in the bookshop?' he said pulling me away with the book in just a simple paper bag, 'don't be such a pleb.'

'Do you even know what that means?' I said to him, pissed off.

'Stupid, uncultured,' he said.

‘It’s fucking ridiculous to say that bookshops are for stupid people for a start and pleb comes from the word Plebeian.

‘So?’

‘Plebeians were working-class free Romans. Unless you think it’s stupid to have to work, or stupid to not be born into wealth and power, calling someone a pleb is kind of dumb.’

Francisco laughed and shook his head.

‘You’re funny,’

‘Maybe you do think it’s stupid to be born without cash,’ I said.

‘Of course not,’ he said, ‘come on, there’s a local artist I’ve been handling who’s doing a q and a by his work. I want to take some pictures.’

The artist was a small jumpy guy call Pablo Ortigo who was explaining to the small, solemn, nodding crowd inspiration for his concrete casts of toilets.

‘I am paying in some part, homage to the great Marcel Duchamp and his urinal, which changed, some say, the course of contemporary art as we know it.’

‘It did,’ said Francisco, nodding.

Pablo put his hand up.

‘I am also paying homage to the millions of toilets we have in São Paulo,’ he said, ‘they remove our piss and shit and blood and vomit and condoms and many other things, all around the city without anyone ever thanking or being grateful to the amazing sewerage network that allows us all to live so closely together in such a city as this. Everyone shits, you see, but we are allowed to forget this fact because of amazing toilets.’

I liked that. Toilets really were so useful. What would we do without them? We couldn’t live like we lived if we didn’t have them. It reminded me a bit of an exhibition I’d gone to, a retrospective of a New York artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who had been artist-in-residence of the New York Sanitation Department. She spent a year visiting each of the Sanitation department’s districts to shake the hand of every single one of the 8 and a half thousand workers. I had thought this was fantastic. I asked Pablo if he had heard of Ukeles. He thought I meant the small guitar. I showed him some pictures of her work on my phone. He appeared speechless that someone decades earlier could have

liked sanitation as much as he did. I explained to Pablo that she started this movement called maintenance art after she had had a baby and was unable to practise her avant-garde art in the way that she used to, what with changing nappies and breastfeeding and the general dirty work of being a mother.

‘Someone,’ I said, ‘has to pick up the garbage on Monday morning after the revolution has happened.’

Pablo twisted his mouth up into a smile, his forehead glistened in the heat of the spotlights.

‘The idea of giving birth terrifies me. It terrifies me. I don’t think I could watch a woman give birth, even if it was my child. I would have stay outside the room.’

I found this a weird thing to say which had almost nothing to do with our previous conversation but I kind of understood him. I was also terrified of childbirth when I thought about it, which wasn’t often. Francisco pulled me over to watch a film of a friend of his, a close-up of a woman’s lips which kept licking themselves and groaning sexually about the art market. He found this funny, folded his arms, smiling and shaking his head at the television. I felt something liquid in my underwear and told him I needed to go to the bathroom.

'Amaral's just about to come out? Can't you wait?' he said.

'I think I've started my period.'

'Too much information,' he said, screwing his face up and waving me off towards the back of the hall.

There was graffiti all over the back of the toilet door and I considered adding my own but decided against it. What was the point, really? I had nothing important to say. I really fancied writing on Pablo’s concrete toilets though, I thought, as I pulled down my underwear.

'Fuck,' I said.

It wasn't my period as I'd thought but a screwed-up condom.

'Shit,' I said, putting it in the bin and flushing the chain. I felt nasty inside, empty and dirty. I had not wanted to sleep with Francisco though he hadn’t forced me to. It was confusing and upsetting. I thought of Marcio and how much we liked to be together. He would kill me, he would absolutely kill me, I thought.

‘Fuck you,’ I said to the space in front of me, ‘you can’t blame me when you left me alone like that.’

When I went back out into the hall there were already whispers of a surprise event and people had started circling the blank canvas, wanting to snag the best view. I had lost interest and hid myself in a small room with an audio installation, a chair in the middle of six speakers which were apparently playing Thomas Tallis in choral harmony. I closed my eyes and felt myself levitate, carried away to another time and place. A soft green hill in England, a blue sky with fast moving clouds, an old beech tree with copper leaves and rippled bark. I looked down and saw that I was not a human but a green sparkling serpent. I suddenly felt very itchy and began to scratch at my skin which came off in great strips. It hurt but underneath was a fantastic gold colour. I felt a hand on my shoulder, pulling me back.

'I've been looking for you,' said Francisco, 'come on, it's about to start.'

The gallery was almost completely empty as we clopped towards the atrium, everyone magically drawing towards a circle around the canvas which was no longer visible in the crowd. We met Amaral and Monica in the Green Room. Francisco and Monica began to murmur together about dinner logistics. I sat down on the white leather sofa upon which Amaral was slumped, gave him the book.

‘A present, a thank you,’ I said.

He looked at it and laughed.

‘I don’t need this shit.’

‘Don’t be hateful. Don’t be a hypocrite.’

‘I won’t find anything in there that speaks to me.’

‘Yeah, you will,’ I said, ‘I already underlined a whole paragraph I know you’re going to love.’

I took it back off him to find the page, flicked through to show him:

‘Before large moral and cultural issues, the individual is helpless but not mute. His weapons are irony, rage, wit, paradox, satire, detachment, skepticism. A familiar kind of mind comes into focus here - restless, self-doubting, inventive about diminishing options, conscious of void, and close to

silence. It is a mind with no fixed abode, empirical, always testing experience, conscious of itself, and thus history - and ambiguous about both.'

'That's you,' I said.

'I'd like it to be,' he said, 'I don't know if it is.'

'I think it's you.'

'Thank you,' he said, handing it back to me, 'can you keep it for me? Till this show is over?'

'Course I can,' I said, 'thank you. And sorry. It is a fucking show, isn't it?'

Monica clapped her hands together. It was time. We proceeded from the green room together, falling into a two-person, two-line formation, Monica and Francisco together ahead of Amaral and myself, slopping behind them like sulky children, a weird kind of blended family on a cultural day out. We reached the edge of the crowd, faces turned expectantly towards us. Monica raised her hand a little as if she was casting a spell and the enchanted faces simply parted for her, just as they had done in the party the night before. Our little group made its way to the front where several brand-new cans of black spray paint stood by a large blank canvas. There was an intense air of expectation around the brightly lit white space. Monica stood by the canvas and a spotlight suddenly lit her up in a warm yellow light. Francisco stood next to her with his arms folded, his eyes to the floor like he was incredibly shy which I knew wasn't the case. I suddenly really fucking hated them both. Monica beckoned Amaral forward, I grabbed his wrist.

'You don't have to do this,' I whispered.

'It's a bit fucking late now,' he said.

Monica clapped her hands together, which was unnecessary because everyone was silently watching her anyway, welcomed us all to the 32nd São Paulo biennial.

'I am more the excited to bring you all this biennial's first intervention,' she said, It's the work of a local artist, activist and *pixadore,* Amaral da Silva. *Pixadores* are street graffiti artists, predominantly from marginalised and brutalised sections of society, who climb difficult and dangerous places to spray their black runic tags called *Pixaçao.* There are many in the city that deride this graffiti as vandalism but a city in which *pixaçao* is so omnipresent must face up to its grave

inequalities. The desire to be seen, to be able to move around and to use the city as others do, push young men like Amaral to so aggressively take over the city in this way. Here, Amaral will create a new work of art for us, in live time, entitled ‘The Mute Scream of the Invisible People.’

A lady with grey hair nearby, dressed in black except her blood red glasses, looked confused, began whispering intently with the younger man she was standing next to. Amaral faced the canvas, shook his can. He sprayed a line up and down the canvas and then stepped back to look at it. Someone beside me nodded. He sprayed another line, this time horizontally, about two thirds of the way up the canvas. It looked pretty good like that, I thought he should probably just leave it, maybe spray his name as small as he could in the corner, which would make it worth something. He lifted his arm again but put it down again. Looked around the room, at all the faces, at me. I winked at him and stuck my tongue out, the most inappropriate and off-putting thing I could think to do.

'You all think you own me,' he said.

Monica started a little, so did Francisco.

'You don't,' said Amaral, moving away from the canvas, pushing his way back through the crowd.

Monica raised an eyebrow, smiled, nodded like she understood, pointed for the crowd to follow him. He strolled through the empty gallery, examining different pieces. He came to Pablo's toilets and smiled. This is what he was looking for. He took his can, shook it up and started to graffiti the concrete casts. I heard Pablo let out a curdled cry from somewhere in the crowd. Other people joined in. Monica shouted for security. The men in black were slow to get through all the people, didn't quite understand if the show was still going on and they were being used to add spice, or if they really were supposed to apprehend Amaral. Francisco shouted at them to do their job. Two of them went forward with their hands out but Amaral whipped out of the way, somehow managed to find a foothold in the white wall, began to swing himself upwards out of reach. It was almost impossible to tell what he was hanging onto, the only thing I could think was that there were hidden white hooks built in to help secure artworks from another exhibition. He began to spray the walls, thick unintelligible runes.

'This is too much. It’s Niemeyer,' said the lady next to me.

'Call the police,' cried Monica, 'Francisco. Call the police.'

I watched the chaos happily, serene and invisible. No-one at all was watching me, all eyes were on Amaral. I took up one of the cans of black spray paint and faced the blank canvas myself, wondering what to write. Not my name, certainly not my name, but still, it had to be something short. There would not be much time. In the end I ripped out the page I had underlined from Amaral's new book and stuck that with my spit onto the canvas too. I knew he wouldn't mind, and I could always give him that page back from my own copy. Then I ripped out a page from *Backlands* and stuck that on the canvas. After this I did write my name, in the bottom righthand corner with my squat little Posca. I wrote the name Amaral too, right beside my own.

……..

'We must insist on the truth: the war of Canudos was a regression in our history. What we had before us was the unsolicited armed insurgence of an old dead society, brought back to life by a madman. We did not recognise this society; it was impossible for us to have known it. After living for four hundred years on a vast stretch of seaboard where we enjoyed the benefits of a civilised life, we were suddenly given the unexpected inheritance of a republic. Swept up in the current of modern ideas, we left behind a third of our people, in the heart of our country, who lived in a centuries-old state of darkness.'

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

'At its most serious, the artist/audience relation can be seen as the testing of the social order by radical propositions and as the successful absorption of these propositions by the support system - galleries, museums, collectors, even magazines and house critics - evolved to barter success for ideological anesthesia. The main medium of this absorption is style, a stabilising social construct if

ever there was one. Style in art, whatever its miraculous, self-defining nature, is the equivalent of etiquette in society. It is a consistent grace that establishes a sense of place and is thus essential to the social order. Those who find advanced art without contemporary relevance ignore that it has been a relentless and subtle critic of the social order, always testing, failing through the rituals of success, succeeding through the rituals of failure.'

Inside the White Cube, Brian O'Doherty

……..

Chapter 13

There were plenty of cream-coloured taxis circling the roads round the park, many of their red lights turned on, life-saving jewels in the dusk. It was very easy to catch one, I simply raised my hand just a little and straight away a cab swooped by my side. The hard part was knowing where to go. The red numbers on the dashboard flicked up as the driver circled Ibirapuera while I tried to work out my destination.

'Do you know Tremembé?' I asked him as we passed flashing police lights.

The man laughed.

'I'm not going all the way up there on a Saturday night. It'll take me hours and hours.'

'Hotel Fasano then, I guess,' I said.

'Easier,' he said, checking me out in his mirror, unable to work out what kind of woman had business in the furthest point of the North Zone as well as one of the most expensive hotels in the city. I took this as a small win.

My room had been cleaned and tidied, all trace of the night before removed, my rucksack hung on a luggage rack, my clothes that I'd left in a hurry all over the bed neatly folded upon a dressing table. The care made my things look sad and lonely, but I was delighted to see that the

cleaner had somehow removed my name from the mirror. I wrote a note on the hotel paper pad to say thank you. I told them I was sorry, that things the night before had been all over the place and I hadn't been myself, but I was better now. I said that they must be very good at their job to have removed those letters and that they should be proud. I hoped they had a good day. I signed it June Pacheco and propped it by the sink. I continued to write on the pad but this time just for myself. I described what I could remember of the night before. Francisco in the taxi and then in the hotel, the drink in the bar and afterwards in the room. Details emerged in my mind as I put it all down in words. Hands and faces, arms and legs, blurry, fuzzy talk, pulling, pushing. Tears. When I read it back I felt better but decided the whole thing could do with a re-draft. I screwed up the first version, threw it in the bin and started again. I folded this second version up neatly in four, put it in the front pocket of my rucksack together with my pen and for the first time in quite some time I felt like I had something in me. I took out the greasy napkin with my two telephone numbers on it, went to call Ursula but was suddenly overcome by such tiredness that even tracking down Marcio felt like too much work. He had a terrible temper. He would find me when he was ready. I read *Backlands* up until almost the final battle. The army had been fighting the town for nearly a year, had fired thousands of rounds of bullets, bombed them with cannons, tried to starve them out and burn them out. The town was in ruins, churches in rubble, the saints and the altars and the images all burnt and broken. Still, under the bright blue sky the town resisted. The government had become obsessed with crushing them and a decision was made to dynamite the whole settlement, with all the old people, all the women and the all the children still sheltering there. An image of a mother trying to protect her baby from this horror made me cry. Then I lay down and slept until the very early morning, waking with just the faintest grey around the electric curtains.

I picked up the hotel phone thinking I would call the apartment but decided that 5.45 was probably too early even for Ursula. The only two other numbers I had were for Amaral and Francisco. I imagined Amaral was in prison or sleeping or both. I didn’t feel like talking to Francisco and I imagined he didn’t feel like talking to me. I opened the drawer by the side of the bed looking for some more paper to write on as I had used up the whole of the hotel pad. There was just a bible. I picked it up just to stop the waves of judgement it seemed emit whilst sitting in the drawer, began to flick

through. My grandfather's favourite passage was from Matthew, the sermon on the mount, when Jesus says to turn the other cheek. He somehow extrapolated this to mean that bad shit was going to happen to all of us all the time and the best thing to do was take it on the chin. His teaching was similar to Jesus's in that it used parts of the face as a life metaphor, but it was not really quite the same thing as turning the other cheek. Nevertheless, he would tell my mother constantly to turn the other cheek and just take it on the chin. She absolutely hated this and would hiss at him to stop preaching at her. I got up, brushed my teeth and washed my face, stared at myself in the mirror and told myself it was a new day, before going out to find a pharmacy that sold the morning-after pill.

Oscar Freire was misty white and shuttered, just a few stray doves and whale videos playing in the window of a 24-hour laser clinic. The pavements were empty except for me and a lonely boy in leggings mincing past with a rabbit on a glittery lead. I found the local pharmacy, but it was closed and wouldn't open till 8.30 so I wandered on, picking my way past a mess of roundabouts to come to a wide riverlike avenue of cars. On one side of the road stood a cemetery named Consolation. Old marble angels peered out over the barbed wire at a large hospital opposite, wondering maybe who was next. Flower stalls were just opening at the cemetery entrance, hawkers already set-up, selling sugared coffee, slabs of yellow corncake. I decided that I was heading in the wrong direction, turned around and didn't stop walking until I came to a square set around a pretty yellow church outlined by a new pink sun, palms picked black against the sky.

'Hotel California,' I said to myself, taking this as a bad sign. I knew I was superstitious, but I couldn't help myself.

There was a pharmacy on the square and it would open at 6.45 am which was only a fifteen-minute wait. An urge to pray came over me and I headed for the open door of the church. A blue and white plaque in the entrance detailed the building's history. The church was dedicated to Our Lady Rosario, a saint traditionally associated with the local slave population, which had not been allowed to worship in the churches of the Portuguese or the mixed-race citizens. In the left alcove was an astonishing statue of a Black Madonna holding her son upright at her side, not dressed in pale blue and cream but gold and red. A turban was wrapped around her stone forehead in just the same style

that Ursula used herself. I hesitated, suddenly ashamed and uncomfortable. A lady in white passed by me, stopped and pulled a packet of pastel sugared almonds from her bag, put them in my hand.

'Go in,' she said, 'she's heard it all before.'

I said thank you but still didn't move from the entrance. The light of the pharmacy flickered on outside and in the end, I just bowed my head and headed back out towards the winking green cross. It was cool inside and smelt of wood polish. Various types of pills were set out like a sweet shop display in large jars. In London Marcio always had a washbag full of Brazilian pills with him. Ursula, I had seen, had even more; red pills, yellow pills, great white sharks of pills, little blue dots. A doctor here was expensive, even with insurance, but the pills were cheap. Marcio said that the pharmacists in São Paulo were so good they could cure almost anything but a broken leg. A thin lady with wispy purple hair was ordering several different kinds of tablets which were given to her in a small brown paper bag, like lemon sherbets. The pharmacist was a woman, I guessed about ten years older than me. She appeared busy, dedicated, professional, talking animatedly with the lady about dizziness, her sleep problems, her general loneliness. She first recommended the lady try some holistic solutions, going out for a walk, eating a steak, making up with her estranged son, but the woman shook her head impatiently, said she just wanted the pills. In the end the pharmacist obliged. Amongst her rainbow dosage were several strips striped with red and yellow which I recognised as Marcio's favourite remedy, Atrovera, made from deadly nightshade and said to help with stomachache and nerves. I took a ticket and browsed the shelves whilst I waited my turn, examined the different kinds of soap, thought about buying a toothbrush, paracetamol too. The red ticketer flashed to 2, my number, the second customer of the day. I cleared my throat and tried to look the pharmacist in the eye, told myself inside I had nothing to be ashamed of. My voice still came out squeaky.

'I'd like the morning after pill please,' I said.

The pharmacist stared back at me. She had perfect oval eyes and a small red mouth.

'OK,' she said, 'I need to ask you some questions.'

I closed my eyes and nodded. I could feel the lady with the purple hair behind me lingering and listening, finally finding some fun in life. I didn't particularly resent her. I knew it could be me one day.

'Are you taking any form of oral contraceptive?' asked the pharmacist.

'No,' I said.

'How long since you last had sex?'

'Ah, I dunno. 24 hours, I guess. I'm just being careful.'

She nodded. Her face was an impassible mask. She would not give a thing away.

'Is there any chance you could be pregnant already?'

'Ah, no, I don't think so. I mean, no. Probably not.'

She raised a carefully plucked eyebrow at me. She was a perfect pharmacist.

'When was your last period?'

'To be honest, you know, I can't remember. I've been moving around.'

'In the last week?'

'No.'

'The last month?'

'To be honest with you, no, not in the last month.'

'Have you been having regular sex in this time?'

I shook my head, told her I didn't want to answer any more questions. I was nearly thirty. I knew how things worked and I just wanted the morning-after pill. She handed me a pregnancy test and told me to come back later.

Back at the hotel I bypassed the beautiful breakfast, went back up to the room and lay on the bed for some time, listening to the absolute quiet of the impeccable AC. The pigeon came back to stare at me.

‘Haven’t you left yet?’ I asked it, finally sitting up and taking the brown paper bag from my rucksack. I sat on the marble toilet, ripped open the packet, read the instructions briefly, the first of which was that you should wait until first thing in the morning to do the test.

‘Fuck that,’ I said, placing the white stick beneath me and holding my breath.

I flushed the chain, put the test below the softly lit mirror, read the next instruction. There were two panels. The first was a control to ensure the test was working. The second was where the shit could really hit the fan. One vertical pink line was negative, two lines was positive. The pamphlet

advised waiting five minutes for the result but there was really no need. I watched as within seconds the liquid seeped across the control, onto the first pink line and then, without a doubt, over a bright thick second line. I took the test up in my hands, stared at it, put it down again. Sat on the toilet. Got back up again. Stared at the test again. Two lines still. I threw the stick in the bin and went back to lie on the bed. Everything seemed creamy and dreamy and unreal. I decided to get another test.

As I was passing through the lobby the receptionist called me over with impeccable courtesy, asked me if I would be checking out this morning. I understood that this was not really a question and told him that that was exactly what I had been planning. He handed me a sealed envelope with my bill. I told him I would settle later but right now I had to go to the pharmacy. He smiled nicely and told me the hotel had most of the things I could need - paracetamol, ibuprofen, plasters. Tampons too, he managed to include without a blush.

‘Do you have pregnancy tests?’ I said.

‘I’m afraid I don’t think we keep a supply of those, ma’am,’ he replied, looking me straight in the eye without a pause. The things these people must see, I realised. The things they must hear.

I slunk back to the local pharmacy done up with vintage mirrored cabinets holding the latest French skincare technology, slunk out a few moments later with yet another brown paper bag. Up once more in the jasmine elevator to sit on the same marble toilet to see the same two pink lines. I sat back on the bed. The refined silence made the noise in my head so much louder. Not again, I said to myself, not again, not again. It doesn’t take much these days, to not get pregnant. The urge to have a baby though, it was that that was getting more and more difficult to control. I took out my napkin and called up the apartment. Ursula answered straight away. I asked to speak to Marcio, told her it was important. She told me he still hadn't come home.

'Where is he? Aren't you worried?' I said to her.

'No,' she said.

'Is he really not there?' I asked, 'I just can't believe he hasn't come home yet. I really need to talk to him.'

My voice cracked as I spoke. I hadn't meant it to, but it did. Ursula didn't say anything for a few moments. I could hear her breath down the phone, the silent moving of her lips.

'June, this is what Marcio does. He disappears. When things don't go well for him, if he's feeling anxious. Has he not done this to you before?'

I replied straightaway - No, Never - but as I spoke, I realised there had been times when his phone had been off, when he wasn't in Tesco either. I figured he had just run out of batteries on his day off. It was the kind of thing that I would do myself. We had been together for such a short time at that point, I hadn't yet felt I had any right to question his whereabouts. Anyway, I understood - everyone needs their alone time.

"I didn't know him that well,' I said, 'before we came here.'

Ursula grunted.

'You're too impulsive. But he must have been happy in London. In São Paulo he goes off like this.'

'Why?'

'Because that's what his father did.'

'Why?'

'That's what João had seen around him. People disappearing, moved on, run away, escaped, vanished. Into the backlands, into the margins. Cheap bodies.'

'Marcio's not his dad.'

'Marcio has it in him too. That bang of blood in the brain. One day he could just leave and not come back. Forget you completely, start a new life.'

'That's not what I want to hear.'

'Better to hear it now, before it's too late.'

'It's already too late.'

Another moment, silently moving lips.

'You should call your mother.'

'No. She's not interested in me. She doesn't like me.'

'Don't be stupid. She's your mother.'

'You don't know her.'

'You don't understand what it's like. On your own with a child.'

'It can't be that difficult, can it? Everyone does it. Everyone has a mother, literally everyone.'

Ursula laughed like I had no idea what I was talking about.

'Look, Marcio has a friend from school,' she said, 'a Japanese boy, Wagner, he DJs at a nightclub, Love Story. It's for people who work in the night, opens at five and goes on till midday. Marcio sometimes goes there. Wagner plays him songs that he likes to hear. I would go there if I was looking for him.'

'Thank you, Ursula,' I said, 'thank you.'

I slunk out of the lobby before the receptionist could ask me about the bill, caught a taxi. The driver laughed when I said I wanted to go to Love Story, but he knew exactly where to go. The club was right in front of the Copan building. Had Marcio been in there all along? He couldn't have stayed for two whole nights. Perhaps he had been there and left already. The squat fronted building was strewn with eighties-style hearts and lettering, proudly announcing it was the home of all homes, the last club to open in the night and the last one to close in the day. Standing outside the door I heard the opening bars of *Alucincão* by Belchior and my heart gave a jump because it meant that Marcio really must be in there. No-one else in the world but Marcio liked this singer anymore, his seventies jeans, his thick moustache, his strumming guitars, his soaring synths, his over-emotional style. The other Brazilians in Marcio's London house all listened to funk or MPB. They loved to take the piss out of Belchior but Marcio didn't care what they thought. He insisted on playing him loud every morning, bringing his tinny speaker out with our coffee into the sunshine of the quay, putting my hand in his and bringing it to his heart, wailing to me at the top of his voice. He was terribly out of tune, seemed to have absolutely no bone of musicality in his body. Still, his dedication to the lyrics was always touching, singing that his addiction was just everyday living, that his dream was to experience real things, just like a black man or a poor man or a student or a woman alone. He would close his eyes in the crisp white English morning and sing about the blue jeans and the motorcycles of his hometown, the normal grey people, girls in the night, a gun, smells of dogs, the homeless with their newspapers in the park, all the loneliness of that enormous city, the violence of the night, the constant movement of traffic. At the time I'd screwed up my face, wondered what a sheep was doing in the middle of a song about São Paulo. Hearing these words now, only months later, filled up my chest. They didn't

seem cheesy to me anymore. I'd go inside and find Marcio and I'd hold his hand in my hand, bring it to my heart and serenade him myself with the lyrics I hadn't meant to learn by heart but had because he'd sung them to me so many times. The thought of the two of us on a London quay in the sunshine made me feel that the white stick with the two pink lines hiding in my bag wasn't such a fuck-up after all. I paid my entrance fee to a blond girl who looked so much like the missing wife in *Paris, Texas* and wondered if a baby could even be something nice.

I found Marcio under a mirror-ball on a half-empty dancefloor with another girl, swaying sloppily, singing the same lyrics to her he had always sung to me. I watched them for a while. The girl was younger than me and far smaller. She had an amazing figure. I would never have been able to wear hot pants like hers. I thought about getting a whisky but knew I couldn't really stomach one. I thought about a cigarette but that would make me vomit. I thought about just walking out and going to the airport and getting a ticket home and not ever talking to him again. Then I did what I had just promised the lovely cleaner I wouldn't do anymore but was the only thing that almost always fixed me. I took my pen out of my rucksack, unclicked it and walked onto the dancefloor as the final over-the-top chords of the song were coming to an end. They didn't see me until I was right there, lunging forward between them. The girl screamed out as I struggled with Marcio. He was quick, like he'd been expecting this and had planned for it, took my wrist in his hand and held it away from his body, using almost all his force to stop me writing at least a J on his forehead. The girl yelled at me that she was calling the police and began to hit my arms. Marcio told her to stop it. We both ended up crying. Everyone in the club was watching and really enjoying themselves. There was some destructive part of me that was enjoying it too, until the moment when Marcio had to choose who he was going to leave with, and a shadow of indecision passed over his face. I closed my eyes, unable to watch such a fucking car crash. I don't know what he did to make it clear that he was with me, but I heard the girl cry out that he'd tricked her.

'I thought you were a good guy,' she said.

'I know,' I said to her, 'I know. He's a fucking shit.'

Once we were back on the street, we wandered around a bit not knowing what to do with ourselves, ended up in an old *boteco* on a shabby side lane, Gal Costa on the radio singing about her

vagabond heart. Workers in their jeans and boots sat on the mirrored bar beneath bunches of bananas, eating *pão da chapa,* drinking shots of cachaca to start the day. Marcio ordered two for us.

'Not for me,' I said.

Marcio cancelled both shots, got us bread fried on the grill and glasses of sweet, stewed coffee instead. We sat on the back wall, next to a couple who looked like they weren't having a much better time than we were.

'I'll never be faithful. I'm all bad,' said the guy.

The girl sniffed, sucked on her avocado milkshake, hunched, devastated shoulders. What did she see in him, I wondered, furtively watching them in the mirrored bar. He was short with long lank black hair, a thick gold chain I was sure was fake and a t-shirt which said, in English, *Calm Down and Carry On.* This seemed appropriate, at least for me.

'Where've you been?' I said, 'with that girl?'

'Where've you been?' he said. 'I looked for you in the party, but you'd gone and so had that guy.'

'We just went up to the club above. I was looking for you. I was looking for you everywhere.'

'Where did you go? You weren't at home. I called and my ma said you hadn't been home in two days.'

'Just a hotel. Where were you? I called too and I saw Mercury at her bakery. Neither of them had seen you.'

'I went to a motel.'

'A motel? Here? In the city? I don't believe you.'

'It's not like the American ones. They're different in São Paulo.'

'You went there with that girl?'

'No, no. I just met her this morning. I slept in the motel because it was cheap. You pay by the hour. I didn't need long.'

'What are we gonna do? This thing is falling apart,' I said.

'It was just a couple of days out,' he said. 'Let's forget about it. Go home.'

Marcio put his hand over mine, rubbed my hair. I ducked away.

'I want to know. Did you have sex with her?'

'No.'

'Why did you just disappear on me?'

Marcio frowned blackly.

'You're so ungrateful. Stop questioning me.'

'I want to know where you've been. Why you vanished. It's not right.'

'You're not my mother. You don't get to tell me off.'

I sat back in my chair. Took a bite out of my bread. It was sticky and dry in my mouth. Marcio stared at me.

'Fine,' I said, 'We'll stop talking about it. You've won. But the thing is, what isn't fair, is that you always acted like you were always going to have my back, like you were always going to watch out for me and make sure nothing bad happened to me, but you haven't done that. You're just like the rest of them.'

'I'm not,' he said.

'You are. Worse. You're worse because you don't know it. You were mad to just go off like that. You wouldn't let me out the house for a week and then you leave me in the middle of the city on my own.'

He didn't like that, the idea that he had been less of a gentleman. He scowled and looked away.

'I'm not asking you what you did. I can imagine it though. I can just imagine. You've got no self-control,' he said.

'I was mostly looking for you. When I found you, you were with another girl.'

Let's just go home,' he said, 'I'm tired. I still need to find the deeds for the apartment. The weekend's over, everyone's back to work this morning. I'm not asking you what you've been up to, where you've been, so let's forget about it.'

I pressed my finger into the space in between my forehead, shrugged my agreement. He'd really left me no other option and of course, I had my own secrets now. I didn't feel guilty - if he'd taken more care then none of these bad things would have happened to me. I watched him go to pay

our bill, sloping over the bar with the last of the day's labourers. The bang of blood in the brain. We had watched that film with batshit crazy Manuel and poor old Rosa just because Marcio thought the guy was like his dad. But I could see now that Marcio also looked like him, the same slanted cheekbones, the same heavy bend in the shoulders, the same way of moving his eyes this way and that. I asked the girl waiting on the tables where the bathroom was. She handed me a key attached to a short white plank and sent me round the back of the bar, past a vat of beans already stewing for lunch, giving off thick nauseating garlic smoke. I unlocked the battered door. The stink of days, weeks, months of stale urine smacked me in the face.

'Urgh,' I cried out, but carried on.

There was almost no graffiti in this toilet which wasn't surprising, given the smell. Just one simple heart carved into the door, broken crudely in two with jagged edges. I took out my pen and wrote my name in neat letters beneath it. I stood back to examine the picture. This seemed a good one to stop on.

'That's it, June,' I said to myself, 'no-more of this now. Really, this is the last one.'

I bent down to take the white stick out my bag, gagging as I did so. There was no proper bin, just a sawn-off plastic oil bottle. I didn't want to throw the test in there. I knew I was being stupid, but I felt sorry for the thing sat in that grease, everyone watching it and judging it, laughing at whichever stupid girl had just got herself into trouble. There was a small window by the ceiling of the cubicle. I climbed up onto the toilet and peered out to see a tight alley filled with all kinds of food smells from the smoke blowing out of the line of bars and *botecos* that backed it. A family of cats were curled up together inside a cart filled with cardboard which I now recognised as a ragpicker cart. I looked for the owner but couldn't see one. I slid my hand out of the tight little space and flung the test in there with the paper and the cats.

Marcio was hanging by the bathroom door when I opened it, told me we had to rush if we were going to catch a bus before the roads got gridlocked and hot. I told him I still had to pay the bill at the hotel but if it was going to make our journey back hard then I didn't mind skipping out on it. I didn't feel like going back there. I'd left a few nice things in the room, the dress, the new bag. I'd got the room on a discount anyway so it wouldn't be much, just a drop in the ocean of the money that the

hotel was clearly swimming in. Marcio said that wasn't the point, the price didn't matter, it wasn't right to just not pay. He told me I should settle up properly, especially if someone had helped me out by giving me a cheap room price. Then he thought for a moment and wanted to know how I'd got the discount in the first place.

'Just, you know, Francisco. He didn't want to give me a lift back to Tremembé, said he could get me a mate's rate at a hotel in town.'

'Which hotel was it?'

'Fasano.'

'Are you kidding? Fasano. That's the most expensive hotel in the city.'

'Is it?'

'Did you sleep with him? Is that why he sorted your room out?'

'Who do you think I am? I helped him out with the biennial. I organised for Amaral to *pixo* at the opening yesterday. It was an absolute fucking disaster though.'

Marcio laughed.

'I could have told you it would be. Give me the bill. We'll go there now and I'll pay it. You can get your dress and your shoes from the room and then I don't want you to see that guy anymore after that. OK?'

I opened my mouth to tell him that he couldn't tell me what to do like that, even if he did pay the bill, but arguing with Marcio was becoming more trouble than it was worth. I just shrugged and said OK. Marcio took the envelope from me and opened it up. His eyebrows shot up to almost his hairline.

'*Caralho* June. This is insane.'

'What?'

'1500 US dollars. They don't even put it in *reals.'*

'What about the discount? They said there would be a discount.'

'No discount I can see.'

'There's a mistake.'

'Call him.'

‘I don’t want to.’

‘You have to call him and sort this out.’

‘Thing is I don’t think he’ll want to talk to me. Last night was bad. Amaral didn’t do what they wanted him to. He destroyed the opening. And then I wrote on something too.’

‘June.’

‘I know, I know. I’m not doing anymore. I’m finished with it.’

Marcio looked at the bill again, shook his head.

‘You’ve fucked up. Still, it’s just outrageous. Who can afford that kind of money?’

‘Francisco, probably.’

‘This is robbery. It’s not right. Come on, fuck it. Blechior never paid his hotel bills. Let’s jump it and get the bus home.’

‘Won’t the police come after us?’

‘Nah. They’ve got better things to do. So have the hotel. This is so much to us but it’s nothing to them. I know how these things work. They’ll never find us in Tremembé. There’s a guy from Haiti who sells dresses at Tiete station. I’ll buy you one of those.’

……

Dynamite was the only suitable weapon. It was a tribute. The firing stopped now and an intense silence fell over the expectant troops. Then a violent tremor shook the circumference of the settlement, running along the camp and spreading to the artillery on the hillsides, covering entire sectors with a shaking grid of seismic curves, intersecting over the ground. The pointed ruins of the churches came crashing down, walls swayed and fell, and rooftop after rooftop jettisoned into the air, forming a plume of dust to add to the smoke, Shrieks of terror came from hundreds of victims as mighty explosions shook the earth. What was left of Canudos was being torn apart.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

Chapter 14

The bus ride to the North Zone became greyer, shabbier, the further away from the centre we travelled. Marcio and I held hands looking out the window, but we didn't talk and we didn't look at each other. He sniffed my neck as we came into Tiete station and accused me of sleeping with Francisco. I denied it. Marcio wasn't the kind of guy that would ever forgive that kind of thing even though I knew I hadn't wanted to.

'You did. I know you did,' he said.

'It's just not true. How can you say that?'

'It's your smell. You smell different. It's overwhelming. Like mud,' he said.

'You're going fucking crazy,' I said.

We got off the bus and Marcio had a change of heart; told me he was sorry for being so suspicious. He hadn't slept enough; his head was all over the place. Maybe he was the one who was smelling strange. He tried to buy me a cheap cotton dress from the Haitian guy like he'd promised to do but I didn't want one. The patterns were cool, African swirls in Day-Glo but they were cut like tents.

'Maternity wear,' I sniffed, turning myself away.

We took the blue 17-L back to Tremembé and Marcio gave me a good tip if I was ever stuck travelling alone, which I took as an apology for having left me for two days without a way to get back home. Public transport was colour-coded: blue for North Zone, Orange for centre, Yellow for South Zone, Green for East Zone and Red for West. Even if you didn't know the specific number of your bus you could always just get on any one with the right colour and you would know you'd be going in roughly the right direction.

Four women were sat at the front of the 17-L. They looked impossibly old, thin wispy hair and cardigans despite the heat. One couple stared out the window, clutching fake leather handbags in grim shades of beige. The other pair leant into one another, talking and touching their pale bony hands together. I recognised them all instantly, the same pensioners who were always on the bus I caught home from school in the sixth form. When I was younger they appeared to be a completely different

species to me, I never even thought to imagine myself as they were. The middle of the bus was taken up by three men wearing paint splattered trousers and dust-covered boots. They leaned heavily back in their seats, legs splayed out in front of them. One of them smiled at me and I smiled back. Marcio didn't like that, put his fingers round my neck and pushed me on towards the back seats where one girl, pale and pretty, was sitting holding a blanket weaved out of flamingo pink feathers and whispering to the little packet. Marcio murmured that he had gone to school with her as we sat down in the seats in front. After some time listening to her coo and sing I lent round.

'Can I see the baby?' I asked, smiling.

The girl opened up a little crest of the rug like it was a priceless, delicate present, peered in happily herself. I craned my neck over to see and then pulled back, horrified. I kept a smile on my face but the baby was not right. Its head was tiny and mishappen, like it had been put in the oven and shriveled up to an impossibly small size. It took me only a few seconds to realise what had happened to the poor thing. It was one of the babies that had been in the news. The drains in the northern margins of the city had flooded last summer and the stagnant ponds had attracted a swarm of mosquitos from the North bringing with them a sickness called Zika. The pregnant mothers which they had bitten had given birth to children with shrunken skulls.

'I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.'

'It's OK. She's OK,' the girl said, 'I love her. I was happy she was born alive. The doctors told me a lot of them are born dead. They told me this would be the best thing. But all I wanted was for her to be alive, for her to live. When she was born, I was full of joy. The only bad feeling I have is the guilt.'

'It's not your fault,' I said, 'it's the mosquitos.'

'It is my fault. I didn't want her, at first, and I didn't take care.'

'It's not your fault.'

The girl moved herself away, opened her shirt and began to feed her baby. Marcio took my wrist and pulled me round, whispered in my ear, wanting to know what was wrong with the baby.

'Zika,' I mouthed.

'It's illegal, breastfeeding in public,' he said, glancing back.

‘Your country is messed up,’ I said, crossing my hands over my stomach and praying that I had not been bitten by any of those mosquitos.

The empty lot next door to Tremembé tower had changed in the two days we had been away. It was no longer simply a wasteland surrounded by placards but a working construction site with a guarded entrance and the rumbling sounds of cement mixers and workers and trucks. Two enormous red steel arms had appeared behind the placards, reaching up to the clouds, trying to pierce their way into heaven. Pile drivers, Marcio told me, used to pound poles into the soft unsuitable soil which would then structure the foundation of tall spindly towers.

‘It’s started, it’s happening,’ he said, ‘this is the end.’

‘The deeds are somewhere. It’ll help to find those,’ I said.

I didn’t really believe this, I just said it to make Marcio feel better. Even if we did find them I couldn’t see it would really make much difference to this massive project. The pictures of the new condominium had been pasted over with a red banner - Last Units Remaining. The majority had been sold on the understanding that there would be tennis courts and a forest dell and green spaces for children to play and for these things Tremembé tower would need to be demolished.

‘Yeah,’ said Marcio, ‘if we find those deeds everything changes.’

The site next door was full of life, but Tremembé tower was ghostly quiet. The box beside the security gate which was normally manned 24 hours a day was empty.

‘How are we supposed to get in?’ said Marcio.

‘Call your ma,’ I said.

But Marcio still hadn’t got a phone and so there was nothing to do but wait around the outside until someone came out. Marcio kicked the gate a few times in frustration. I just sat on the kerb feeling sick, watching the dusty street go by.

‘This is dangerous,’ said Marcio, ‘this is fucking dangerous. It’s wrong.’

The man under the umbrella selling yellow corncake was half-asleep at the bus-stop, so were the police, guns hanging off their shoulders. It didn’t feel dangerous to me anymore, just boring and

nauseating. Finally, a woman who lived on one of the top floors came out to walk her tiny dog and the gate lifted. She told us the guards had left on the weekend. The building was under new management, and they had terminated their contracts. To lift the gate, you now needed to call a certain number which would activate a mechanism to open it automatically.

'And if you haven't got a phone?' said Marcio.

The woman looked at him dubiously.

'Then you can't live here,' she said, 'anyway, it's not long, is it? Have you sold your place? We're moving out to Santos, for the sea air.'

She seemed a sensible woman.

'Is it close to here?' I asked.

'Very close, very nice. Safe. Well, safer. Good fish restaurants. Lots of seafront,' said the woman.

Marcio shrugged and turned away. The first gate clicked shut. We stood ominously in the holding pen, close together. Marcio sniffed at me suspiciously.

'It is you,' he said, 'you smell of mud. It's so heavy.'

'You're really acting crazy,' I said to Marcio, pushing him away.

The second door buzzed and lifted, and we walked together into the underground car park. Many of the plastic toys which had marked the way for me when I first arrived were now gone. I guessed those were owned by the families who had had the deeds of their apartments and had sold them while they could. Up in the lift with the tarnished mirror. We watched each other standing side by side, not touching. Marcio put his hand on my shoulder as the doors pinged open.

'You look good,' he said.

The flashing light in the corridor, the cheap wood door stained dark, the Rococo doorhandle which doubled as a lock. Each detail was vivid in the memory of my very first morning but pulsed now with a new sadness that came from an almost final sense that none of this had worked out. Marcio fiddled with the lock just as Mercury had done.

'*Caralho*,' he spat, 'should have been fixed years ago.'

'Calm down,' I said behind him.

We were on our own for most of the day, Ursula and Mercury off doing their own things somewhere else. It was overcast and everything felt cold and grey although it was actually very hot and humid. Marcio did another sweep of the living room shelves to find the deeds, but they were once more definitely not there. The family of monkeys were still hanging out in the tree outside the living-room window, and we spent some time sitting under the creepy swaying helmet throwing them bananas. The mother appeared put-upon, harassed, bullied by her children. We would try and get the bananas to her first, but the kids were quicker and greedier. One of them would snatch the fruit and then they would spend the next few minutes screeching and scratching each other over it.

'Just like Mercury and me, when we were kids,' said Marcio.

'Your poor mother,' I said.

'Where is she? Things are bad; they've started construction and she's still off finding her bits.'

'She bought this place with one of her bits.'

'Yeah, but that was just massive good luck, to find a helmet like that. Apartments are four, five times the price that they were. I don't know what happened. No-one can buy their home anymore. It's not possible. Only if you're super- rich, only if you can afford to stay in Fasano.'

'Your ma's just doing what she knows what to do. She doesn't know what else to do.'

Ursula turned up in the early evening with a curved sword which she had found outside an old Arabic restaurant being converted into a rage room. The sword irritated Marcio and they argued over it. Mercury never came home. We ate our rice and beans all lined up on the sofa just as before, watched news about a big corruption investigation being led by a Japanese-Brazilian chief of police and an Italian judge from the south of the country. All sorts of powerful people were being handcuffed and taken to jail although many of them would then be out a few hours later having shopped all their other big-wheel friends. Still, the whole of São Paulo appeared delighted. There was lots of footage of people partying in the street dressed up as the Japanese policemen. There was even a new pop song about the guy. The beans stank. I couldn't eat them. I pushed around the rice a bit, had a few mouthfuls but that didn't sit right either. I put my plate in the kitchen, scraped the leftovers in

the bin so no-one would comment, told them both I was going to bed. Marcio glanced at me listlessly before gluing his eyes back on the corruption investigation.

'All fucking bastards,' he said. 'Where's Domingos Sertão? They're the worst of the lot.'

I fell into a deep black hole of a sleep, feeling Marcio against me for a moment late in the night, his arm heavy over my stomach, his hand clutching at my arm. He smelt really bad, and I tried to move away but he held me to him, muttering, wanting once more to know the truth about Francisco.

'You know what I'll do? If I find out your lying?' he said.

'Kill me?' I said.

'No, no. Why you say that? But I'll be angry. I won't love you anymore,' he said.

'Just go to sleep Marcio,' I said.

'I love you, June, you know I love you,' he said.

'I know,' I said, 'but you don't own me.'

'I love you,' he muttered back, annoyed.

I lay uncomfortably folded up beneath his chest until finally I felt his limbs soften. They had been so rigid and tense, I realised, sliding myself away and towards the moonlit wall.

We both woke up in the very early morning to a terrifying sound. An enormous ringing noise, like a giant iron bell, cracking the air at intervals.

'Marcio. What is it? It's horrible,' I said.

'The pile driver. It's not even five am. There're laws against this, against using it so early in the morning. It gives people nightmares.'

I was overcome with tiredness and fell back to sleep despite the noise. I dreamt fitfully, of Marcio pulling down all the books that were towered around his room, leafing through each one before throwing it aside and beginning on the next one. I woke finally to bright sun cutting through the window and found that I had not really been dreaming at all. The tiny room was covered in books, pages splayed open and some of them even ripped. Marcio sat in a corner flicking through the sheets, turning the book upside down before throwing it to one side and doing the same thing with the next

one he picked up. His eyes looked yellow. The pile driver continued to ring out at echoing intervals, the toll of a giant.

'Marcio, what are you doing?' I said.

'I just realised we hadn't looked in here yet,' he said, 'for the deeds.'

I lay watching him. The sickness hadn't gone away and in fact it was getting worse, like a thick pillow pressing down on me, suffocating. Marcio really did look completely mad going through his books so recklessly like this, especially when he usually took so much care with them. I grabbed hold of my *Backlands* and hid it under the mattress to keep it away from Marcio. Canudos had been razed to the ground by the dynamite and emaciated refugees were now beginning to pick their way out of the rubble and towards the army camp. I had just a few thin chapters left and the idea that I could lose it in Marcio's discarded heap of books was intolerable.

'Do you have bi-polar or something?' I said to Marcio.

'Is that supposed to be a joke?' he said.

'No, not really,' I said.

I felt bile come up my throat and ran to the bathroom to vomit. It was horrible at the time but afterwards I felt better, at least physically. I sat on the toilet in the tiny bathroom and examined the beige tiles with purple flowers, found it amazing that at some point in time someone had thought these were attractive. I also found it amazing that I thought throwing away the pregnancy test would solve anything at all. My pen was in the bedroom, I wanted to write all over the tiles.

'No, June,' I said to myself.

There was a knock on the thin plastic door.

'Are you OK?' Marcio said.

'Yeah, fine. Just give me a minute,' I said.

'Alright, I'll be in the room. I'm halfway through now.'

My mouth was watering horribly. I decided that I needed to eat something although that would mean going into the kitchen on my own. There was a good chance that Ursula could be there. I really didn't want to talk to Ursula any more than I wanted to witness Marcio crazily throwing his books around. I wanted to go home. My mother's terrace didn't seem so terrible anymore, neither did

my single bed. I stood on the toilet seat to peer through the high window that opened onto the laundry room and then into the kitchen. I groaned to myself. There she was, with her rocket coffee and her daily papaya, solemnly cutting off squares of orange fruit and chewing on them like some kind of regal cow. I suddenly really wanted some of that papaya. I got down off the toilet and went to the kitchen. Ursula glanced up from her breakfast and motioned for me to sit down at the small table. I did as she commanded.

'There is water just boiled. For your tea,' she said.

I was shocked to find the idea of tea was repulsive to me.

'I don't want any,' I said.

She stared me.

'You don't want your tea? Marcio looked so hard to find it. It was expensive,' she said, 'he said you couldn't get up in the morning without it.'

'Later, later,' I said, 'my stomach isn't right.'

'You should eat some papaya. It's good for your digestion.'

I let her prepare me four orange slices on an olive green plate decorated with bunches of grapes. The black seeds looked like frog spawns. I shook my head. She clucked and pushed my hair out my eyes. Everything was so awful.

'Is there any bread?'

'Have you spoken to your mother yet?' she said, getting up from the table and rifling through one of the cupboards above our heads.

'Not yet.'

'I left home without telling my mother. I never forgave myself. It was terrible of me. I was everything to her.'

'My mother knows where I am. She's not bothered.'

Ursula put her hands to her face.

'My ma was so beautiful. The river ran dry. Cracked red earth. Bony cows. Vultures. But her skin just shone. She brushed my hair every night. That's what I remember most, her cool hand on my

head, the pale soles of her feet when she was standing at the cooker making coffee in the morning. I wish I'd told her I was leaving. You should call your mother.'

'I did, I called her. She didn't pick up. She knows where I am, I told you.'

'Where is Marcio? Is he sleeping?'

'He's rifling through his books, looking for the deeds. He doesn't look well.'

'He's just like his father,' said Ursula, turning back to the cupboard in which she was searching, pulling out an old coffee tin and a packet of years old crackers which she handed to me.

I opened the wrapper and began working my way through the stale tasteless biscuits whilst Ursula rifled through her tin. The best before date was six months past but there were so many preservatives listed in the ingredients, I didn't think I could actually get sick. I thought of the breakfast in Fasano and wondered if I could have sunk any lower than this. Ursula bought out a photo from her tin and handed it to me. It was of a man in a checked shirt and jeans and a cowboy hat. He was in his early forties, stocky, with a beard and small shining slanted black eyes.

'See,' said Ursula, 'see how alike they both are. See how much Marcio looks like his father.'

I held the photo in my two hands studying the man for traces of his son. They didn't seem anything like each other.

'He looks a nice guy,' I said.

'He was sick. He wrote letters to himself. I only found them after he had gone,' she said.

……..

Ahead, an indescribable dissonance of screams and wails, curses and shouts, expressing terror and pain, anger and frustration, rose from the tortured multitude. In the glow of the fires, silhouettes could be seen running in and out. Women ran from their burning shacks, carrying babies in their arms or dragging children along as they hurried down the lanes and disappeared into the maze. People were fleeing in every direction, rolling on the ground, their clothing afire. Bodies were

burning and writhing in agony. They were human torches. Overlooking the horrible scene, running about and making no attempt to hide, leaping over the bonfires and standing on the rooftops, the last defenders of the settlement shouted and gestured. They were barely visible through the smoke. Then from all around, two steps away from the line of fire, sinister figures with masks of soot and singed chests, returned to the battle. The jagunços were back.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

……

Chapter 15

Marcio walked in on me staring at his dad and got mad at Ursula for showing him to me. She tried to calm him down, put her hands on his arms, told him she would make him eggs but he batted her away, shouted her down for not helping him look for the deeds.

'You're hungry' she pleaded.

'I'm not,' he said.

'Why don't you want me to see the photo?' I asked.

They both ignored me. Ursula grimaced, kind of crouched down and moved towards Marcio while his arms flew around. It looked like a scene which had happened many times before. She was desperate to put her hand on him, somewhere, anywhere. He moved away from her into the living room and she followed him. I heard him threaten to sell the helmet. She got angry then, told him he couldn't just take her things. The pile driver began its pounding once more. Marcio cried out with the noise.

'Oh Marcio,' said Ursula, 'please let me touch you.'

I put my head on the table. This was such a sinking ship. I suddenly understood just how my mother had felt back in Setúbal and that was utterly stranded. It hadn't been my fault though so she shouldn't have taken it out on me. You make your decisions, and you live with them, you take it on the chin. It was no-one's fault but my own that I was locked in a tiny São Paulo apartment marked for demolition with a half-crazed boyfriend and his half-crazed mother swimming through tidal waves of what I knew now was morning sickness without a friend in the world to help me.

I felt a hand on my arm. Mercury in pyjamas patterned with pink sparkly motorbikes, finger to her lips. Not someone I really trusted enough to call a friend but there was absolutely no-one else.

'Come on,' she said, 'let's get out of here.'

She led me quietly past Ursula and Marcio, locked now in an embrace, Ursula tearful, Marcio stroking her hair like her own poor stranded mother used to do. She deserved to get left behind, I brooded, it was karma. Mercury clicked the door shut gently, winked at me in the flashing corridor, hustled me into the lift with the tarnished mirror, pressed on the very bottom button, minus 2.

'The basement? Bluebeard's chamber. That's all I need,' I said.

Mercury looked confused.

'Your brother's not really the guy I thought he was,' I explained.

'It's just the gym,' she said, as the doors opened.

It was a surprisingly pleasant place given that it was underground, lit by two thin skylights, nothing like the flashy fitness studios which were so popular everywhere, big glass windows showing off their TV screens and their rows of running machines and sweaty girls in crop-tops. This gym had a wooden floor, a few free weights and a worn plastic mat, contraption that looked like it could be for rowing and a leather boxing bag hanging by a steel hook from the ceiling.

'It's a good place when those two are rowing. My dad installed the bag himself. He loved to box, he loved sport. Amaral likes to train here,' said Mercury, 'he's not been in a while though.'

She frowned as she said that, and I felt sorry for her.

'Did you see him yesterday?'

‘Nah, he’s gone off somewhere. Hasn’t been in touch. I’ve got to get a new phone sorted out. He does this.’

‘Don’t you get upset?’

Mercury shook her head, jabbing at the bag.

‘There’s no point is there? If I nag him, he’ll find some other girl. There’s always one waiting to clean up after you.’

‘You know what happened at the art show?’

‘I read about it in a newspaper. It’s funny. He’s not in prison though, they didn’t press charges, so I don’t know where he’s gone. He’ll turn up when he wants to. Come on, let’s box.’

Mercury turned on me, began jabbing at my face, I put my hands up.

‘I don’t want to. I’m tired. Your brother’s going mad.’

‘Nah. He gets like this sometimes. He’s got a good heart.’

‘That’s what people always say when someone has a bad personality.’

Mercury laughed, danced around me, jabbing at my arm now.

‘I mean,’ I continued, ‘most people do have good hearts, right? Even your ma, she’s been kind of alright to me since I called her.’

‘That’s because she thinks she’s won,’ Mercury said.

‘Won what?’

Mercury just laughed.

‘There’s not many people really, with actually bad hearts,’ I said.

‘Dictators,’ said Mercury, ‘dictators have bad hearts.’

She hit at me softly and then harder. I pushed her away.

‘Mercury, don’t. I don’t want to.’

‘You’re so boring.’

‘I’m not fucking boring. That’s the last thing I am. What happened to your father? Your ma says he was sick. She says Marcio is just like your father.’

Mercury jabbed at my other arm, three or four times, harder now.

‘Stop it. I want to know,’ I said.

‘It’s nothing to do with you,’ she said.

‘It is,’ I said.

‘It’s not. You just turned up here one day and one day you’ll leave. It’s nothing to do with you.’

‘He’s my boyfriend.’

Mercury turned to face me. She was pissed off, frowning again, deeper this time, just like her brother.

‘I’ve been so nice to you and all you do is ask for more,’ she said, ‘what have you done for me?’

‘I bought you that book,’ I said weakly.

A wave of nausea overcame me once more, holding me down under its muddy water. Mercury began to jab at my face. Everything was just getting worse. I put my hands up. She went for my front, boxing at my hip and then at my chest and then at my stomach. I could stop some of the blows but not all of them. She could see I was getting upset and that just made her carry on. She was really enjoying herself, she even tried a few kick-boxes. I backed away. She moved towards me.

‘Mercury, stop, please,’ I said.

‘Why should I?’ she said.

‘I’m pregnant,’ I said.

She dropped her arms, looked at me aghast, put her hands up and moved away like it was highly contagious.

‘Oh my god,’ she said.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I know.’

It was such a relief to tell someone that I lay down on the floor afterwards. It was so cool and solid I felt like I could stay there for hours. Mercury lay down too, but far away from me, so as not to get pregnant herself. I told her it didn’t work like that. She said she didn’t want to take the risk.

‘What are you going to do?’ she said.

‘Get rid of it,’ I said, trying to keep voice carefree as I spoke. I knew that this was not as easy as it sounded. It was the opposite of easy. It was very, very hard and would break my heart.

‘Have you told Marcio?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Don’t tell him.’

‘Really?’

‘Nah,’ she said, ‘don’t tell him.’

‘I dunno.’

‘You’re in trouble.’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘No, you don’t know. You’ve no idea. It’s illegal, abortion.’

‘What?’

‘We’re a Catholic country. We love the pope.’

I got up, went over to Mercury and slapped her on the arm.

‘Don’t kid around. That’s ridiculous.’

She smiled at me and shook her head. It was true.

I banged my head against the boxing bag. I didn’t feel any better, so I did it again. After a while doing this Mercury told me there were still ways. You could buy pills online, but it wasn’t a good idea. A friend of Amaral’s got in a bad way like that and she still ended up with the baby. There were doctors who would do it for you, but you had to pay them a lot of money and the cheaper ones sometimes did a bad job.

‘I don’t understand,’ I said, ‘how can it be illegal? It’s my body.’

‘That’s not what they think,’ said Mercury.

‘Who’s they?’ I said.

‘The people who own your body,’ she said and laughed like this was so funny.

‘What am I going to do?’

‘Go home.’

‘I can’t just go home. What about Marcio?’

‘He’ll be better if you’re not around.’

‘He loves me.’

‘Does he?’

‘He gave me your grandma’s ring.’

‘That old thing?’

‘I found him at this club, Love Story, dancing with another girl.’

Mercury laughed again. I wasn’t sure if she was trying to make me feel better about myself by making light of the situation or she really did think all this shit was hilarious. I was suspicious but I had to give her the benefit of the doubt as she really was the only person I had around.

‘It wasn’t funny. It was awful. I didn’t think he was that kind of guy.’

Mercury carried on laughing.

‘I don’t know what’s so funny Mercury.’

‘That club, it’s where prostitutes go, after working the night.’

‘That can’t be true. I don’t believe you.’

She shrugged.

‘It’s better like that though, isn’t it? Paying is different than when it’s free.’

‘He said he hadn’t slept with her.’

Mercury bit her lip and looked at me.

‘Men are men, aren’t they?’ she said.

‘I don’t think that. Marcio’s not well right now.’

‘You want a baby?’

‘Yes. No. No. I’ll talk to him. Marcio will want to come back with me. He wouldn't want me to be alone.’

‘He needs to stay here with us. We need him more than you do. Anyway, his visa has run out. He won’t be able to get back in.’

‘We could get married.’

‘I told you June, I told you when you first got here. My brother is a bad one. You don’t want to do that.’

Mercury stared at me with her big eyes. It was so difficult to tell when she was lying.

‘What am I going to do?’

‘Don’t say anything. Just go. Buy a ticket and get on a plane. I’ll deal with Marcio for you. That’s the best thing for everyone, for you and for him. I’ll do that for you.’

I watched Mercury watch me. Part of me agreed with her. That really was the most sensible thing to do. But she was just too strange to really trust, like a grown-up fairy, a forest sprite that would lead me through the jungle and then throw me over a cliff.

‘Why did they call you Mercury? It’s weird.’

‘My father liked myths. There was a programme every Saturday when we were kids, different episodes for different old cultures. Native, Viking, Mesopotamian, any old and crazy story, he loved it all, but his favourites were the Romans. He told us he was going to take us to Rome one day but that never happened. I mean, it was his fantasy.’

‘Why did Marcio not get a name like yours?’

‘Ah you know, he had to be called after my father’s father. It’s very boring being a boy. He’s supposed to inherit a whole town in the North but that won’t ever happen either, I mean it doesn’t exist anymore.’

‘Your hair, do you dye it?’

Mercury laughed like this was hilarious.

‘It’s ice blue! Did you think it was natural?’

‘I’ve never seen any roots.’

‘I’ve got a good hairdresser. Look, we need to go back up. I have to get ready to go to work. I can’t spend all my time just looking after you.’

‘Fine.’

‘Don’t look so miserable. It’s not the end of the world. You don’t know what’s round the next corner. Amaral always says that,’ said Mercury, ‘it’s usually the police for him.’

Mercury told me in the lift that she would distract her brother while I booked a flight on my laptop. She said it wouldn’t be hard, all she had to do was suggest looking in Ursula’s storeroom for the deeds. This always caused a big row between them. No-one was allowed in there but Ursula and even she hardly ever went in. In the end though Mercury didn’t need to do anything because Ursula and Marcio had both left by the time we got back upstairs.

‘There’s a Catholic Church closing in Santana. The Evangelicals are taking over. She’s gone there,’ said Mercury.

‘Where’s Marcio though?’ I said, looking around the room. It felt different but I was unable to put my finger on just why. The tree outside cast moving shadows across the muddy-coloured sofa, the monkey family were still there, lazing in the branches. Everything appeared in its place, but something had changed. Not wrong so much as different, a different atmosphere. I turned around on myself but couldn’t work it out.

‘Oh my god,’ said Mercury, ‘he’s taken the helmet.’

We stared at the space where the creepy helmet usually creaked. Mercury opened the window. The sounds of drills and shouts and heavy-duty vehicles came to us. She shut it again.

‘My ma loves that helmet,’ she said,

‘The shit’s gonna hit the fan now,’ I said.

‘What?’ she said.

‘It’s an English expression. If you threw shit at a fan, it would go everywhere.’

‘Right. Yeah,’ she said, then tried it out herself ‘*A merda vai bater no ventilador.’*

‘It doesn’t really sound right Portuguese,’ I said.

‘What do you say for *quente para caralho?’* she asked.

‘I guess it would be this is so hot for a cock. Not really the same in English either.’

‘Can you buy me a ticket to England with you?’ she asked.

I wasn’t sure if she was joking or not. I was polite, just in case.

‘I would if I could Mercury, but I don’t think I have the money, sorry,’ I said.

I opened my laptop, found a cheap ticket with Kuwait Airways going through UAE. Normally I avoided Middle Eastern airlines as they didn’t serve alcohol but that did not feel like a big problem right now. I put my credit card details in and checked my emails as I waited for the payment to process. An email from my tutor wanting me to get in touch as soon as possible. I felt heat rising up my throat. Michael never asked me to call. Francisco must have called him, told him what had happened at the biennial. If only I hadn’t written on the canvas, I could have just blamed it on Amaral and maybe Michael would have forgiven me. But my name was there, I was implicated. I had

completely burnt my bridges and would not be getting another nice job. If only I'd stayed in London, I thought, if only I hadn't made Marcio bring me out here, Michael would have found me something else, something better, probably. He wouldn't help me anymore, though. When I got back to London I would be completely on my own. My mind flashed through miserable scenes, me alone at Heathrow, green, exhausted. Me on the tube, chugging through the Piccadilly line, yellow eyes. Me at my mother's flat, lying on my single bed in my single room, plain white walls looming over me, texting Marcio to tell him where I was. My old doctor's surgery, red cheeks, eyes down, ashamed. An operating theatre somewhere, a fuzzy scene. Still, what was the alternative? I wished so much this sickness would lift; it was grabbing me by the neck and pushing me into its murky bog. I emailed Michael to say I would call him as soon as possible, clicked back to my payment. A big black box told me there was a problem with my card. I tried again. Same black box. I called the bank on Ursula's landline. A woman in India told me that my credit card had almost reached its limit. I had 30 US dollars left to spend.

'How is that possible?' I said, 'there must be a mistake. I should have at least 1500 dollars. I've hardly used it,' I said.

'Do you want me to check your transactions?'

'Yes please.'

'So, there's a payment a few days ago for a Boutique Oscar Freire and then just one other payment that went through yesterday. The Fasano group. Is that a fraudulent transaction?'

'Ah. Yes,' I said.

'Do you want me to put you through to our fraud team?' she said.

I paused and tried to think things through instead of saying the first thing that came into my head. I wasn't sure the fraud team was a good idea, really.

'No. No actually don't worry. I remember now. It was a hotel bill that needed to be paid,' I said.

'OK ma'am, anything else I can help you with today?'

'I need some extra credit. Just about 500 dollars. Would it be possible to extend the card now over the phone?'

The woman laughed. It seemed that my situation was incredibly amusing to almost everyone today.

'Sorry ma'am. I wish it were that easy.'

I sat watching the monkeys for a few minutes, thinking what to do. A lot of my focus was just taken up by trying to keep my head above the surface of the horrid brown sickness, I didn't have much energy left for emotion or strategy. I was shocked about the money, frightened too, but also a relieved that I couldn't book a plane ticket so quickly and easily. The journey home was such a miserable prospect. At the same time, I didn't have a better plan. Marcio couldn't just leave now with the pile drivers and the trucks and the pneumatic drills roaring away outside his bedroom window. I was clear though, I was completely clear. Although perhaps less clear than last time. I didn't want a baby. The very last thing I wanted was to get stuck in a foreign land with a baby, completely reliant on a man who was not even my husband and who also had a habit of disappearing. The larger monkey, the one Marcio and I decided was the mother, was having her fleas picked off by her kids.

'I'm better than that,' I said to her.

The monkey mother ignored me, stuck her finger up her nose, inspected the contents. Ate it. She looked happy. Ambition was a double-edged sword. I ran through the people I could try and borrow the money for the plane ticket from. Marcio was out for obvious reasons. Mercury wanted me to go but there was no way she had that kind of cash. Neither my mother. She worked but never had anything spare. She wasn't a practical person and had never really got her head round savings. She had very good taste and liked expensive things and was always asking my grandfather for a little bit here and there, for a new vase, or fabric. I considered my grandfather. Although he styled himself as a quiet countryside vicar he had money, made by his own grandfather who had run a cotton mill in Lancashire. We should be, my mother would often point out bitterly, very comfortable, except for the fact my grandfather had given so much away to charity and was very careful with what he had kept. He'd give me something straightaway if I told him it was for an emergency but then he'd worry about me and I'd have to lie to him or he'd find out somehow what was going on and he'd be terribly upset. He was old now, almost eighty and I didn't want to do that to him. I could email my own father, on a ship probably, somewhere in the Atlantic or Indian ocean, doing the route from Portugal round the

horn of Africa which he was apparently so good at. I didn't want to do that either. He told me once that sailors have a third eye which could see over the horizon and also through their children's lies. I knew of course it wasn't true but still I didn't want to risk it. He read the future in the flights of birds and had a liking for predictions. Once he'd pointed at Brazil on a map and told me I would go there one day and that I would be able to travel around as if wearing invisible clothes because everyone there spoke Portuguese with a funny accent, just like me.

Mercury came into the room, jacket on, helmet in hand.

'You booked it?'

'I don't have enough money.'

'You need to find one of those flights with a 13-hour stopover somewhere. They're only three hundred dollars, sometimes two hundred.'

'I need one for 30 dollars. That's all I've got.'

'*Caralho*,' she said.

'Have you got 300 dollars you can lend me?'

Mercury shook her head.

'Didn't think so. Can you give me a lift into town instead?'

'Yeah, I can do that. You need to be quick though. OK? I've got to be at Olympus shopping mall in an hour. They're opening a new branch of Baudelaire's and I'm photographing the launch.'

I emailed Francisco, praying he was online and wasn't so mad about the biennial that he wouldn't answer. He replied straight back. I said I needed to talk to him. He said sure but he was at work at the biennial and it would have to be somewhere nearby.

'Is your mall near Ibirapuera?' I asked Mercury.

'Yeah, actually, it's right next door,' she said.

I asked Francisco if he could meet me in Olympus Shopping and he replied that he went there every lunch time anyway and to meet me at Santa Grão coffee shop. I suggested the new Baudelaire's that was opening today. He hadn't known about this and was delighted, told me he'd meet me there in an hour. The stars, I felt, had suddenly changed. The sickness lifted as I prepared to leave and I felt almost normal, as if I had surged out of some dirty gutter and into the sky. I had a deep urge to write

my name over the window and then to open it and lean out and write my name on the leaves of the tree, on the bark. But I'd promised myself I'd stopped all that now and pressed my hands together sharply. In the end I wrote my name on my stomach as I was changing into my cleanest jeans, reasoning to myself that my own skin was mine to do with what I pleased.

……

The arrival of the prisoners was a touching event. Our men looked at them remorsefully. They were shocked and moved. In this short truce the settlement was putting in front of them their legions of harmless, crippled, mutilated, starving souls in an assault that was harder to take than any barrage of enemy fire. It was hard for them to acknowledge that these weak, helpless, people were the ones living in the huts during the three-months bombardment. The dark faces and filthy emaciated bodies covered with wounds, scars and gashes made the victory they longed for shallow and shameful. They now saw the reward of all the battle they had fought, the reversals they had experienced and the lives they had wasted. Here were their prisoners, an assortment of human jetsam. It was tragic and disgusting in the extreme.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

Chapter 16

The breeze I felt on my face as Mercury and I rode into town blew away the last gluey scum of nausea. Just being outside helped, distracted me from all these internal disturbances. At first our

progress was slow, stopping and starting through dense lanes of traffic and people. As we reached the river the buildings grew higher, denser, newer, the roads smoother, faster. We took a fly-over and it really felt like flying. Huge rain clouds gathered up ahead. The tower-blocks on either side were grey against the dark sky, jigsaw-ed together in a never-ending pattern, looming cliff-like around us. I liked the lines of glinting windows, each one a home, the occasional sign of life, someone handing over a drink, picking up a child, talking on the phone. It felt like spotting these private movements was lucky, like seeing a shooting star. When I saw a woman leaning out of her window, brushing her hair, I took it as a good sign. Things felt bad now, but everything would work out in time. Have faith, my grandfather would have said to me, and I did.

Olympus shopping mall was in the new business district - tarmac like lambskin and huge spacey structures of glass and steel. An old orthodox cathedral leftover from another age had been spared destruction and now sat on a roundabout looking pokey and old amongst the mirrored monoliths. Mercury flashed a press pass at a concierge on the kerb beside grand glass doors which slid open and closed breathlessly. He nodded and drove away on her bike. She watched after him anxiously.

'I wish I didn't need to do that,' she said, 'it's crazy. They don't let you park your own vehicle.'

Men and women in tight suits flashing peacock linings waltzed in and out of the gliding doors whilst a group of teenagers from the periphery tried to build up the courage to enter the hallowed mall, grouped together like frightened ducklings wearing baseball caps.

'Just go in,' Mercury said to them as we walked past, 'they can't sell you the air.'

The first thing to hit me as I walked inside was the smell. Something heady, smoky, pumped through the air conditioning. A deep-voiced lady sang softly, so softly it was almost not there, a beautiful sad song that flowed up and down, coming from nowhere and everywhere. I turned my head up to the high vaulted glass above, it was hard to tell where the shopping mall ended and the sky began. I saw the teenagers finally enter behind me; mouths open in awe. It really was almost religious. As we climbed up the mirrored escalators Mercury mouthed out the names of the brands she saw

around us - Wonderbra, Nike, Hello Kitty - stared at her glassy reflection and pronounced to me that she the most beautiful person in the place, which she probably was.

The launch of Baudelaire's was low-key, just a small placard announcing a free coffee and croissant for each customer to celebrate the opening of branch number 4. I sat down in a booth and watched Mercury set to work. Her first idea was to place three glistening Rum Babas upon a white plate on the brass counter. She clicked away a few of these close-ups before starting work on the new Italian coffee machine. She was surprisingly professional with the staff, assiduously and thoughtfully creating different inviting images. It was a kind of odd job to have, photographing French pastries in a Latin megacity, but she set to it with such vigor that it became strange to think of her back in the apartment in her pyjamas, or on her motorbike, or far out perched on the rusty truck at *Over There.* She seemed to have a talent for flowing into any scene that she found herself.

Francisco arrived looking busy and attractive in an unbuttoned shirt, scanned the room and smiled his tiger smile when he saw me cornered in one of the wall booths. I suddenly wondered if it was such a good idea to meet this guy with Marcio's sister so close by, but she was so involved in her work she didn't give me a second glance. I'm not sure she would have questioned it much anyway; she had her own moral compass which was different to mine or to Marcio's. I had the feeling she was more generous than either of us with the things people do. As he leant across the table and kissed me on the cheek, I caught a smell of oats cooked in milk. It was such a nice smell that it made me wonder if I was doing the right thing meeting him like this. An image of Marcio turning up and seeing us together flashed into my mind and the sickness slid greasily over me once more. A waitress in white and black bought us plates of free croissants. Francisco touched her on the hip and sent them away, told her to bring us two filter coffees and the raspberry and pistachio swirls instead.

'You'll love these,' he said, 'they're worth paying for. Literally my favourite thing.'

The swirls were far heavier and sweeter than an average pastry and I didn't have much appetite for them. I wondered if 30 dollars would cover the bill. I pretended to eat, studying Francisco between bites of our breakfast, considering whether to apologise for what had happened at the biennial or not. I decided in the end that it was the right thing to do.

‘I’m sorry about the launch,’ I said, ‘it wasn’t planned, what happened with Amaral. I didn’t know he would do that.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he said, ‘it was all right in the end.’

‘I know I slipped off. I thought it was best just to leave. You looked so furious.’

‘Not me.’

‘Did you talk to Michael about it?’

‘Not me,’ he said.

‘He wants me to call him,’ I said.

‘You should do then,’ he said.

‘I get nervous talking to him on the phone,’ I said.

‘Me too,’ said Francisco.

‘I don’t even have his number, it was on my old phone,’ I said.

‘I’ve got his number. I’ll give it to you before we leave.’

‘Thanks,’ I said, ‘that’s great.’

Francisco was being very intense about his breakfast, using his finger to lick the white icing of his plate then losing himself in its deliciousness. When he closed his eyes he looked like an addict, the crags in his face loose and relaxed, a livery yellow under his eyes and down his neck.

‘Are you alright? You’re a funny colour,’ I said when he’d sucked the last of the sugar from his fingers and had returned to looking at me.

‘I didn’t sleep last night,’ he said, ‘I had this kind of nightmare.’

He described his dream and it did sound horrible. He had been at a party in a clearing that was in the middle of a dense mysterious forest. There were piles of fruit and corn and nuts and it had all tasted delicious. A very beautiful girl appeared with very long black hair which shone like a mirror. They danced together and were having so much fun until Francisco saw a man he knew instantly to be her husband watching from the side of the clearing. The man pointed at the pair of them and then disappeared. Suddenly a great storm arrived, and everyone began to cry with the rain and the wind. The man appeared again and took hold of his wife’s nose and shook it and shook it. Her nose got longer and longer and she began to grow fur on her body and finally she turned into an anteater.

Everyone at the party started to turn into different animals. One ugly Indian turned into a bat, another woman that had been talking non-stop turned into a dog, a man with a head of good teeth turned into an alligator.

'God,' I said, 'that's not nice at all.'

'That's not the worse bit,' he said, 'I looked down at my hands and I saw that I was turning into an animal too. It was the most frightening experience of my life. I felt my body becoming elastic, my bones kind of melting, my heart split into different pieces. I don't know how I knew but I knew I was turning into an earthworm.'

I don't know why but I laughed at this. Francisco shook his head and told me it wasn't funny.

'I'm sorry. It's not nice when people laugh at bad things happening to other people,' I said.

'No. It isn't,' he said.

'I had a nightmare too today,' I said.

'Oh dear. What?' he said.

'I went to book a ticket back to England and found I couldn't do it because my credit card had been maxed out.'

'Was this real or when you were asleep?'

'Real.'

'Oh dear,' he said.

'It was the bill from Fasano. It was enormous. Over 1000 dollars. They took it from my credit card without me authorising it.'

'That's why you gave them your credit card details, so they could charge you when you left.'

'But you said you were getting me a discount, a big discount. You said the bill would be hardly anything.'

'That is a big discount, for two nights at the Fasano, 1000 dollars is nothing.'

'It's not nothing to me. It's all the money I have.'

Francisco frowned, spread his finger round his plate to find any remaining sugar.

'I'm sorry. I just, I dunno, you work for Nicha so… Her gallery is doing so well.'

‘I don’t work for Nicha anymore. I was hardly paid anything when I was there. You should know that. I’ve got one credit card, that’s it. And it’s only got 30 dollars on it now.’

‘I’m sorry. Really, I am.’

‘I need you to talk to your friend at the hotel about putting the money back on my card. I need to buy a ticket back to London today.’

Francisco put his hands up.

‘Look, I can’t do that. He’s not that kind of friend.’

‘What am I going to do?’

‘Can’t you borrow it from your parents?’

‘No. Can you?’

Francisco laughed.

‘It’s not that easy, is it? There’re always strings attached. Sorry. I wish I could give you the money, but I really can’t. I just don’t have it.’

Francisco screwed up his mouth and scrunched his eyebrows together in a beatific ‘life sucks but what can you do?’ kind of way and with that signaled our conversation was closed. He looked across the room, motioned for the waitress to bring over the bill. The white paper came folded over on a little brass plate with a special clip to hold it down. Francisco slipped it out and inspected it.

‘Only 10 dollars each, which is quite reasonable, for two pastries and two filter coffees, I think.’

He took out wallet and put down his own card.

‘I’ll pay this, OK? Don’t worry about it,’ he said. ‘Oh, here’s Michael’s number too. Have you got a pen? A paper?’

I went through my rucksack, took out my Posca and the story I had written in the hotel, wrote the number down on the plain side. Once I had finished, I slid the paper across to him.

He laughed, pushed it back.

‘It’s yours,’ he said.

‘It’s for you,’ I said, ‘I wrote it, about what happened, in the hotel.’

‘You can’t help yourself, can you? Always writing on something. Even actual paper,’ he said, picking up the notepaper and beginning to read.

His eyes flicked from left to right. I could feel my heart beating in my chest. The sickness shriveled up and began to shed in beige strips from my skin. Had I put the night we had spent together exactly as it happened? I had put down how it had felt to me. It made me feel sick, thinking of it. Even more so now I had a baby inside me, thinking of the tiny pure ball of cells being so distressed by this stranger. When he had finished, he put the paper down on the table and kept his fingers pressed upon it.

‘I don’t remember it like that,’ he said, staring at the square of white.

‘Probably not.’

‘You were so drunk.’

‘I wasn’t that bad.’

‘This is really bullshit,’ he said.

‘You could have just given me a lift home like you said you would,’ I said, ‘none of this would have happened.’

He shook his head, looked away from me across the room to the Rum Babas that were still shining on the counter.

‘That’s my all-time favourite dessert,’ he said, spreading his arm out across the room as if he could simply take one. I slid the paper back towards me and then into my rucksack.

‘What do you want?’ he said.

‘I just need you to sort that hotel bill out,’ I said.

‘I’ll try, OK, fine,’ he said, ‘I’ll try.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, ‘I appreciate it.’

‘Really, it’s fine.’

‘You’ve got a good heart, Francisco, thank you,’ I said, screwing my face up in an effort not to smile.

Once Francisco had left, I asked the nice waitress if she could bring me both of our free croissants and another black coffee. I realised that if I ate the sickness seemed to subside but if I stopped then it would come back worse, stronger, like the nausea had eaten all that food itself and this had made it stronger and queasier and more monstrous. The only thing to do was continue to eat it seemed. I chewed steadily through the beige pastries, absent-mindedly watching Mercury setting up a portrait shot of a customer sipping a cappuccino looking out across the thundery sky. She checked the shot on her camera. She was completely focused on her job and seemed unaware that I was still sat in the corner watching her.

'We can photoshop that later,' she said to the manager, 'make the sky blue and get rid of the wrinkles.'

I laughed. Mercury looked over, frowning. I shrugged. She slid over to me.

'Look, it's putting me off, having you in here,' she said.

'I didn't think you had noticed. I'm not doing anything. I'm just eating,' I said.

'Of course I notice but I have a job to do. Was that the guy from the street party?' she said.

'He's helping me out with some work.'

'It's giving me the creeps, thinking about the baby,' she said.

'How do you think it is for me? Anyway, it's not a baby.'

'You know what I mean. It's just the idea of it. It makes me sick,' she said.

'Makes you sick? What about me? You have no idea,' I said.

'Can't you just go and get your nails done or something? The salon here is supposed to be amazing.'

'Expensive,' I said.

Mercury threw me her press pass.

'Here, they've given me a free pedicure, but you need it more than me,' she said, looking at my dirty nails.

The penthouse salon was called Beyond Nature and decorated in the way of a forest. Mechanical birds sang from overgrown bonsai trees while pale pink rabbits padded around a carpet of green plastic lawn. Women sat in massage chairs covered in velvet moss, dipping their feet into

personal pools of nibbling fish. The salon assistants quietly carried out manicures, facials, eyebrow threading and massages upon the near comatose women. Every so often a manicurist would pick up a rabbit, brushing off her client's nails with its tail or buffing with its stomach. I showed them Mercury's pass and was immediately and smoothly taken care of, winding up in a comfortable bumping chair of fake grass.

'Coffee? Tea? Champagne?' said a girl who began to softly float both my hands in creamy lilac water. The horrid sickness told me I could only have water.

'OK,' sang the girl, 'anything you need you just ask me, OK? Absolutely anything.'

I took her at her word.

'Actually,' I said, 'I really need to use a phone. I've lost mine, you see. Do you have one I could use just quickly?'

'I'll see what I can do,' sang the girl, sliding my feet into a bowl of water on which floated jasmine flowers. Tiny fish gathered around my toes. She glided away and returned soon after with a phone in the shape of a pink rabbit on a small golden trolley. I hoped this was a good sign, nervously tapping in Michael's long Oxford number. I swallowed as the rings went on. After a few more I told myself he was out and went to put down the phone but then he answered, as soft-voiced as ever.

'Hello?'

'Michael, it's June. Hello.'

'June,' he said, 'good to hear from you.'

'Sorry,' I said, 'I didn't have a phone.'

I could hear him give a half smile.

'Not the first time,' he said.

'It wasn't my fault,' I said.

'Mmm,' he said, not believing me.

'Really it wasn't, we got robbed,' I said.

'That's not good. Are you OK?'

'I'm fine, I just don't have a phone.'

'You should try and take care of yourself better. You know why I wanted you to call?

‘I think so. About the biennial. I’m sorry. I know I messed up. Did Francisco call you?’

‘No. It was Monica. We’re old friends,’ he said.

‘What happened, it wasn’t planned. Not at all. It just happened.’ I said, ‘I know I let you down. I’m sorry.’

‘Wait,’ he said.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

‘You’ve got it wrong,’ he said, ‘completely.’

‘I know. I messed up Michael. I know.’

‘No. Will you just wait. Monica called me because she loved it.’

‘Really?’ I said.

‘The coverage was fantastic for her. She’s very good at turning bad situations around. Even ones that appear horrific. It’s her special talent.’

‘Oh.’

‘She called me about you, afterwards. We both agree that we should try and help you.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘She’s working with the Serpentine right now. They want to do a little Biennial SP x Serpentine thing, bring one of the artworks over whilst the São Paulo exhibition is still ongoing, create a kind of satellite of the event. Monica should have decided by now what she was going to send over but she couldn’t quite find the thing that would make the right kind of splash. Anyway, now she has. It’s you and Amaral. She wants you to come over here together and do the same thing you did over there.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘She sent me a picture of what you did. Monica us related to the man who wrote the backlands book which you stuck to the canvas.’

‘She’s related to everyone.’

‘Not everyone. But she was very affected by what you did. It’s a very special book to her. She wants you to do it all again but in London.’

‘She wants us to repeat it?’

‘That’s her idea. She’s having another toilet cast here in the UK, a public urinal from Peckham, I think. You’ll both graffiti that. She’s getting rid of the canvas. But you’re not to touch the walls of the gallery. That was going too far, she said, even for her.’

‘I can’t believe it.’

‘You’ve pulled it out the bag just in time.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘You can come home now, stop skulking around bits of South America that you shouldn’t be in.’

‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘You don’t have to say anything. Just look after yourself a bit more, June. Don’t go wasting all your energy everywhere, on everything. Keep it to yourself more.’

‘Thanks Michael, thank you. Thanks.’

I put down the phone and saw the manicurist buffing my toes with one of the pink rabbit’s tails.

'Oh my god,’ I said, ‘How does the poor thing stand it?'

'We sedate them. They're totally out of it,' she said.

'Once we forgot to put the drugs in their food,' laughed another manicurist sitting beside her, 'they went wild. It was kinda funny. One of them bit a customer. We had to put it one down. That was sad.'

My mouth began to water and I knew I needed to vomit. I must have gone pale because the girl instantly knew what was happening, pulled me up and pointed towards a door embedded in a wall of roses. I got there just in time to vomit all my beige and pink and green pastries into the rose-smelling toilet bowl. As I was washing my hands, I saw a white bag of something called Midazolam propped up under the sinks. I threw it all down the toilet and made sure I washed my hands once more carefully.

‘How was the pedicure?’ Mercury asked as we waited for her bike to be bought back to her.

‘A bit cruel to be honest,’ I said, ‘they sedate the rabbits to use as buffers.’

‘Oh yeah,’ she said, ‘that was a big trend last year. Whole city was doing it.’

‘I’ve got some good news, though, about Amaral. He’s been invited to go to London with me, to *pixo* in a gallery there. I’m going to call him when we get home.’

Mercury yelped, put her hand up over her open mouth, stared at me like a frightened little animal.

‘What? Aren’t you pleased?’

‘Oh no, June,’ she said, ‘don’t tell him. If he goes over there he’ll never come back and I don’t know what I would do.’

……

‘The spotless gallery wall, though a fragile evolutionary product of a highly specialised nature, is impure. It subsumes commerce and aesthetics, artist and audience, ethics and expediency. It is an image of the society that supports it, so it is a perfect surface off which to bounce our paranoias.’

Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*

Chapter 17

Mercury and I had only been away a few hours but by the time we arrived back at Tremembé tower a quad of steel girders had been hoisted up into the skyline next door. The pile driver continued to ring out its pounding bell. Sickness barked round me, a shadowy dog at my throat.

‘Ah,’ said Mercury, ‘that noise is driving me mad.’

We got lucky getting back into the apartment, the gate rose almost as soon as we stopped outside. A man in a high-vis yellow jacket and a clipboard walked out. He nodded at us sheepishly. Mercury hissed at him and then cackled but she was silent and watchful as we went up in the lift, facing ourselves in the greying old mirror.

‘I have to tell Amaral,’ I said to her, ‘you don’t want him to miss out on going to London. It’ll be paid for too. They won’t want me just on my own. I need him.’

‘You don’t need him like I need him. Anyway, he doesn’t even have a passport.’

‘Monica seems the kind of woman who can sort that out,’ I said.

The elevator pinged. She pursed her lips and shook her head, elbowed her way past me and into the corridor. I stared at myself in the mirror a moment longer, torn. Mercury cried to herself at the front door. I found her reading an eviction notice, freshly stuck there with black masking tape, ordering residents to leave their apartment with a deadline of 72 hours. She went to rip it down but I stopped her.

‘Don’t,’ I said, ‘just don’t touch it. I think it’s better if you don’t touch it.’

We found Marcio slumped on the sofa reading through one of his books. A life-size sculpture of a saint in flowing robes stood watching over him. The helmet was back, swaying gently, just where it had always been.

‘Marcio,’ I said.

‘You took the helmet,’ said Mercury.

‘I bought it back,’ he said, ‘it’s worth nothing. Nothing at all.’

‘No. It isn’t true. Ma bought this apartment with one just like it,’ said Mercury.

‘She can’t have. I took it to the pawnbroker in Jardim Franca. He said it was junk. Part of a costume or something. It’s just rusty like that because it fell in the river, not because it’s old.’

‘Who the hell is this hot guy?’ I said, putting my arm around the statue. It was like the icons in my grandfather’s church except for the eyes, which bulged and stared in the way of a man sent mad by heat and endless landscapes.

‘Saint Christopher apparently,’ said Marcio, frowning at my joke.

‘Looks more like John the Baptist,’ I said.

‘Ma said he was just like Antonio Conselheiro.’

‘The counsellor,’ I said.

‘Yeah, of course, you know all about him. Have you finished the book yet?’

‘I’m right at the end. The army dynamited the town with all the children and mothers still sheltering there. There are trenches of dead men, covered in blood and rivers of pus. And they still have not surrendered. There’s an army of five thousand and there are four guys left fighting and one of them is an old man and one of them is a child. It’s insanity. Why are they carrying on?’

‘They’d prefer to die then surrender. It’s faith.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘That’s because you grew up in beautiful, vibrant places.’

‘I’m not sure I’d call my mum’s street beautiful.’

‘All cities are beautiful because they are full of people. We have so much here in the city and so no-one believes in God anymore. At least not the old God that we are supposed to believe in. The Santana church is closing. Ma dropped this statue off and went straight back to pick up Mary. And in the end, those four were right fight because the army decapitated all the prisoners anyway.’

‘It makes me sick.’

‘Did you see the notice?’ said Mercury, ‘on the door?’

‘Yeah, don’t touch it. Forget about it,’ he said, ‘It’s fake. They’ve no right to evict us. The company who built this block didn’t own the land, they’re right about that, but neither do Domingos Sertão.’

‘I’m off,’ said Mercury, ‘before ma arrives with the virgin mother.’

‘I think it’s the other one. You know, the whore,’ said Marcio.

‘Don’t call her that,’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ said Mercury, ‘don’t call her that.’

‘It’s not an insult,’ he said.

‘It is when you say it like you say it,’ said Mercury.

‘She’s the winner, actually,’ I said, ‘she got to do it so many more times than the other Mary, who never did it, and she still went to heaven.’

Mercury cackled as she walked out.

‘Where you going Mercury?’ called out Marcio, ‘You can’t just slip off like you do. I need to know where you are. How to get in touch with you.’

‘Over There,’ she yelled. ‘I’ll be in Over There with Amaral.’

I slumped down by Marcio on the sofa, avoiding the crazed eyes of the wooden saint.

‘You still smell weird,’ he said, ‘it’s getting worse. Like a swamp.’

I tried to change the subject, asked him about his book, which didn’t look a particularly good read: a self-published history of São Paulo’s North Zone with a lime-green cover, a photograph of a cat-filled cemetery and oversized gothic typeface.

‘I found it in my room. I’d forgotten about it. It’s the only book I’ve ever bought.’

‘You told me you hadn’t bought any of them.’

‘Except this one. I got it from this old guy who was always at the corner of Parada Inglesa metro station, standing with the other hawkers but dressed properly, in a suit, with a Panama hat, trying to sell this book that he wrote. He was so out of place, but he was so committed. He really believed in his book, that it was important. I had to buy one off him. How could I not? I bought two and gave one to my girlfriend.’

‘Your girlfriend?’

‘Ages ago. She didn’t like it, hated it, threw it out the window, said I didn’t understand her,’ he said.

‘Fair enough,’ I said.

‘You wouldn’t have done that. You would have liked it,’ he said.

‘Would I?’

‘Yeah,’ he said, eyes still on the book, ‘you would have got it.’

I took Marcio’s hand in my own, rested my head down on his shoulder. The monkeys had looted the bins and had their paws in a dripping ice-cream carton.

‘You seem better,’ I said, ‘than this morning, at least. I thought you were going crazy.’

‘I’m tired by all this,’ he said, ‘The pile driver was driving me mad. I didn’t have a plan but I do now. This book is what I needed. It gives the whole history of the land around here. None of the people who say they own it do. It was all Indian land, at first, a settlement of Guianese natives around the river. The Jesuits came and took the village over, converting the Indians and then taking their land.’

‘I told you the Jesuits were bad. You don’t get that rich by praying,’ I said.

‘The priests applied to the Portuguese for a land grant so they could protect the Indians from being enslaved in all the plantations that were being set up. The King granted them 100 square miles, even though he didn’t own the land either. And then the Indians got enslaved anyway, and lost their land.’

‘And you thought you had things bad.’

‘The point is the government never had documents proving they owned any of this land around us, so no-one can prove that they bought it.’

‘But the government didn’t have documents for any of Brazil, right? That’s the Colonial project. You take land which lies beyond the legal framework of your culture in order to claim it as yours even though it could very well belong to other people. Because these people have nothing to do with your own justice or moral systems it’s supposed to not matter. Centuries go by and it’s all just become part of our histories.’

‘You English were the worst.’

‘We were bad. The Portuguese were terrible.’

‘It wasn’t my family that did it. We don’t even have sugar in the house.’

‘Who knows? We’re all connected, on some level.’

‘You sound like a lecture series.’

‘My grandfather has a lot of guilt. He gave half his money away.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘It’s not something I start out telling people,’ I said, ‘we’ve all got histories. All of us.’

‘In the 19th century, the whole of this stretch of the city, from Lapa right up to the Cantareira hills, was a coffee plantation owned by the Cubas family. They’re still around today, but they’re artists now, writers, left-wing, which is good for us.’

‘Why?’ I said.

‘I don’t know, I guess they must be liberal, egalitarian.’

‘Because they write?’

‘Better than working in finance.’

‘I dunno, really, when you get down to it. Everyone’s just trying to make their way.’

‘Look, whatever, the plantation mansion, it’s still there, in Lapa. There’s a photo of it here in the book. One of the relatives probably lives there still, maybe there’s some papers. If they have anything that proves that they owned the land…’

‘Which they never really did…’

‘OK, we’ve established that no-one owned the land, but if there is anything to prove that the Cubas’ were original owners of the land then Domingos Sertão really have no power to evict us or to take over this tower. They don’t have the right to now, either, but we don’t have lawyers or deeds or documents to fight them, so they’ll just do what they want with us.’

‘What if the Cubas’ decide they want the land back?’

‘It’s been so long. Why would they?’

‘Because it’s now worth, I dunno, a fortune, compared to what it had been when any of them last thought of it.’

One of the younger monkey’s put the ice-cream carton on its head. Its twin laughed hysterically and smacked him on the head. The mother yawned. I felt sickness bubble up once more, a great thick grey geyser.

‘I’m going to vomit,’ I said.

I threw up the last of the croissants and the pistachios and the raspberries and felt OK for a few moments before really wanting to eat again. I found the last of the crackers in the kitchen and started working my way through them at the table. Marcio came and sat with me, book in hand.

‘What’s up with you? You look grey,’ he said.

‘It’s the colour of your book, that’s what’s doing it,’ I said.

‘I quite like it,’ he said.

‘I need to talk to you,’ I said.

‘You always want to talk about something. Let’s go down to Lapa now, check out this house,’ he said.

‘I’m exhausted Marcio,’ I said, ‘I really need to sleep.’

‘What? It’s the middle of the day. Don’t be stupid. Let’s go.’

‘I don’t understand what you think you’ll find there though. Are you just going to knock on the door and ask if they have any land deeds for Tremembé?’

‘What have we got to lose?’

‘You still have a couple of days to find the deeds. At least you can get some money with those. That woman moving to Santos, she’s happy. The documents must be here somewhere. We should just carry on looking.’

‘I’ve looked everywhere.’

‘What about the storeroom? You still haven’t looked in there.’

Marcio shook his head.

‘No, no. I don’t want to go in there. I don’t want to. They won’t be in there, that place is just for old rubbish. Mercury just talks about going in to upset me. She knows it will upset me. She’s cruel like that. Come on, let’s go. We just have to get the metro from Parada Inglesa down to Luz then it’s only a couple of stops to Lapa. It won’t take us long. Forty minutes or so, that’s all.’

‘I feel so ill.’

Marcio pulled me up from my chair.

‘What is wrong with you? Come on, this is what you wanted, getting out, seeing the city. You should be happy.’

The first few stops on the blue line from Parada Inglesa were high about the city, built on steel girders looming over the road below, the legs of an iron giant stamping through the neighbourhood. Marcio and I sat side by side watching a cloud of black starlings swoop and scarf strange flowing shapes across yellow afternoon clouds. Except for the heat we could have been on the London overground watching a midwinter sunset. Sickness took another dogged bite out of me and I decided the birds must mean that now was the moment to tell Marcio I would be going home, tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that. Very soon, anyhow. I’d checked my account before we’d left and the money from Fasano had already been returned. More than that, I’d had an email from Monica’s assistant asking for Amaral’s contact details and my own passport number for him to

book flights and accommodation in London for us both. The Serpentine show was due to happen in ten days and he advised that we arrive a few days before in order to get over the jetlag. I would be paid a thousand pounds for the 'performance' and so would Amaral. It felt like a dream, except for the terrible nausea.

'Something great has happened,' I said, 'I'm going to London to do a show with Amaral.'

'What? How did you figure that out?'

'That big mess-up at the biennial launch. Francisco's boss, Monica, in the end she thought it was great. She wants us to repeat it in London. My flights are paid for, everything.'

'You're going home?'

'I'll come back,' I said.

'No, you won't,' he said.

We watched the starlings stretch away from us. He held me round the neck.

'Don't go,' he said.

'I have to.'

'I gave you my grandmother's ring.'

'You won't let me wear it round your mother. I can hardly use it.'

'Wear it round her, I don't care, you can wear it anytime. I'll deal with it. She's mad anyway, she's just mad.'

'I have to go. This is it for me, things will be different after this.'

Marcio shook his head.

'Don't tell me you're writing your name over things.'

'I'll be writing. But not my name. Other things.'

'The world is so fucking mad. That is not art what you do. It's vandalism.'

'You know who the Vandals were? They were a small Germanic tribe that managed to survive despite the whole might of the Roman empire trying to crush them. They sacked Rome for fourteen days and that's where the term vandalism comes: pointless destruction, especially of artwork. But we know now that they were also responsible for continuing Roman traditions like mosaic,

literature, coinage and really, they were just standing up for themselves in the face of this huge, fuck-off never ending power. And that's kind of an art too, isn't it? Self-defence?'

'How do you know that stuff?'

'Ah, I read a book on them once. I liked the cover. A gold mosaic of a man on a bucking horse.' I said.

'And your coinage? Are you getting paid for this trip?'

'Yeah. And flights and accommodation. You can come too. I can pay for your ticket.'

'You don't need to do that.'

'I've got enough, for your ticket back, and a bit more, to give us time to work things out.'

'I have to stay here. I need to get on with my life, work out what I'm going to do. London supermarkets, I've had enough of those.'

'You can't just keep reading on your mother's sofa.'

'That's what she says too,' said Marcio.

The starlings swooped and spread, together and apart, together and apart. Marcio gripped my hand between his.

'It won't last,' I said, 'this thing. If you don't come back with me.'

He shook his head, screwed his mouth up, watched the birds. The tunnel was coming up, we would soon be in darkness, these were our last moments with the clouds and the dancing shapes.

'I'm pregnant,' I said.

'I knew it,' he said, 'it's that muddy smell.'

'I'm not having it,' I said.

'You must.'

'Are you serious?'

'Of course. Remember the way you cried, that first night?'

'I can't. I'm too scared. I can't look after anything, not even myself. And we're not right, are we? It's not working.'

We went into the tunnel soon after this and only emerged into daylight at the entrance of Lapa Station. I told Marcio I was only joking about being pregnant. He laughed at me, told me to trust in

the power of the universe. A large covered market stood opposite, fruit, vegetables and livestock escaping from its edges. Marcio took out his lime-green book to examine the map of the 19th century coffee plantation.

'The market is on the site of what was the *senzala*. The mansion is just on the other side,' he said.

'I don't know what a *senzala* is,' I said.

'You don't?' said Marcio, looking at me strangely.

He read from his book which had a funny tone to it, the unedited voice of one old man who felt very close to his audience but nevertheless had a grand vision of history.

'The *senzala*, as we all know, were the slave quarters attached to the big houses of the plantations. They were spaces of confinement for the slave, prisoners of subhuman conditions. The architecture expressed a lordly will. A row of rooms without windows or furniture enclosed a courtyard where the slaves could be watched and commanded. The *senzala* represents brutality and violence however it was an architecture that, without intending, helped to foster and develop 'black-becoming', an affirmation of the will and solidarity and self-preservation that underpinned the African community in Brazil.'

'You can't believe it, can you?' I said, 'The cruelty.'

'I can,' said Marcio, 'things aren't that different now. Look, the guy carries on - the legacy of the *senzala* continues today in São Paulo, in the architecture of our apartments, with even the smallest containing quarters for a domestic servant to be on call 24 hours a day - Come on, let's cut through the market, that's the easiest way.'

He went to take my hand but then didn't, just pointed up ahead to the dark mouth of the warehouse. The smell was a thick wall, made up of various living and rotting things, meat, fruit, and fish, frightened chickens, human workers and shoppers, all sweating under a hot roof of amber-coloured plastic. I put my hand to my mouth, told Marcio I would be sick, that we had to go round. He ignored me, pulled me on with him, said we'd go through the dry goods section which would not have such a reek about it. It was a labyrinth of little stalls and finding the exit to the opposite side of the market was not straightforward. Enamelware, cheap suitcases, brooms, blue plastic vats of brown and

black and yellow beans, church candles, icons, rings of foul-smelling Indian tobacco wound-up like greasy cobras, frothy costumes in blue and white and green. One tiny, wrinkled woman in a white turban sat making dolls from bushels of straw. The little boys and girls, roughly made but with skirts and eyes and even hats, sat lined up in a row on her table as she worked. I picked one up, thinking it was a sweet present for a child. Marcio took it from me, told me they were for cursing not playing, bought one from the lady along with some pins. She told him to go to the temple nearby to get it working but he said we didn't have time.

'Is that for me?' I said.

Marcio laughed, put his arm round me.

'I wasn't thinking of you. We're not that bad yet. The manager at the building site, maybe. Or Amaral, if he doesn't treat my sister right. That guy Francisco who left you with that massive hotel bill.'

I shook my head and tried to look unperturbed.

We emerged from the market into a steel blue sky, hard sun on our faces, facing rows of shabby warehouses and workshops, metalworkers, electronics, black tires, fridges. Marcio was dismayed as there was no sign of the big house which was marked right next to the *senzala*. When he examined the book's map however, he realised we had come out to the West of the slave quarters and not to the East where the mansion was located. I refused to go back into the market so there was no other way than to skirt round the backstreets.

Strolling through these lanes was surprisingly pleasant. Trees lined the way shading brick buildings of only two or three stories facing directly onto black cobbled pavements. A saxophone practised the blues scale by an open window, music floating through the still air, easy notes all around us. It was a pleasure to peer into the house's large windows at these nice lives. An emerald green parrot chatted to a young man with a hooked nose leaning back on a tall wooden chair. The smell of garlic being fried in butter reeked but also made my mouth water. A radio played scratchy Argentinian tango; the sound of a well-made shoe stamped along.

‘My ma has a cousin who lives around here. It didn’t used to be like this,’ said Marcio, ‘this used to be a bad bit of the city. Dangerous. There’s a road that leads straight to Over There from here. A lot of robberies happened at Lapa Station. I don’t know what’s happened.’

‘In London it’s called gentrification,’ I said.

‘It’s great,’ said Marcio, ‘ma would love it. I could just see her here.’

…….

In the last days of the campaign, when they could enter what was left of the huts, the victors were terribly disappointed. The hard-won victory gave them the right to sack the ruined homes, and nothing was exempt from their insatiable curiosity. But it was one of the most unrewarding spoils of war in history. In place of riches they found broken images and coconut shell rosaries. What most taunted their greed were the letters, miscellaneous writings, and especially the terrible verses that they found on poor scraps of paper. These limp sheets, with their irregular handwriting and barbarous spelling, seemed to be a photographic image of the twisted thoughts of these people. These scrapes were worth everything because they were worth nothing. They recorded the preaching of Antonio Conselheiro, and as one read them over, it was evident just how harmless his sermons really were: they simply reflected the poor man’s confusion. Every line was imbued with the same vague and incongruous religious doctrine.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

……

Chapter 18

We walked past the mansion two or three times before we realised it was the house we were looking for. It had been boarded up and was surrounded by the placards of another construction company on which were pinned pictures for another tower-block, to be called Plantation Residence. When I saw this, I wanted to give up right away, go back to the apartment, email Monica's assistant about my ticket to London, persuade Mercury that Amaral should go with me, maybe even buy her a ticket too, begin to sort out his passport, google abortions. But then Marcio found a gap in the fencing and squeezed himself through. We argued through the hole.

'I don't want to, Marcio,' I said.

'Come on,' he said, 'what's going to happen?'

'You're not going to find anything in there.'

'Let's just have a look,' he said.

'That gap's too small,' I said.

'Just come on, you're not that big. Yet,' he said, grabbing my hand and pulling me through. I burst over to the other side.

'I'm scared,' I said, 'what if there's a dog? Security.'

'Don't be stupid. I'm right here beside you. I won't let anything happen,' he said.

We moved ourselves through waist-length grass, past a tangle of matted trees and jungle creepers and wild-flowers, towards the cobwebby mess of the house. It was an enormous old stucco mansion, the white plaster now a sorry grey, streaked with black and green, mould and damp, half the shutters hanging lop-sided off solitary rusty nails. Still, it was clear that in its time it had been a beautiful and elegant home. We stood gingerly on the rotten verandah. Marcio put his face to the windows to try and see inside but the glass was almost opaque with age and neglect. I tried the handle of a door. It came off in my hand with a cloud of ants and dust.

'Let's go home,' I said, 'I'm exhausted. I could just lie down on this floor here.'

'It's the baby, that's why you're tired.'

'It's not a baby. It's just some cells. It's you. You're what tires me out.'

'I know it's been hard,' he said, 'it's not been easy for me. If you laid down here all night in the rain for me, you know, I couldn't love you more.'

Marcio tried another handle. It stayed and the door wrenched open. He slipped inside.

‘No Marcio, please, you don’t know what’s in there.’

‘Come on, just a little further, then we’ll go home,’ he called out.

I did not want to be left alone outside and so I had no choice but to follow him on.

We wandered softly through the sooty rooms. I tried to open one rusted window, but it was soldered shut by damp. Wildflowers grew from cracks in the floor and the doorframes were scattered with constellations of termite holes. The ceilings were high and the ornate plaster moldings that must have once held chandeliers were intact. The large, yellowed windows let in a deep pea-green light, filtered through the overgrown garden. The city had completely receded from view.

‘No-one could hear you scream in here,’ I said.

‘Why are you so worried about me killing you all the time?’ said Marcio.

‘You’re not a very stable person,’ I replied, brushing my hand across a thick lump in the crumbling plaster that turned out to be a nest of spiders. They scurried across the wall in a burst. I felt sick, seeing so many little babies scattering into new corners to make yet more cobwebs. All these animals, all these ghosts, soon to be demolished, completely erased.

‘The light must have been amazing in this place,’ said Marcio.

Great heavy sunbeams carried streams of dust towards the main hall which was of Tudor palace proportions.

‘The living room is the size of your ma’s apartment. It’s mad. How could they have let it all go like this?’ I said.

‘It happens, more than you think. The place was built in the countryside, surrounded by farmland. At some point the family must have sold or lost the plantation but kept the house. The city engulfed it, probably in the 30s or 40s, from the look of the streets. In the 80s the economy crashed, crime exploded. Having a large house was dangerous, you were a target. It’s still like that today. That’s why everyone wants to live in tower-blocks. We feel safer, with a guard, a double security entrance, other people close at hand. I bet the family just left, went to live in a penthouse in Itaim Bibi, maybe to Rio.’

‘But why didn’t they sell the house? Make some money. It doesn’t make sense to just leave it like this.’

‘Probably same problem as us, they didn’t have the documents to sell it. Maybe they didn’t own the land either, after all.’

‘This country is crazy,’ I said.

‘Brazil is not for beginners,’ said Marcio, ‘you know who said that? The guy who wrote ‘The Girl from Ipanema’. Tom Jobim, before he left to live in America.’

‘I wish we’d gone there, to Ipanema. Things would have been different if we’d had been on the beach,’ I said.

‘You can’t trust men from Rio,’ said Marcio.

Our footsteps echoed round us as we ranged through the entrance hall down to the archaic kitchen. Sweeps of dead flies crunched beneath our feet. It wasn’t hard though, to imagine the large glass doors cleared of vines, opening out into the garden whilst Marcio and I made tea and coffee, breakfast, lunch, dinner, all the daily rhythms of life which make up the weeks and months and suddenly the years. My mind roamed through the rooms in which I had lived my life so far. Filmy, pixelated views of my first years: Portuguese covers embroidered with moons and stars, heavy on my sleepy limbs, a high window left ajar for the hot dry breeze, the hooing of the wood pigeon, a sugared biscuit dipped in thick coffee, pushed into my mouth with murmured songs by our old Angolan housekeeper. The lilac first light that haunted me still. Moody teenage room, stale patchouli incense, old records stolen from my father - Miles Davis, Betty Smith, A Love Supreme, Stan Getz in Brazil, and me with no idea of where that country even was. Smoking cigarettes out my window, blowing smoke to a one note samba, the local church lit up yellow in the night, chiming out the midnight hour. Spartan college room, the tree I thought of as my own, keeping me company in the lonely first months, dropping glossy red leaves the shape of hearts outside my window that I kicked and ground into a mush, waiting nervously for a tutorial, clutching my Ruskin essay, rolled tightly up in my hand like a sword. Then south London, New Cross, a room on the Old Kent Road, buses and sirens, fights and parties. Jamaican take-away, jerk chicken and goat, the Nigerian shop below playing high-life all night, yellow beacon in the dark, guiding me home, Ike handing me plantains to fry for my breakfast.

Hackney Central, London Fields, the squatted Lido, scuzzy beautiful canal, moorhens and heroin and light and dark. All these rooms and all these years, peopled by a young woman that no longer existed, all the skin and hair and cells from those times now just lint and earth. I had no idea where my next home would be, tried to ignore the image that kept flashing in my mind of the thing inside me, its stumpy little arms and legs, its goldfish mouth, its furious heartbeat.

'I've found a way out,' said Marcio, 'into the back garden. Let's go.'

He turned on his side and slid himself through a door from which the glass had gone completely. I'd lost my fear now and didn't complain, just followed him on. We walked quietly through hoary vines that had twisted and curved themselves into bawdy figures, jumping and twirling, as if in a gavotte together. We went on further and further, into the heart of what had been an orchard, until we reached a clearing. Ornate stone benches sat around a dried-up fountain littered with leaves and dead snake skins. In the centre of the empty pool was a little marble god, I couldn't tell who, a dirty babyish thing with wings and cherub cheeks, head back, mouth open to the sky, splattered in bird shit.

'I'm going to be sick again,' I said.

We sat down on the bench, Marcio instructed me to put my head between my knees, which didn't help. He put his hands on my skull, told me he was a desert mystic who could cure all my mental and physical illnesses.

'Don't joke. It's horrible,' I said, 'feeling like this.'

'It can't be that bad,' said Marcio.

'You can't understand till it happens to you, which it never will. It's like being held underwater. I couldn't stand this for nine months.'

'Apparently the sickness goes, after a while.'

'How do you know that?'

'I had a book on it.'

'We can barely take care of ourselves. It would end up looking like that cherub, if we had a baby.'

'Yeah.'

‘Come back with me.’

‘I can’t, can I? My visa.’

‘We could get married, if you still want to.’

‘I still need to find a job to do. A profession. You’re not the only one who went to university, June, though you think you are.’

‘I don’t think that,’ I said.

‘You do. You think you’re smarter than everyone, secretly, and that your country is better than any other.’

‘It’s not true.’

‘It is.’

‘Why don’t you study something? It’s June now, you’ve got time to get onto a course for September. We could just start again, in the Autumn, in London, pretend this summer never happened.’

‘It’s too expensive to study there. I wanted to but everything got eaten up with work and with rent and with just living there.’

‘It pays off. We’d get jobs.’

‘It’s horrible. Thinking about getting rid of a baby,’ he said.

‘I know,’ I said.

I got up and began to walk further on into the garden. Marcio followed me. I didn’t know where I was going, just wanted to walk till we found the edge of this place so we could turn around and start our return journey as soon as possible. I pushed my way through loops of blackened vines which hung from a line of trees. I saw these were old English apples that over the years had been smothered in spidery creepers, thick lawn moss, sluttish orchids that would make a home in any bit of bark and damp they could. I assumed this first wall of hanging vegetation was merely a curtain which would thin and disappear once I passed behind it. Instead, it thickened and grew densely around me until the point where there was very little sun penetrating the canopy I found over my head. The sound of water drops, solidified humidity, closed in. I jumped, feeling something on my shoulder, which turned out to be Marcio.

‘Let’s go home,’ he said, ‘it’s not nice in here. There’ll be insects. I don’t want you to get bitten.’

‘OK,’ I said.

‘There aren’t any deeds here,’ he said.

‘No,’ I said.

‘I don’t know if there ever were. The Cubas family didn’t own the land either I don’t think,’ he said.

‘Well, we know they didn’t, not really,’ I said.

We picked our way back across fallen branches, little stagnant ponds buzzing with mosquitos. We arrived at one tree which had a colony of forest bees buzzing around a waxy hive shaped like a large ear and realised that we had been going around in circles. Marcio said that this was crazy as we were in such small space, it should be easy to get out again, but we needed to be careful because the bees were dangerous. We picked a direction and just kept heading straight, but still we came back to the beehive. Damp was creeping into my Converse. The smell of rotten tubers clogged up my nose and made me light-headed.

‘I don’t feel well,’ I said, ‘I’m really thirsty.’

Marcio took his shirt off. I told him it wasn’t really the time for that kind of thing though it was nice to see his stomach which I liked so much. He said he didn’t want me to get stung, laid it down on mossy branch, told me to sit down. He picked a large creamy flower hanging from a black tree, plucked out its pink stamens and told me to suck on them. I asked him if he was trying to poison me. He said it was nectar and very hydrating. I was still dubious, couldn’t believe he would ever know that kind of thing, living his whole life in São Paulo. He told me his great-grandmother had been an Indigenous Indian. His great-grandfather had found his wife by lassoing her in the forest.

‘That’s horrific,’ I said.

‘They had twelve children together so they must have got on alright in the end,’ he said.

‘I wish we’d never come in here,’ I said, ‘I’m frightened. It was a stupid idea. It was never going to solve anything.’

‘Just rest a little. It’s dense but it can only be a very small patch of jungle. We’re in the middle of the city.’

‘It’s a massive megacity, though. It’s one of the biggest in the world. There’re more people living here than in the whole of Portugal. This could be a massive bit of wasteland too. You could have an acre of jungle in here and no-one would know.’

‘Just keep calm. Don’t panic. It doesn’t help. Rest a little now. Suck on the stamens.’

‘Have you seen that film, *Into the Wild?* This kid goes to camp out in the wilderness and it goes wrong and he ends up dying even though he was just half an hour’s walk away from a railway track.*’*

‘Don’t be stupid. That’s not going to happen to us. Just keep calm.’

‘I feel so sick.’

‘I’ll tell you a story.’

He told me the story his mother used to tell him when he was naughty, a story which her mother had told her and who had heard it from her own mother, about how the stars had been born. The sky in the forest used to be dark without stars. One day the women who lived in the forest found they had no corn left. They went into the brilliant deep green woods to search for corn but couldn’t find any. Their young sons were lucky and so the women went back to the village to fetch them into the forest to help them search for corn. They soon found a lush field of corn in a clearing. The mothers began to harvest the corn and so did the boys. Afterwards the boys escaped back to the village with all the corn and asked their grandmothers to make it into a cake for them. They ate all the cake and then became very nervous about their mothers who would be returning soon and would be angry. They asked hummingbirds to attach a vine to the sky and began climbing up it. The mothers returned to find their children halfway to the sky. They began climbing up it themselves but the vine was cut and the women fell to earth to become jaguars. The fat boys are now brilliant stars in the sky.

‘I don’t understand these tales you tell,’ I said.

Marcio shrugged.

‘You unlock them. They’re like a secret.’

‘It’s the worst thing, for your mother to not want you,’ I said, ‘it’s the worse feeling in the world, for a child to know that they’re unwanted.’

‘The story doesn’t say that. The mothers wanted their sons, they were just angry. They climbed up the vines to catch them. It’s far worse to not exist,’ he said.

‘The boys do exist. They’re timeless stars in the sky,’ I said.

‘They should have stayed and faced the music. Not run away like that,’ he said.

‘What happened to your father?’ I said, ‘Your ma said he was always disappearing. That you often disappear like he did. She said you were so alike.’

Marcio shook his head.

‘She shouldn’t have said those things,’ he said.

‘What happened to him?’

‘He’s not here anymore. He’s not coming back.’

‘How do I know you wouldn’t disappear one day, wouldn’t leave me like he left your ma?’

‘I would never do that.’

‘How do I know?’

‘My father killed himself. He committed suicide.’

I was so shocked that I laughed when Marcio told me this. I put my hand over my mouth, couldn’t trust myself to speak. Marcio clasped at his own mouth too, unable to take back the secret he had just told me. We looked at each other like that for a while, hands over our untrustworthy mouths. I had a terrible urge, the worst urge, to write over his bare stomach. It was impossible to resist despite my resolution to stop all of that. I took the pen out of my bag, knelt on the mossy floor, my head by his waist, pen poised, waiting for his hand to pull my wrist away as it had so often done before.

‘Go on,’ he said, ‘I don’t care. Do want you want. It’s only skin.’

I pulled down his trousers slightly and wrote the word ‘sorry’ in the smallest letters on the bump of his hipbone. He read the word and shook his head, crouched down to my height and told me it wasn’t my fault, before turning himself around and hoisting me on his back.

‘He was just sick. Really sick and we didn’t know it. Let’s get out of here,’ he said, ‘before it gets dark. We would be in trouble then.’

We circled once more, finding ourselves again at the beehive and for the first time Marcio began to look a little concerned.

'This is mad. To be locked in this tiny space like this,' he said, 'let's just stop still. Listen for the sounds of the road.'

We stood like statues in the thick and mysterious green, listened to the fizzing, hissing, cooing, spreading of the animals and birds and plants which were in constant movement. I could hear no car, no bus, no train, no human voice. I moaned to myself in fright. Marcio put his finger to his lips. His ear turned up. He had heard something I hadn't.

'I can't believe it. It's Ney Mattogrosso,' he said.

'Who?'

'Someone's playing *Sangue Latino*,' he said, 'listen, it's this way.'

He kissed me hard on the lips and then pulled me along through the soft moss, the swampish trees. As we went further on, I too could hear the music begin to filter through the leaves, the swinging rhythm of a bass, the chick chick chick of the *maracas,* the high falsetto of Ney, singing about his captive soul, his Latin blood, walking alone, lying and cheating and dying and living, all the treaties he broke, all the rites he betrayed, his captive soul, his Latin blood.

We emerged at the very edge of the property, where the jungly bracken finally ended, backing onto the courtyard of a *serralheria*, a workshop in which tyres were made and fitted to cars. Someone had done their best to make the atmosphere less industrial by placing pots of purple flowering oregano bushes around and about the tyres. The woody fragrance of the plants had attracted clouds of yellow butterflies although even these delicate creatures could not disguise the fact that the place was still a working garage. There was just one man working, dressed in an oily boilersuit and an incongruously flamboyant baseball cap covered in sequins which caught the early evening light and flickered it around the forecourt. He was involved in two activities: singing along in a high falsetto to Mattogrosso blasting statically from his small ghetto blaster and branding a batch of fresh shiny tires with a cast iron stamp. He kept the stamp in an oil can burning with hot coals. Each time he hit a high note he would thrust his iron stick into the inside of a tire which would then envelop him in a hissing tarry cloud of smoke that set him off in a fit of coughing. When the cloud finally receded, he would

take up his singing once more, waiting for either the high note or the brand to become hot again, before once more plunging it another tire. The man really proved that life wasn't all about what you do but how you do it too.

'Why did you never tell me?' I said.

'It's not easy to talk about,' Marcio said.

'You all pretend it never happened,' I said.

'We're ashamed. The shame is terrible,' he said, 'the guilt.'

'Why did he do it?'

'We'll be talking about that till we die, June,' he said, 'he was sick. He was frightened.'

'Things happened, with Francisco,' I said.

'I knew it had,' said Marcio, 'it was that smell, that muddy smell.'

'You said that was the baby.'

'It's the smell of secrets.'

'I didn't want to,' I said, 'I really didn't want to.'

'Oh June,' he said.

'It wasn't that bad. It was a misunderstanding,' I said.

'What do you want to do?'

'Go home and eat something,' I said.

We jumped the rotten fence and cut across the tire workshop, creepers in our hair, streaks of moss over our clothes, mud-covered knees. We nodded at the man and he smiled and waved to us before returning to his tires and his *Secos e Molhados.*

…….

It is truly regrettable that in these times we do not have a Maudsley, who knew the difference between good sense and insanity, to prevent nations from committing acts of madness and crimes against humanity.

Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands*

Chapter 19

We arrived home to Tremembé tower to find that the same placards surrounding the neighbouring site were now surrounding Marcio's block. Pinned to these boards were the same pictures of the new rural condo with its tall spindly towers and its rolling landscaped gardens and the same slogan 'Your private countryside retreat in the heart of the city.'

'We've just come from there,' I said, picking the last twigs from Marcio's black hair.

The security gate which had been causing us problems was now permanently propped open, a working entrance where trucks and cars and workmen could come and go as they pleased. The few labourers who had arrived all wore boilersuits in an angelic sky blue. They weren't working however, but kneeling towards the tower in a line, muttering to themselves, looking up towards the building.

'They're praying,' said Marcio.

Ursula's life-size saint stood frowning down from the first-floor window, along with another sculpture of a holy woman in a red veil holding a bushel of corn. The woman had a glazed, semi-shocked expression on her face, a similar look of madness to the first saint, although she appeared less furious and more simply trodden down. The lift was now closed off with red and white striped tape so we took the fire escape stairs up to the apartment, found Mercury red-eyed and wet-faced sitting amongst the enormous icons.

'Mercury,' said Marcio, threading his way over to her, 'don't cry. We'll find another place to live, we must. We're the only ones left in here now, there's hardly any point trying to fight it anymore. Just pack what you love, leave the rest.'

'I'm not crying because of the apartment, *burra,'* she spat at him, 'I couldn't care less if they knocked this place down. I hate it. All it is is bad times.'

'They weren't all bad times,' said Marcio.

‘You know what I mean. I can’t stand living here,’ she said.

‘Why are you crying then? Has one of those men done something to you?’ said Marcio.

‘You always think it’s that,’ I said, ‘that’s all you think about.’

Mercury looked daggers at me, said it was me who had done something to her, not those poor guys downstairs. She’d just come from Over There*,* Amaral was going to London, to take part in the show. The biennial people had even sorted out a passport for him, he was collecting it today from the Federal Police. I tried to look shocked although I’d known since I received the email from Monica’s assistant that this was the plan.

‘This is your fault,’ she said to me, ‘I asked you not to tell him and you did.’

‘I didn’t,’ I said, ‘they must have had his number already.’

‘It’s not that bad, Mercury,’ said Marcio, ‘he’s going to come back, in just a few days, maybe a week or two.’

‘He won’t come back,’ she said, ‘I know him.’

‘If he stays, he’ll be illegal,’ I said.

‘Do you think he cares?’ she said.

‘He’ll come back Mercury,’ said Marcio. ‘Look at me, I came back.’

‘That’s because you’re an idiot. Believing ma’s story that she needed your help to save the apartment. She can look after herself. She just wanted you back here with her, couldn’t stand you staying over there with your English girlfriend. She said you’d get her pregnant and then you’d never come home.’

‘You told them about me?’ I said.

‘That’s all he talked about,’ said Mercury.

Marcio growled at his sister.

‘I spent two weeks looking for the deeds to this place. You didn’t help. Neither ma,’ he said.

‘You knew where they were. We all did. They’re somewhere in the storeroom. But you didn’t want to go in there and neither did I and neither did ma so there it is.’

‘Papers are just a waste of time,’ said Marcio, ‘there’s piles of them everywhere, half of them are fake, they don’t mean anything without a lawyer.’

‘So why did you go so mad looking for them?’ I said.

‘I couldn’t think of anything else to do.’

‘And then ma picks up a couple of old saints and all those guys down there refuse to work and start praying. She stopped the whole thing just like that. She understands how things work, she knows what she’s doing. She doesn’t need you.’

‘You can come home with me then, Marcio,’ I said, ‘if that’s the case.’

Mercury looked knives and daggers at me.

‘I gave you rides all over the place and you took my boyfriend and you want to take my brother too?’ she said.

‘It’s not like that,’ I said.

Mercury didn’t want to listen, said she had to get ready for work, she was late already. Marcio told her she should call in sick, she wasn’t in a state to drive into the centre but she said she didn’t have a choice. It was a big day. The novella star Angelina Maria Rita Regina was having a baby gender reveal at the new Baudelaire’s and Mercury was taking the photos.

‘What’s a gender reveal party?’ I said.

Marcio and Mercury both looked at me like I had just crawled out of a big dark cave.

‘You don’t know?’ said Marcio. ‘It’s so big here.’

‘Is it something to do with sex-changes?’ I said.

‘It’s when you reveal the gender of your baby at a party,’ said Mercury, wiping at her eyes.

‘What, after it’s born?’ I said.

‘No, before. When the mother is still pregnant,’ said Marcio.

‘That’s fucking weird,’ I said.

Mercury laughed a little. I wasn’t forgiven but she couldn’t help showing me the best clips of baby reveal parties on my laptop before she left. I was stunned. I had no idea that people could be so excited about having a baby. And then to make a whole show about whether it was going to be a boy or a girl for other people, their friends and families, who also seemed to go absolutely nuts when they found out.

‘This is crazy,’ I said.

‘Wait, Mercury,’ said Marcio, ‘show her the one that happened in Ibirapuera park last year. It’s on Youtube.’

A footballer and his wife had held a gender reveal picnic in the park which appeared at first a sedately chic affair with a large cream cake poised to expose either a pink or blue sponge. Before the cake was cut however an enormous baby with a nappy and a blue bib (the baby was a boy) burst from the nearby woods and came rampaging through the guests, high fiving the women and doing a drug-addled twerk. It was the footballer’s brother who had a problem with cocaine and had taken it upon himself to liven up the party. A few little children began to scream in fear. An angry grandad smacked the big baby on the bottom. It fell over and crashed into the champagne and cake which squidged blue icing all over the grass. The mother-to-be burst into tears. She had wanted a girl.

‘Angelina wants a girl too. No-one knows what it is though yet. Today’s a real surprise, not one of those crappy fake ones,’ said Mercury, ‘you can always tell when the mother knows already.’

Mercury showed us pictures on her camera that she’d taken yesterday, towers of pastel pink and blue macaroons and floating balloons waiting in the kitchens of Baudelaire’s bakery in preparation for the reveal, as well as an enormous *piñata* in the shape of a baby.

‘The only person who knows the sex of the baby except the doctor is the *piñata* maker,’ said Mercury, ‘They had a *motoboy* collect the paper from the clinic and drive straight over to Bom Retiro with it. That baby has blue or pink confetti inside it, but no-one knows which except the man who put it in there.’

‘The mother is going to hit the baby *piñata* to reveal the sex?’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ said Mercury.

‘I don’t think they thought that through,’ I said.

‘You’re having a girl,’ said Mercury to me.

‘It’s a boy,’ said Marcio.

‘Don’t say those things,’ I said, ‘don’t talk about it. It’s neither.’

‘It is,’ said Mercury, ‘it’s got to be.’

The video of the giant stampeding baby cheered Mercury up enough to feel a little more positive about Amaral. She played with the idea of getting pregnant herself in order to keep him in

São Paulo but Marcio pointed out that she didn't really have enough time to see that plan through before tomorrow evening. She asked Marcio instead to go and talk to Amaral for her. He would be at the Federal Police now and he wouldn't leave for a while, he'd want to eat one of those hotdogs he liked so much and which always put him in a good mood.

'Make him promise to come back,' she said.

'Don't we need to start moving all this stuff out the apartment?' I said, 'where's it all going to go?'

Mercury said that Ursula wasn't worried, wasn't moving. She had told Mercury to just leave everything where it was. She was out right now collecting a copy of the little brown madonna, Santa Maria de Aparecida, which the Evangelicals were ungluing from the old altar today. None of those men would touch the building if that tiny woman was in the window. We watched the labourers down below being pulled up from their knees by the same man in the high viz jacket who had stuck up the eviction notices.

'Marcio should be doing the London show, not Amaral,' said Mercury, 'He taught him how to climb in the first place. Amaral was so clumsy when he first started but Marcio never fell.'

'Yeah, but I lost my nerve. I didn't want to do it anymore. I hate the edges of buildings now,' said Marcio.

Mercury started crying again. Marcio put his arms round her, told her not to get herself in a state, he would do what he could to help her, they were family, twins, after all. They went off together on the bike leaving me alone in the apartment. I had a few pages of my book left so ended up just sitting on the sofa reading. The ending was terrible. They killed all the refugees, all of them, even the children. Sickness all mixed up inside me, imagining it all. I had a shiver thinking of the baby inside me, maybe even be related to one of those victims. I opened my laptop, sat with it looking out the window. The monkeys had gone. The men in the boilersuits were now on their feet, eyes down to the floor, while the man in the jacket gave them a lecture. One of them glanced back up to the saints and saw my face. I put my hands in prayer and nodded in a way which I hoped looked sage-like. He tilted his head back at me like he understood. I bowed in a meditative pose whilst I checked my emails. One from my mother telling me she had had a strange dream. She had been a little boy, part of a group of

friends who lived in a village deep within a forest. One day they heard a beautiful bird among the trees and went to look for it. It was an ugly old woman playing the flute. They were all so angry because they thought that beautiful sounds should only come from beautiful people. They shot the flute player with their bows and arrows. She turned into a beautiful bird and they were all enchanted once more. Then one of the boys shot the bird and the tiny thing disappeared completely although the song continued. My mother woke up unsettled. Because the dream had taken place in a far-off jungle she decided it must be about me. She asked me for my news and sent me photos of my room which she had just finished redecorating. She had not been able to cover all my drawings and writings with emulsion so in the end she had papered the walls in a design called the Symphony of Birds which came from an expensive interiors brand. Another email, from Monica's assistant, sending me details of the flight bookings. Two seats on British Airways, leaving São Paulo Guarulhos tomorrow evening at 21.30. I felt my chest tighten and expand. I told myself that it wasn't how Mercury was saying it was, that Amaral would return to Brazil and Marcio would at some point come back to me. Still, I had this kind of metallic taste in my mouth that could have just been my nausea but also could have been guilt. I'd asked Marcio about his sister on our journey back to the North Zone from the old plantation house. Had she always been such a shifting, slippery girl or was it their father that had done it to her? He'd shaken his head, she'd always been like that. It wasn't anything to do with their father but the strange name she had been given which made her dart all over like a hummingbird, so airy, so…*mercurial.*

'They should have called her Maria,' said Marcio, 'like my mother wanted. The name you're given means something. It's a big thing, naming a child.'

I watched the men downstairs talk among themselves, arms crossed, discussing, I imagined, whether to begin emptying the building or to get back down on their knees. I googled the meaning of the name Marcio, ended up on a baby-naming website which was another first for me. *Marcio is a boy's name of Old French origin meaning 'borderland or frontier'.* Another site said that the name came from the Italian, from Mars, the Roman fertility god for whom the month of March was named. I googled my own name, never having thought it meant anything but the month I was born. *June is a gender-neutral name of Latin origin meaning 'young'. It comes from the summer month of June,*

which itself is derived from Juno, a powerful Roman goddess who was considered the protector of marriage and childbirth. I googled a few more sites and it all came back with the same answer, June meant follower of Juno. All three of us were mythical creatures in the end, not just Mercury. I googled abortions. There was all sorts of shit on the internet about those, though I knew it all already. I felt the sickness rise again as I read, pulling me under its swampy filmy surface yet again. There were two types of available - one before ten weeks which was just a pill and the other which was a surgical procedure that happened later. I prayed to someone, maybe Mary Magdalene standing there beside me, that I was still under ten weeks. I cast my mind back to the first days here, and then the week before that, when Marcio and I had been packing, and then before that, in Soho together eating pistachio ice-cream. I still couldn't remember when my last period was. Before that had been when I had got the sack and Marcio had taken me for noodles and beer. It hadn't been then either. Maybe the week before that? I counted on my fingers and found that I ran out. I estimated, in the end, about 9 to 12 weeks and ended up googling baby development too, which I hadn't done the last time. There were so many websites telling pregnant women what was happening with their baby week by week. It was astonishing. Apparently at 12 weeks a baby was about 5 - 6 cm and 14 grams. The size of a plum, was how one article described it. My eyes hurt. I shut the laptop, closed my eyes, thought of Damsons and Mirabelles and Greengages, decided Plum was a good name for a child. Better than June or Marcio or Mercury, fruitful, without unnecessary baggage or meaning. I found my rucksack dumped in a corner, took out my Posca and wrote the word Plum carefully on my skin next to my own name. Once I had finished it took me a few moments to realise what I had done to myself and then I was horrified.

'Why the fuck did you do that?' I said.

I went to the bathroom to try and scrub the letters off even though I knew they would not. I rubbed and rubbed until my skin was bright red and began to really hurt. I gave up, pulled my top down, threw my pen on the floor and stamped on it.

'Fucking idiot,' I said to myself, picking up the unbroken pen, like a cockroach really, how indestructible it was, opened the window and lobbed it out. The men in boilersuits below all looked at me, then looked at the pen that had rolled towards them.

'The word of God is yours, brothers,' I said with as much solemnity as I could muster.

I lay on the sofa with my arms covering my face, trying to block out the light. Where the hell was Ursula? She must be coming back soon, it was so late in the day now. I couldn't believe it but I was hungry and wanted her to start cooking the daily beans and rice. The sound of the pile driver began again. I sat up and looked out the window. The men were scattering, finally going back to whatever jobs they had been assigned. There seemed to be no plan in place for when they arrived at the apartment to do a final clearing of the building, which would happen tomorrow probably, or the day after at the latest. Would Ursula simply leave all this stuff in here to be demolished? I got up off the sofa and went into the kitchen, put my hand on the handle of the storeroom where none of us were allowed to go, or wanted to go.

It opened easily. I could smell the damp, loam and mushrooms. I felt along the side of the door for a light, clicked it on. A single dim bulb lit up the surprisingly large room. I went in and closed the door behind me, unsure of what I was really doing in there. The place was piled high with forgotten things, bags of children's clothes, boxes of notebooks from Marcio's schooldays, albums of faded photos of the family together, Mercury and Marcio in matching bell-bottom jeans, Ursula in her headscarf, impossibly thin, beautiful yellow eyes, beatific and statuesque. Their father João, mostly behind the camera, shy when he was captured himself, hiding behind his children who he hugged tightly to him. Mercury's face was different, still delicate, birdlike but she didn't look like she pecked at random as she did now. Her eyes were simpler. I disagreed with Marcio that she had always been as she was now. It wasn't her name, it was her past, of course it was. I went further into the room which I remembered had been designed as a maid's living quarters. It stopped seeming large and was suddenly very small indeed. There was still a narrow bed, just enough room for one adult woman to curl up upon at the end of a long day. A rusted reading lamp was clipped to the headboard. On top of the bed, like a coffin, were stacks of books which I realised by the subjects must have been Marcio's father's library: books on football, books on cars, books on fixing cars, books on painting houses, books on fixing houses, books on children, books on disciplining children, one book on the history of Brazil from the 15th century to the present day, one novel, *Vidas Secas,* and one last copy of *Backlands*. Beyond the bed was a miniscule box of a bathroom, an electric shower above a toilet and a mirrored cabinet, stained by the dripping shower. I opened the cabinet and saw Ursula's name written

on the inside and the date, just over a year before the twins had been born. The cabinet housed a retro looking unopened toothbrush and several defunct identity cards, bank cards, driving licences and even library memberships. Most of them were in Ursula's or her husband's name but there was also a card from the University of São Paulo in the name of Aires Bragança, who was, according to his identity, a professor of political science. There was a black cross on the back marking the card invalid. Something in the air suddenly made my skin crawl. There were several box files sitting on the toilet seat, one of them even marked 'documents' but I left them where they were. Of course, the deeds to the apartment were somewhere in these quarters but if I was Ursula, or Marcio or Mercury, I would prefer to have the whole place demolished than be forced to look through all this. The dim light overhead flickered for a moment, on and off. I cried out to myself, picked my way as carefully as I could over all the stuff. As I was about to leave a smooth marble-like paperweight sitting on top of a plastic bag full of baby blankets caught my eye. I picked it up and held it in the air and as I did a strong light and then a shadow passed over it. Ursula, opening the door of the storeroom.

'What are you doing in here?' she said.

'Looking for the deeds,' she said.

'They aren't in here. Marcio told you that. He told you not to go in here.'

'I was just trying to help.'

'We let you stay in our house, stay in our family and you do the one thing we have asked you not to do.'

'There's a box marked documents in here.'

'You've been rifling around. The deeds aren't in that box. There are no deeds.'

'There must be.'

'Of course, there must be some papers, somewhere. But they don't have our names on them.'

'Whose name do they have then?'

'The name of the professor who lived here before us, who I cleaned for, when we first arrived in São Paulo.'

'What happened to him?'

'He disappeared one day. It was normal back then.'

‘Do the twins know?’

‘It would drive them crazy, thinking about these things.’

‘It drove your husband crazy.’

‘Who knows? Who knows where his demons came from. They were like springs flowing into the sea.’

The phone began to ring.

‘I’ll answer it,’ I said, ‘it will be Marcio.’

Ursula smiled and shook her head, went to pick the phone up herself. I picked my way through the rest of the debris and came out into the kitchen, shut the door just as Ursula cried out to herself. She clicked the receiver down and then told me it had not been Marcio but Mercury with the news that Amaral had fallen from a building close to the Federal Police and broken his leg, just after he had collected his passport. I cried out, because that meant the show in London would not happen. I must have looked devastated, or desperate, or something because Ursula told me I had to keep calm, that it would be bad for me to get very upset. She would think of something, if I just sat down. She took out another pack of stale crackers from her heaving cupboard and ordered me to onto the sofa to eat them while she thought. She threaded herself through the saints, went to stand by the window, staring out into space. The pile driver began again to toll again, in between the almost unbearable crunching of the crackers. After a few minutes she crossed herself and then beckoned me over, saying that she wanted to show me something. She pointed to the empty space where the men had been praying before they were

‘Stay there,’ she said, ‘stay there on your knees for the afternoon, until someone else joins you.’

‘I’m not doing that. That’s crazy.’

‘You do it and I promise you Marcio will be on the plane over to London with you tonight, in place of Amaral.’

‘You can’t promise me that. His visa has run out.’

‘Whoever sorted out a passport for Amaral can sort out a visa too. That isn’t a problem.’

‘But they want Amaral, not Marcio.’

Ursula laughed.

'You think they care? They just want their show. Marcio can *pixo* just as well as Amaral and really what's the difference over there, in your world, between one man from São Paulo and another?'

I looked out in the hot concrete courtyard, could faintly make out the stain where the dog had fallen to its death.

'It's hot. No-one will join me.'

'I have a wide straw hat you can wear. It won't be long before someone comes. And then someone else and someone else and then we will have a miracle and no-one will ever be able to touch us.'

I shook my head but couldn't think of another plan. I felt tired and confused. Ursula prepared me a flask of ice-water with lime and filled an old yoghurt pot with the rest of the crackers which she then wrapped up in a 'I HEART SÃO PAULO'' tea towel. She handed me my parcel, placed the enormous straw hat on my head and opened the door for me to go down to the baking asphalt and get on my knees and pray.

…..…….

Attributions

The description of the city on page 143 was inspired by Thom Gunn's 'In Praise of Cities'.

The description of Marcio's 'bang of the blood in the brain' on page 209 was inspired by Ted Hughes' 'The Jaguar'.

The epigraphs that begin the novel are from the following novel and film:

Ramos, Graciliano, trans. Ralph Edward Dimmick, *Barren Lives,* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989)

Style Wars, dir Harry Chalfant, (Public Broadcasting Service, 1983)

The epigraphs that begin the chapters are from the following books:

Da Cunha, Euclides, *Rebellion in the Backlands,* trans. Elizabeth Lowe, (London: 2010, Penguin)

O'Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space,* (Santa Monica and San Francisco: 1976, The Lapis Press)