

NOTEBOOK OF RETURN

[excerpts]

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Brazil (b. 1963)

Trans. Johnny Lorenz

On the 2nd day of November, 1864, a throng of 80 armed slaves moved through the outskirts of Diamantina heading towards this City, slaves presumably belonging to the Barro Mine, where the slaves total more than 500, and, as our own investigation indicates, all the slaves working in that mine were preparing for insurrection, and so, too, were the slaves working in the mines of Antonio Moreira, Paulo de Nau, José Julião, and others. I also came to know with complete certainty that the slaves of Major Antonio da Silva Pereira, numbering about 50, had vanished from the plantation belonging to the aforementioned Pereira, and were heading who knows where ...

Is loving possible where the unloading of slaves
multiplied like flies

over the bananas?

*Qué pretendes cuando olvidas ésta memoria
la continuación del masacre?
cette odeur de cheveux au feu?
hunger as syntax?*

The meager voice scrapes its nails against the chaos.
The boy with whom the bullet didn't fall in love
travels about, safe and sound, unafraid.

He rides along the waterfront, sneakers, bicycle,
objects easing his calluses.
He rides as if, within him, the conflict
between slave catcher and slave
had ended. He wanders out into the open
against death's vigilance.
The soft sneakers and brand-name clothes,
documents of daily exorcism.
He moves discretely, no swing of the hips,
a stone here and there trips him up.

Until the conflict pursuing him
explodes from within. He was riding along
with sneakers, a bicycle – why did it embrace him,
the bullet, diverted from its scheduled stop?

Sometimes I want to disconnect myself
from the place where I was born
like a radio turning from the waves
so many punctures in the eye
so many random dead
so many premonitions of the sacrifice
so many bulletholes in the wall.

Beneath so much tranquil sleep, a circus of horrors
a foreboding
that we'll go to paradise
in a Cadillac.

We are precise in meter, and in rhyme,
in our campaigns to save the fauna, we are
experts, attentive always.

Oh how plastic we are
with a quick look
comprehending the myths.

Another series of essays
explains it – the country was entirely different but,
deluded, we lie down as cats and wake as rabbits.

Standing before versions
of Spix, Martius & Company
your attention, please, take notice, listen:
the voice at the back of your mind.

What did it sound like, this country played by one thousand two
hundred and seventy-three indigenous tongues
before cloud, wind and tempest
were mined?

How shall the nation recite one hundred and eighty
tongues exiled from the dictionary?

And the African tongues that once negotiated
in slave quarters and public squares?

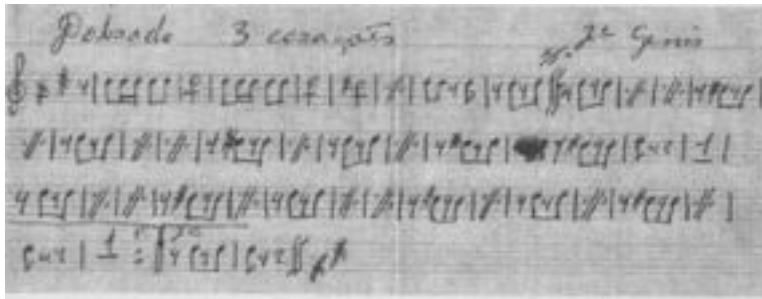
And the Portuguese tongue that turned into
the chameleon of the tropics?

Ah, how exhausting it is, discussing the way things are

and how they could have been,
the visions, the setbacks,
the infiltrations twisting the navel of the word.
There are challenges and nits and Mays in my country
saddened icons
mirages
that bind me at once to its street festivals.

But what of that childhood attacked by fish?
The dead child, standing there, in my memory?
If they'd give me the diving suit
there'd be a way to nestle up to those still eyes
the panicking mothers.
I could've been the crane lifting the drowned.
A coral reef, a switchblade, my love,
for the illegible embrace of the sea.

I'm reading what my father didn't think would
become a letter: his encrypted commotion
doesn't surrender its text until
it is born



What mound is this, of manure and paths
yoked by slaves making a risky pact?
What mine is this, belonging to neither overseer
nor field slave?
A mine of notes & not a single trail
of rhythm & not a single drought

of music & not a single plantation
A mine stapled to memory in order to ruin
the disguises of lavishness
A mine discovered in the dry depths of a drawer
fully committed
to the concealment of interconnections
A mine exposed to searches
by someone who survived being denounced
A mine without any records
before the looting
A place of bones that when outraged
flagellate the sleep of books.

I'm twelve years old. When I drop off the clean laundry
they point me to the poorly lit
service entrance.
That boy slides across the Hades of garages,
makes out the doorbell in Braille.
The kitchen opens the door
(how long will she make the same gestures?)
smiles and collects the dirty laundry
dives once more
into colonial Brazil.
Could she be the double of the houseslave cleaning out pots
Saturday after Saturday?
ironing, under compulsion, her own destiny?

- - -

I've got twelve breaths and an education
to embarrass the unsuspecting.
What I saw when I went through the back door
of the city didn't dessicate my retinas
on the contrary
it filled my writing with impertinence.
Those who break open the stone
taught me the other side
the gnawed papers
crushing as an approach
my father instructed me it happens from within,
the boiling of lava.

The country has gaps grottos corridors
a vocation for biting
that made Hans Staden tremble
 we bite off tail and head
 swallow without chewing
 gulp down frogs
 salivating over hornets.
We know God widens our gullets
when He pulls out our teeth.
We don't spit in the fire so we don't
diminish the crest.

Loose words come back to kill,
 except in the case of Exu,
 guide of Tiresias
who defies Gregório de Matos
Macunaíma and François Villon.
 Exu Caliban
unsuspicious glove of Shakespeare
hunter who carries the hunt within him
and grows angry
bound to a dozen different names.

- - -

I want to detach from myself and remain in the
fields of harvested grapes.
One grape for each enemy leaving and entering
through the crack in your skull.
No signal – from a lover or child –
extinguishes that which, having healed,
is harbinger of another plague.

- - -

How to shimmy wash clothes
be sly ask the barber
for a rounded cut at the back.

How to recite the commandments
(the swallows fly out through gaps in the ship)
the sacraments
(the rain attacks between the nerves of the
gutters). How to face Iansã without weapons?
And Omulu covered in pestilence?
How to say, "Kalunga,
take me home?"

- - -

All of a sudden the domesticated animal attacks the
public no one can recuperate him for the circus.
He's looking out for himself, the wild beast alive once
more like the one we carry within
without ever knowing its scale.
The beast leaps from the circus out into the
day inhabits us
with the familiarity of cousins.
We glimpse through its iris the massacre of
Indians street vendors in conflict
children at the mercy of Cronos
and for so long now we've come to believe that another
beast without a face, feverish, serves to provoke this chaos.

the encrypted song
frightens because
it asks something of us
like a book
it opens, terrible,
for the one who picked it up

- - -

I who cannot sing, cannot dance, will there be a place for
me in the biography of my country?
- I don't know, brother, I don't know.
And before they take out my vertebra
will they translate my fingerprints?

- I don't know, brother, I don't know.
And what if I spoke another language in which
what's said surrendered to things and its letters were a
film without intervals?

- - -



The lizard
climbed down the tree
it's his way
of measuring things

If each of us measured
the world
by his own means
the lizard
wouldn't be called strange

- - -



There are knots
not for us
to untie

We squeeze the throat
so that topics
of conversation do not rot
our teeth

Those belonging
to the same shell
fear that through a sliver
the whole sea
will fill their ears

Those belonging
to the same tree
grow desperate
when the beast
by biting at the root
bites everyone

And so the throat
narrows
like a crime

- - -

Camelias in the lapel are a sign of something
beyond our calculation
 something in the newspapers, however
 locked with seven keys
something known in the marketplace tents
 imperceptible in messages left for
 us
something someone whispered
 into the loudspeaker on the corner.

- - -

Within this generation (incommunicable) that I decipher
something's stitched when it's loosed
 the electric guitar of Ogum
 the visit Zambi pays
 to the vegetable stands
 everything before the naked eye
We didn't even figure out the way, we went ahead
 directed by a bird
 a carnival parade
 a victim
 a kind of zeal
 but so entirely possible that we leapt
 from our souls and left.

Your house, brother? your horse, your father's
imaginary scar? where
are the others that were always the farthest ahead
the freest
 standing before the revealed prohibitions?
What belongs to all of us so that we might recognize
neighbors from the same ship?
or is that not enough when facing the fury that changes
 the limits of the flora?

What was written in me about my fever
tells a part of me
it doesn't expose me to the sun, it only tattoos

a compass that trembles
to the Occident Orient
of my nerves.

Don't save me
don't rescue me from the channels
don't plaster in the name of some name
my flock of quotation marks

over the quilt the plates and the teacups the habit of depositing the presents on the
bed in the manner of an offering in order to confuse the person with the orixá that is
riding her and multiplies until the weaving of the body is lost and it can't be
distinguished what's in me and in others whether it be tree or offspring and even so
invites us to tell the others what didn't have a storyline

Not one of those we love speaks
in us if the love drops its rows of scales
but if the ancient one recuperates
his dolls
with them he brings joy
to the market
if a wasp goes across
the dead steer he
runs like a *sendero*

if life has a leg
it's in us that it can stand
we are the walking cane
to wander between east and west
the odyssey and the antilope.
I wanted the dawn of the shipwrecked to break to bring them
to the theater hoping they would thank me
narrow meanwhile my torso
and it's as if a hyrda
were rising inside of me.

Those who go side by side are an enigmatic valise
they listen to once-disowned languages
I myself wave hello
in order to sign a contract in Morse code.
For those of us who exhaust
the wheel
the gunpowder
the word

it doesn't bother us if they carry these things off to an island or the repair
shop the skin of the word interests us
not the skin of a debt but the skin yes that risks the text and refutes its thesis the
skin in a trance like a boy weaving his conversation with disasters like a gymnast an
old mill ready to fling themselves on the ground the skin not as something tolerated
but anchorage and trampoline a writing exercise in various styles the skin
submersed the skin on top of the gesture like a route that desire takes for its vertigo
like an arrow in the ballroom an ecstasy the skin so entirely a part of everything and
a part of everyone so entirely at the limit that in translating it you perceive a
beginning in another beginning Cici herself pilfering from death its precipice a
rooster between the stones a splinter a sun that has always been scattered