PAPER RAIN

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Sample translation by Eric M. B. Becker

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When Joel walks through Copacabana, he has the tendency to looking up to see where he might jump. The oldest buildings are the best, free of bonded windows and away from the main thoroughfares. He knows how passersby react to a dead man and doesn’t wish to frighten others. A retiree steps out to buy milk, crosses a cadaver and there goes the day or the rest of his life. Also, the fewer people on the streets, the smaller the chances of landing on someone. These things happened, he’d seen it, a jilted wife landing on top of a family man. One person’s suffering ends and three others’ begin, a widow in shock, the children explaining to classmates how their father went splat on some street downtown. Lunchtime on a work day, a sea of passersby— someone was bound to get hit.

 Penthouses were attractive, he knows from New Year’s parties he’d covered for work, hosts striving to fill salons and verandas with the right set. A celebrated economist, a minor poet, a former government minister, businessmen, socialites, artists. At parties like this, waiters

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chased hands holding empty cups, restoring spirits in ample doses. Such generosity was extended to him, the poorly dressed reporter, who for reasons superior to good manners never denied an imported whiskey. Joel would withdrew from the rest to lean on a windowsill**,** metalgrade’s touch cool against his forearms**.** The nighttime views at the parties of Rio’s wealthy invariably featured some combination of Sugarloaf/Corcovado/Beach/Lagoon/Two Brothers Mountain. Joel looked down and the sidewalks seemed to be beckon, whispering how easy it was.

 No one would be waiting up for him at home. He has no home. After his last eviction he had rented a room in Lapa. Every morning he wakes before eight, gets dressed, and leaves the boarding house as though he were still expected in the newsroom. He crosses the city on foot, waits at a bus stop, jumps on and takes it to the end of the line. There, hesits on a bench in some park or church, rests his elbows on a lunch counter to eat a snack. At night he coils up to sleep, pillow covering his ear while the couple next door moans or argues. He knows how it is, and he doesn’t miss it. When he talksto God it’s to speak of death. **Oh my Lord**, he says. T**his time I’m gonna make the call – or I am making the call.**

Joel would make the leap from a building in Copacabana. An instant and painless death, without the preamble of goodbyes or a will drawn up before a notary. There’s no need for that, all he owns is a nightlamp.

 It had to be in Copacabana, where the tragedy of a suicide can be drowned out by the neighborhood’s excesses. Childbirth, aneurysms and heart attacks, cancer diagnoses, root canals treatments, mediums contacting spirits, priests performing exorcisms, robberies, scams and thefts, fights and truces, betrayals and first loves, endless traffic jams, mothers begging at supermarket doors, street kids selling gum, people getting it together and others losing it, while in a few blocks or feet away students do homework, maids fry steaks, manicurists paint nails, prostitutes name their price, bodybuilders admire themselves, tourists buy T-shirts, and old ladies knit useless ~~yet more useless~~  footies.

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 Joel has picked out a building on Rua Santa Clara**.** On each floor a pivot window is always open for ventilation. He tells the front desk about an appointment with Dr. Perdigão. He’s waiting on the elevator when the phone vibrates in his pants. No caller ID. Recently, Eliane was in the habit of using a neighbor’s cell phone so he would answer when she called to demand their grandkids’ tuition money. Two hopeless losers, backs hunched from staring at phones and games. At their age Joel had already married, had an affair and become a widower, had been sued and threatened, got into who-knows-how-many fights and was deepinto payments for an apartment in the suburbs. But it would make no differenceto pick up this time. He is a man on the brink of death, and if his ex-wife wished to keep nagging she could take it up with his coffin.

 “Hello?”

 “Joel?”

 “Eliane, darling.”

 “It’s Beatriz.”

 “Beatriz. How’s the boy?”

 “They boy’s name is Marceu and he’s your son.”

 “How’s the boy, Beatriz.”

 “Ha! As though you cared. The last time you promised to show up, Marceu told his friends he was going to spend the day with his dad. It killed me towatch the boy sit on the couch waiting for the doorbell to ring.”

 “I had an emergency.”

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“They have this thing now, it’s called a cellphone.”

 “What do you want, Beatriz.”

 “Piano lessons for Marceu. I bought a second-hand keyboard, but the classes are expensive.”

 “I’ll see what I can do.”

 “If you don’t, your son’s nevergoing to learn.”

 “I’ll see what I can do.”

 “Marceu’s got talent. He wants to be a musician.”

 “Beatriz, I should have been a better husband.”

 “Are you drunk?”

 “And a better father. Or at least a better ex-husband.”

 “You know your problem, Joel? You only grow a conscience once you’ve started drinking, and when it’s over everything goes back to the way things were.”

 “I’ve got to go. I have an interview, I’m in the elevator.”

 “Who’s the nut who hired you?”

 “I’m about to lose you. Send a kiss to the boy.”

 “Don’t go to work drunk. You’ll get fired again.”

 Joel puts the phone in his pocket and steps into the elevator. The car is full, heavy with the scent of people, laden with sweat and perfume. He reaches for his ID, hanging from a lanyard around his neck. He hasn’t lost all love for his carcass and has no desire to end up like the corpses he’s seen, stitched up the middle like a zipper, laying on a drawer at the coroner’s office.

 He’s the last to get off, on the tenth floor. The hallway is old, floor covered with grimy white tiles, a fire extinguisher on the wall, a round trash can between the elevators. He walks over to the window.

 He’s an old man. Bags under his eyes, unshaven, greasy and disheveled hair, faded jeans and a polo shirt with tattered collar, shabby shoes with holes in the soles. He closes his eyes.

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 On rare occasions, Joel had worn a suit and tie, and even a tuxedo once. But none occasion had never felt as sacred as this one, as he stood unkempt, next to a fire extinguisher and a trash can covered in lumps of sand, gum, and phlegm, in the dilapidated hallway of a mid-rise in Copacabana. He deserves this moment as a eulogy, a prelude to a peculiar end.

 He hears a drumbeat, then another, and another. Joel opens his eyes. Residents from buildings on the other side of the street appear in their windows with wood spoons and frying pans. He can hear jeering, horns, shouting against the president. The noise is also coming from the building he’s standing in. In the office spaces**,** people bang on take-out boxes, staplers, whatever’s within reach.

 In Copacabana, there are more tenantsthan windows, so people start to filter out, taking their protest to the hallway.

 “Need a frying pan, pal?”a man offers.

 Joel does not need a frying pan.

 The noise is unbearable. The line of mid-rises reverberates with banging and shouting. Joel needs to move before he regrets the best decision he’s ever made. He takes the stairs down to the ninth-floor hallway, where more people are protesting in the window. Eight, seven, six, he opens the emergency exit to the backsides of people shouting.

 The fourth-floor hallway is empty.

 Joel heads for the windowand heaves one leg toward it, but his legs are short and he doesn’t reach the opening. He stands on tiptoe and soldiers on, trying over and over again. He should have brought a stool. One more try, and he notices his jeans restricting his movement. He angrily removes his moccasins and his pants, as his rage propels his leg upward. His foot lands like an anchor on the window frame. He slides his leg over to the other side and sets his hands

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on the metal sill. He wipes the sweat from his brow, catches his breath, curses the hellishRio heat for the thousandth and final time.

 Now the other leg. He shifts his weight to his arms, squeezing and contorting his body until his foot reaches the opening. His leg slides across to the other side. Here we go.Joelreadies himself for the fall. Half his body inside the building and facing the hallway, back to the clamoring pots and pans of Copacabana.

 A relief to be leaving this world behind. The best decision he’d ever made, on the brink of realization. He’s sure of it. It’s a good decision. The best. Better not to think much about it, this best decision. Joel takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and releases his grip.

 Nothing happens. He’s sandwiched there. Bare legs dangling from the building, belly lodged in the window frame.

 If lung cancer didn’t take him, Joel had always been certain he would die from arteries clogged with fat, and here he is, barred from death by fat.

 Joel sucks his belly in. The woman from the studio next door screams. More people scream. Some yell, “Jump,” others yell, “Don’t jump.” Still others yell, “He’s a perv.” The clean-shaven face of an evangelical minister peeks out from the floor above.

 “Repent, brother!”

 Joel sucks his belly in further. He starts to slide, distracted by one last feeling of vanity, satisfaction at not being that fat. There’s one advantage to having started to smoke again.

 In the1990s, a phlegmy cough and a wife intent on celebrating their silver anniversary pried Joel from his Marlboros. Replacing the cigarettes in his shirt pocket was a bag of cookies bought from Carmen, the newsroom secretary. He put on forty pounds in six months. At the time, he drove a Puma sports car, and the day headjusted the seatback for the third time to fit his belly behind the wheel, his feet couldn’t reach the pedals. To hell with

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cookies. He left his wife, bought a carton of Malboros, and ever since he smokes a half-pack a day to balance out the bar food.

 A man appears in the hallway. “Please help, he’s falling!” says a woman behind him. The man runs to the window and grabs Joel’s hand.

 He had not expected this. The warmth of the hand, the texture of the skin, thedetermination with which the other man grabs him so as to keep him in the world they know. The instinct and the effort to save a life. Joel is surprised to see his own hand grabbing onto the stranger’s wrist.

 “Repent,” the pastor shouts.

 “The break of the down on the hill, what a beauty . . .”

 “He’s singing. Theperv sings!”

 “Brother, you are loved! Repent!”

 “The son coloring, the nature smiling . . .”

“You’re gonna fall!”

 “He’s falling.”

 “He’s singing.”

 “No tears, no sadness and no sighs. . The break of dawn . . .”

His body slips, his hands lose their grip, Joel is alone inmidair. He tries to recite the verses, tofall without thinking, but it’s impossible. They say that we can see our whole lives before we die, and he’s discovering that’s true. In the endless seconds comprising his fall, Joel mentally prepares his own obituary.

**CHAPTER 2**

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Joel Nascimento, an award-winning reporter, loving father, and model citizen, died last Tuesday, February 18t, 2020. Joel was one of a kind. Known as the Don Quixote of Praça Onze, the Superman of Água Santa, until recently Nascimento could be found arriving at the newspaper each morning with beignets for his colleagues, made by a friend in Lapa. Jacinta was a cook for the German Ambassador, he tells them. She spent many years making milk jam for the diplomat’s children. The ambassador returned to Germany; Jacinta never learned about diabetes. Ever since her leg was amputated she fries the beignets as she leans against crutches, selling them out of a [her?] window. That was Joel. He could imbue a doughy ball with the singular taste of an elaborate backstory.

 Joel’s story is the story of Rio. Not just the bucolic, elegant and charming city, ~~which from high atop an overlook appears in the midst of beauty res~~t, stretching in serene magnificence from the dense green of the forested mountains to the tranquil waters of the Atlantic. Joel’s Rio was different. A seedy place, documented by him in the pages of the city’s newspapers.

 There was a time, not so long ago, when Rio boasted a newsstand on every corner, shielded from the sun beneath the shade of an almond tree. On either side of the stand, newspapers lined up, their headlines crying out to readers.

*Troubled man throws himself from cliff*

 *Boy Chained Up Like Beast in Backyard!*

 *Runaway wife Last Seen in Red-Light District!*

 *Man-Eating Lion Terrorizes Santa Cruz!*

It was Joel behind these headlines. Hunched over a wooden desk in a newsroom reeking of cigarettes, banging away on a Remington typewriter, and later on lighter computer keyboards. There was Joel, time after time, the man behind the words, pen and pad in hand, standing before a body covered in earth (dirt?), chain marks on the boy’s arms, the teary woman in her camisole, the lion. He was like bait on a hook: casting the line, coming back with a story to others.

 It began one morning in October 1963, when tin soldiers were hiding behind wads of tobacco as they crossed the parquet to domino trenches. Not so much as a pinch of tobacco remained to fill a pipe for an afternoon smoke. The owner of said tobacco, Joel’s father—Renê Rubirosa, a former jockey, by then a bookie with a limp—took out his frustrations by beating his son in the name of discipline.

 When Renê and Joel showed up at the *Luta Democrática*newsroom, the boy was black and blue.

“You take it from here.” As though the boy were a road full of potholes to avoid. Cristiano Mota, the editorial director and an acquaintance of Renê’s from the brothelon Rua Alice, took things from there. He offered Joel the night shift listening to the police blotter.

 Never again did a tin soldier wage battle on the parquet floor.

 Mornings: change out of his street clothes, don his school uniform, walk along Rua Conde de Bonfim and climb the steps of the Colégio São José*.* Afternoons: sleep for six hours on the pull-out couch in the living room. Nights: put on his first pair of creased pants and polyestershirt, take the tram downtown to listen to police conversations over the blotter. Give Farinha the heads-up about an armed robbery in Caxias. Thieves had plucked some Turk clean, taking even his gold teeth.

 At five in the morning, the tram back home. Brown locks framing a handsome face, feet swinging, hands between his legs. Little more than a runt, he was often the lone rider. Joel watched the morning light advance on the streets and the buildings, took in the empty sidewalks, the bakery owners raising the shutters, the paper boys dumping

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morning editions at thenewsstands, the crisp air of dawn, and the silence of collective slumber accentuating the gentle sound of the tram. It was the ideal city, his alone, before people began their assault from all angles.

Such mornings forged his contentious relationship with Rio. The ugly, vile city of the overnight police blotter rendered harmless and spellbinding beneath the rising sun.

 Half a century later, and at least once a month, Joel would walk out of the newsroom to a waiting crowd of students. The old chronicler of Rio’s dog-eat-dog world, keeper of the unpublishable actions and reactions of the agents of order and chaos, the last of his breed, a living archive of the heinous and degrading aspects of the human condition (and also the most virtuous and miraculous), would place his hand on one of their shoulders, and with the tender look of a kindly grandfather would issue an invitation.

 “Around the corner there’s a joint serving ice cold beer. What day is it, Thursday? Thursdays they have the best stew in town.”

 The students would smile, the way only the unseasoned can. Wandering down the narrow sidewalks, the group would slow its pace to match the reporter’s.

 “I’m slower now,” he would explain. “Years living off hardboiled eggs and bar food. And cigarettes,” he would add, tapping the pack in his shirt pocket. “I used to smoke Marlboros, now it’s this menthol crap.”

 As they strolled, the students listened with the outsizedconsiderationafforded the greats. The fugitive Nazi official who became a beekeeper and sold honey in Petropolis: Joel figured him out. The Italian mafioso, living in a luxury seafront condo, a regular at the sauna and pool, not to mention the Golden Age Bingo Parlor:

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Joel. The dictatorship-era torturer turnedcultural attaché in Rome: Joel put an end to the man’s European vacation.

 There was more, too, unbeknownst to the students. Episodes that ran through the mind of the old reporter as he strolled the city center or took a bus from one end of Rio to the other. Street corners and high-rises unveiled their own private histories, like notes of a melancholy tune only Joel could hear.

 Minutes later Joel and the students would be sitting on plastic stools around a rickety bar table.“Aristides, my man!” he cried out to the owner walking out from behind the bar, beer and mugs in hand. Bars like that served as a transition point between the city and so-called domestic comfort. In the bars, he would tell his tales. Up to a point, so as to avoid being branded a liar. What Joel did share evolved into a repertoire. He would start with the case of the umbrella, move on to floods and mudslides, the woman who lived in the tree, the boy.

 This would stretch until the wee hours, when the prostitutes and drag queens rolled in, leaning against the bar to drink coffee on their way home, filling the narrow space with the scent of work, sweat, and sex. If Marli or Sandra showed up, Joel would interrupt his tales for an embrace, the two women scolding him as though he were a child. He had diabetes, a feeble heart—he ought to be at home in bed.

 “Don’t worry. God’s forgotten to take me,” he would say.

 “He’s forgot because of this boyishface of yours,” Marli would respond, mussing Joel’s hair.

 It’s true, the students would think to themselves. Joel looked more like a sad little boy than a hardened man.

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 After the first bottle of beer, two platters of stew wiped clean with a hunk of bread, Joel would order another beer and light a cigarette. Peer into the distance. Turn back to the students.

 “I’m going tell you all about the first piece that stuck with me. I was cub reporter for a newspaper called the ***Luta Democrática*.** Heard of it? Of course not, your mothers were still in school when it folded. It was a . . . peculiar little newspaper.If daily paperswere cuts of meat, *Luta*would be the tripe. The mouthwatering filet mignon you find at trendy restaurants—that was other papers. ***Luta*** reported the tragedies, the other papers reported the other news across Rio. The same Rio cooked up a filet mignon of politican’s promises and celebrity gossip on the one hand, and the tripe**—** rapes, murders, suicides, so on. People used to say that if you squeezed a copy of **the *Luta***, blood would come oozing out. Let me tell: not only would there be blood, but the tears and sweat of hardworking men.

 “This story begins one spring evening in Rio. It’s Thursday, October 1964. On Rua Uruguaiana, men and women parade about in the era’s elegant attire. At restaurant doors, waiters in white tuxedos awaited the arrival of clients for happy hour. The city’s first street vendors offer buy-one-get-one-free. The city is young, vibrant, pulsing, its sidewalks punctuated by stationery shops, pharmacies, lunch counters, boutiques and restaurants, elegant **porticos** of mid-rises housing medical offices, law firms, architecture studios. Buses, cars, and taxis carry on morosely toward Avenida Rio Branco, a flock of pigeons flies by on its way to the Largo da Carioca.

 “Along comes this handsome guy. The body of a Greek statue, headful of hair, unlined face.This guy was, he was . . . I was . . .

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a kid. He . . . I was still playing slapjack and button soccer. I carried a cheese sandwich my mother made in my pocket every day for dinner . . .”

As Joel reaches this part of the obituary he is contriving midair, he gets the full picture of himself. He sees the faithless man leaping and recalls the boy he once was.