

## Everything that no-one wants

Cabelo Seco  
Marabá, Amazônia

### Amazon diary

7 September 2018

Our descent into Belém airport is announced. I close my Mac and look past the man beside me at the distant cityscape. The sky is black with imminent storm. My neighbour turns off his mobile. He has been listening to the unmistakable tones of angry accusation by the presidential frontrunner, Jair Bolsonaro, the full three hours of the flight. 'How do you think the elections will go?', I ask.

'Bolsonaro will win. We need the shock. Today, the water is up to here'. He lifts his open palm to beneath his nose. 'He's aggressive. Loses control at times. But he knows the situation is critical. Discipline in school is the key. You American?'

'Born in London', I reply. 'Been living here 20 years. And you?' I look at my - companion, humble, mixed-race, self-reflexive. 'Barão de Cocais, a small city in Minas Gerais. Worked in the Valley of Iron. But I'm more than steel. I've travelled outside Brazil. You speak well.' I smile. He continues. 'I lived through the dictatorship. The generals have been corrupted. This Bolsonaro has never taken bribes. In seven mandates. He doesn't need his 8 seconds TV. He makes news. He will create the shock we need.' He extends his open hand. 'André'.

At the boarding gate in Brasilia, I'd been stunned to see four professionals in dark suits salute one another, then chant in unison, 'Bolsonaro'. His moral outrage clearly voices the repressed anger felt by many Brazilians. 'Dan'. I smile, shaking André's hand. 'Distrust vanquished hope', I propose, recalling the iconic phrase of the then President Lula. Today the ex-president leads the election polls from jail, condemned for still unproven corruption. The shoeshine boy turned metalworker, trade union leader turned president proved that hope could overcome fear. But it didn't overcome the bible, bullet and bull of the elite, nor the seduction of recognition and corrupting ache for life-long immunity from hunger.

'I'm 70 next month, from a big family'. André leans towards me, confidentially. 'I don't understand it. Only my sister studied. A university professor of pedagogy. And she turned red. Her sons and daughters too. Now we can't even sit in the same room.' He looks out at the dark clouds, then turns back, eyes brimming with tears. 'I don't want to be governed by generals. But who else is qualified? We were deceived by terrorists who hid their lust for power behind promises of democracy'.

André looks back at Belém. 'Do you know the Amazon?', I ask. 'My first time', André replies. 'We're going fishing, to the Xingu River. We fly on to Altamira.' I smile. 'I

know it well. We visited the hydroelectric dam. All we saw were dead fish'. André shakes his head. 'Same with the Mariana disaster<sup>1</sup>. Near me. Terrible. 500 years of toxic pollution. Both under the Workers' Party government'. We fly deep into the clouds. No visibility. I wonder if the plane will be able to land.

'Altamira became the most violent city in Brazil', André adds, 'Mining security is my beach. 30,000 workers bussed in with no infrastructure. The military police shouldered the social tragedy. And the multinational mining companies were acquitted. Not one cent in compensation to the families. It's government by the elite for the elite. Libraries burn, and the people who suffer, party'.

The plane touches down and we stand. André lifts his hand to beneath his nose. 'Up to here. And if all the corrupt and rich block Bolsonaro, the generals will step in. Everything that no-one wants.' We shake hands. 'Good fishing', I smile, and turn on my mobile.

Jair Bolsonaro has just been stabbed, during a rally in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais. I walk through the airport to pick up my case, reading in disbelief. A single action has transformed the aggressive, homophobic and racist admirer of Trump into victim, hero and saviour. A living symbol of his own discourse. The storm explodes dramatically above the airport. At the carousel, I scroll photos and clips of the stabbing. A revengeful crowd, the surgery and bland statements of his opponents.

Impeached President Dilma Rousseff provokes a polemic: 'When you plant hate, you harvest thunderstorms'. Torrential rain muffles announcements of cancelled flights.

## **In the shadows of the dictatorship**

2 October 2018?

The motor-taxi slows to a halt beside me on the Trans-Amazonia highway, in front of the Headquarters of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion. 'Where to?' asks the taxi-driver. I'm in shock. No one had warned me that just two days earlier, a new coronel from Special Missions had replaced the regional commander of the Military Police, a reference in community policing. In the first dawn 'intervention', mutual respect and trust built up over seven years of cultural collaboration between our Afro-Indigenous community of Cabelo Seco and a Military Police that had executed social movement leaders and black youth for decades with impunity, had been erased.

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<sup>1</sup> Brazil's most serious mining disaster, when an iron ore tailings dam burst in Minas Gerais in November 2015.

‘They broke into that house, masked, with no identification’, explained Maria, the neighbour, pointing at the flat from her home across the square. ‘They woke and tortured two seventeen year old boys, then murdered them in their beds. They herded us indoors at gunpoint, ordered us to lock our windows and doors, but we heard everything.’

I listened to the traumatized neighbours as they took me through the smashed door of the flat to photograph the drying blood on the floors where the youth had been dragged, and their blood-stained mattresses. When I’d mentioned the photos to the new commander, he explained that Special Missions was now an independent company, no longer his responsibility, being installed in every major city in Pará. An environment of panic was being created to justify the need for a populist civilian dictatorship. Bolsonaro had already won.

‘Senhor?’ The taxi driver holds out his passenger’s helmet. That same afternoon, in Marabá’s *#elenão* (*#nothim*) national action by Women United Against Bolsonaro, a grandmother from Cabelo Seco called for an end to all violence. But the same night, regional TV reported the death of two alleged leaders of a local wing of the *Red Command*<sup>2</sup> in an exchange of gunfire with the Special Missions police. ‘We know the machine guns the police claimed they found in the flat were planted, to mask their error’, Maria told me. I make a note to remember to make sure the community speaks to the press and the new military police commander.

‘O Senhor é *Bolsonarista*?’ I look at the timid young taxi driver, and manage a smile. ‘Of course not.’ He belts his passenger helmet to the seat behind him. ‘Make your own way then, and fuck off back home.’

Just a month ago, such aggression had been unimaginable. *#elenão*, the most radical women’s movement in Brazil’s history may have energised social movements and created a celebratory space for diverse minorities to cry out. But it had clearly not touched a huge majority whose centuries of unresolved visceral anger and self-hatred had found an authentic voice in the compulsive, unmediated accusations of the ex-army officer. And it didn’t begin to reassure the same majority living in fear, at home, in the workplace and the street, imprisoned in chronic shyness, that reflexive empathy and self-determination need to be learned..

18 October 2018

An explosion of angry voices right outside our home sends startled cats darting in all directions. Harsh street lights on the Tocantins River boardwalk glint in the blade of a knife held in a normally quiet neighbour’s hand. ‘Go on, cousin!’ rages Tiago. ‘Cut my throat, like Bolsonaro will cut the veins of the Amazon!’ Their mothers gather quickly, covering their mouths. The roots of Cabelo Seco community are a tangle of

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<sup>2</sup> The criminal organization commanded from Rio de Janeiro.

three extended families that have lived in silent unity for 112 years. No one has ever seen such hatred.

‘Don’t you see?’ Tiago pleads with his shocked relatives, his eye on the circling blade. ‘The *Thing* hates us! For what we are. He won’t just erase indigenous villages and African quilombos in the interior. He will trample our rights into the ashes of all the forests he will burn.’ His cousin lunges at him: ‘You’re protecting the puppet of a convicted Mafioso ex-president!’ Tiago turns to the swelling crowd. ‘When Dilma was impeached, Bolsonaro celebrated the general who ordered activists to be hung upside down, gagged and hooded, from helicopters, right here, in front of our open doors, to crack their heads open on the rocks of Tucunaré beach. Tortured in the name of nation and god!’

Tiago’s cousin points his knife north. ‘Go to Venezuela, communist shit. Your kind are not welcome here any more!’

19 October 2018

A shout away, just past midnight, Bryan leans bare-chested against the mango tree in Cabelo Seco’s village square. Rafael approaches the chipped concrete bench of childhood friends. Victims of the worst state secondary school education in Brazil, these first-time voters struggle to graduate primary school, but read the winds and the rivers of the future. I greet them all and fill our galleon container from our deep artesian well, still the purest water in Marabá.

‘One question has tormented me since the results of the first round of the elections on October 7. Vote in the second round for a self-proclaimed homophobic, racist, misogynist who openly condemns democracy as weak, corrupt and inefficient, and advocates dictatorship? Or vote for the puppet of a corrupted people’s government, run by the imprisoned puppeteer?’ I’m stunned this spontaneous offstage debate is even taking place, here in Cabelo Seco.

One by one Rafael’s friends condemn the system that robbed them of their horizon and the Workers’ Party leaders that betrayed their trust. ‘*O mito*, the saviour who speaks his mind, speaks what we are all thinking’. Rafael steps in. ‘But the liberty we have now, to talk here past midnight. It will all disappear. Bolsonaro will militarise every school, every village square and every street corner. He’ll arm the landowners and expel us from our homes to get at the iron and gold beneath our feet. Four hundred years of industrialization in 40 years! Our people have already suffered a 20-year military dictatorship. But none of us remember it and those who do are still too frightened to speak. Once again, we’ll be caught in the crossfire. Only this time, the people will be voting to be repressed!’

Silence descends on the bench. Two single mothers, a youth scarred by stray bullets, and three young fishermen who’ve sold their nets, look down, silenced by Rafael’s piercing question. He looks with great affection at each of them. ‘I’m afraid, amigos.

Our first election, so much responsibility'. The shadow of the mango tree cast by the village square streetlight mingles with the shadows of Marabá's first nursery school, ear-marked to become a tourist information centre.

On the boardwalk, cats wail and brawl for bitches on heat. Rafael looks towards the Tocantins. 'Do we choose the least worst? Or be condemned to decades of repression, silence and irreversible environmental holocaust?' I turn off the tap to listen.

Rafael turns to face one of the best fishermen of their generation. 'And you, Bryan?'

Bryan looks up. His easy charisma is being gradually stolen by crack, traded for the loss of the tucunaré fish that he'd hawked door to door, since childhood, hanging from a bamboo staff across his wiry, muscular back. He smiles, a twinkle in his eyes still bright with resilience.

'I can't vote. The cops confiscated my ID when they invaded our home and murdered our two cousins in their sleep.' He nods, as if in agreement with angry ancestors beneath his feet. 'Tonight's my last night in Cabelo Seco. I've been marked. If I don't leave by dawn, I'll be executed by the military police.' In an instant, Bryan has brought all the dead black youth of Cabelo Seco back to life. He smiles, seeing them present in the uncried tears of his friends' eyes.

'But if I could vote, as a son of the River Tocantins, I'd ask Haddad to apologise. To us all. For raising our hopes and then betraying them through pacts with the devil. Then I'd say: look at our canoes, bleached, imprisoned and rotting in the cracked toxic mud of the River Tocantins. Look at our Itacaiúnas, our Araguaia, the Xingu. Look at all the rivers of the Amazon. Our life sources are dying. You did that, in the name of green energy for all. You cemented our back gardens in the name of sustainable development.' Bryan smiles, surprised by his own focus and lucidity.

'I'd be generous too. You knew we were hungry so you guaranteed full plates for all. You knew we could read the world, but you also knew we needed to be able to read and write our own books, so you built us new universities. But as each pact corrupted you and your power seduced you, you stopped listening to us. Gradually, as you imposed mega-projects of death, and drove us to consume our own future, you betrayed our trust.'

'So I'd say Fernando, what did you learn, as a father, as a son, as a political leader and as a teacher, from those Lula and Dilma years?'

Revolving red lights of military landrovers in convoy appear in the distance, entering Quintino Bocaiúva Street leading to the square. Bryan instinctively tilts his head deeper into the shadow of the mango tree. He moistens his lips. 'I'll just complete what's in my mind, as my vote's been denied.' He keeps his eye on the approaching landrovers.

'I'd end by saying: all our communities want the violence to end. We are all scared. But prevention is not a project. It may create an illusion of brief calm. But it creates more fear and anger. And arming every home and school will only increase the violence. No-one can live in fear, or without hope.'

As the convoy of military vehicles approach the far corner of the square, I gesture to Bryan to move. And fast. He nods. His breathing accelerates. He has no notion if he will ever be back.

'I'd say Haddad, don't talk about an interrupted project. Nor interrupted democracy. Talk about projects for the future. Of the Amazon, of Brazil, and of the world. You've just visited Acre. You know the rivers and forests of the Amazon are our world's most advanced technology, for living well. Invite everyone, the afraid, the silent and the angry, to create a horizon of good living, to sustain not to choke the future.'

Rafael smiles, relieved, prepared for the final week of debates. Everyone steps up on to the chipped concrete bench, laughing, just a little taller, illuminated by the revolving flashing red lights.

I lift our 20 litres of free pure water up onto my shoulder. Bryan has slipped into the shadows of the mango tree.

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22 October 2018