

## Brazil, Under these Circumstances

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In 2003 I took a trip to Brazil for the first time after discovering my runaway mother's whereabouts by accident on the Internet. I had not seen nor heard from her since I was eight years old, but I boarded a plane in Toronto and landed, without language and with little knowledge of Brazilian culture, in Sao Paulo, where she was working. I spent ten turbulent days with her and then we visited Brasilia where the rest of my Brazilian family awaited my own strange reappearance in their lives. "Brazil, Under These Circumstances" is a series of poems that explores how place is affected by our imaginative perceptions of our families. In much the same way that when we are disoriented we look for landmarks to stabilize ourselves, the speaker attempts to navigate her way through the family drama by accessing translated confessions, troubled memories, even absurd adventures. Brazil, like a runaway mother, constantly changes, from exotic jungle to criminal haven to government town to a treasure trove of garbage. The purse image, which repeats prominently several times in the titles of poems, also changes throughout the poetic sequence. Can identity be bought? Can memories be mugged? Who does a place belong to? Who does a mother (or, for that matter, a grandmother or an uncle) belong to? The landscape in these poems undergoes constant negotiation within the speaker's imagination. And that negotiation is still ongoing.

*Going to Brazil*

My mother's side: boycotted, I had to drop  
underground, undetected. Customs  
could not suspect my disguise.

I tunnelled, made myself thin. Danced  
like a gangly skeleton. After eating, performed  
liposuction on the sun.

Crosses had little power to stop me.  
Or priestesses. When I laid down in their beds,  
and pulled off their wigs, my many mothers  
showered my blackened breasts with beads.

## *Radius*

In Sao Paulo, the young dark desk clerk  
with the brown eyes and blue bead necklace  
won't let me leave the Hotel Paradiso  
without checking with my mother.

They argue in lively Portuguese (which I can't  
understand—an embarrassment to my mother,  
signaling, unlike my frizzy black hair and olive skin,  
that I have not spoken to her in over  
twenty years) about my approved radius.

Though I am twenty-seven years old,  
the conclusion is that I am not allowed to walk past  
the first intersection—the hotel block  
will be my promenade: a cheese store, a lingerie shop,  
and a pastry café. *Very dangerous, you speak  
English. Perfect for kidnapping, yes?* he says, *I tell  
your mother you no go out without her, but  
she say you stubborn, want to shop.  
You Canadian.*

I nod; don't explain that it's not the shopping  
I'm after—although I have my eye on a peach negligee  
in the window—but a little peace and quiet  
to counter the whirlwind of memory and regret,  
accusation and defense, swirling in our semi-neutral suite,  
where I can follow only as far as the *Time Out* guide  
and some novels by Clarice Lispector and Moacyr Scliar  
take me. And she halts after she's exhausted  
what can be inferred by my clothing and passport, or  
what I let slip (I had to tell her my brother goes by the name of Jit,  
not Amerjit, and she slammed her fist against the semi-neutral  
coffee table. *No one should change the name  
one's been given. What, is he ashamed?*)

As I stroll out the front door of Hotel Paradiso, I feel foreign  
footsteps behind me. My mother is having me spied on—the poor  
clerk on a new duty—for my own good, I suppose—  
so I swing my hips from side to side, let my purse

dangle precariously on my hand (I might as well act the part of the oblivious Canadian damsel in distress).

*Nothing bad ever happened to me before I got married*  
she said that morning as we washed our underwear  
in the sink. *Don't talk about him that way,*  
*he raised me,* I sparred back, sending her into fits  
of *Why did you come if you don't want to hear*  
*my side? Do you want to spit on me?*

I have little time left, but a lot of money I haven't spent.  
Our semi-neutral Hotel Paradiso will be waiting for me after  
I tour the block. I won't be gone long. But  
she is right to be frightened. There is only so much  
one can accomplish on this trip, and we all have maps  
in our heads—designated safe and dangerous spaces.  
I am a terrible threat for kidnapping, just as  
for the last twenty years she has been a terrorist  
silently bombing our family photo album preparing  
for this one uncharitable, unchartable clash of cultures.

*Purse*

Large on purpose, my mother's purse hangs by her side  
like a colostomy bag. She is a suffering woman,  
and her organs know it.

Streets have the nerve to exist when she walks upon them,  
clouds have the hubris to puff, the caju trees know  
how to bleed such sonorous juice that her ears  
burn in discomfort.

Flowers turn like pinwheels inside her mind.  
Her children scurry like mice.  
If she zips open her purse, be advised:  
Her memories are having seizures.

The whole thing might spill out.  
Then she'd really be a target for the pick pockets.

*You Go To the Movies*

Three times Uncle Fernando's neighbours  
have called the police to report him.

When they go to the movies,  
he goes through their garbage.

*How is this a crime?* he argues.  
*The stuff is right here, out on the street.*

*I don't steal it. I just look. It's my job.* The police  
eye him warily (Fernando is a big man

with large eyes and cancer scars and a certified  
garbage expert), let him go with another warning.

*My fellow creatures have no idea the service*  
*I'm providing,* he assures me a I note

down the contents as he calls them.  
You learn much about the world from

*its garbage.* I nod. Plug my nose. I know  
he is highly respected in his field, but

this is not the way I imagined my vacation.  
*Pronto!* he cries. *Soon they'll be back from the movies*  
*with all kinds of strange talk and ideas in their heads.*

*My Uncle Holds My Grandmother's Purse*

My uncle feels no shame; or at least this is my impression of him.  
He says *people talk too much*, and as long as he doesn't have to speak,  
nothing is a humiliation.

I must learn from him: I prize words too much,  
as if they actually *mean*, as if a word ever fed a belly,  
softened a callous or sewed a ghost back to its flesh.

Blunt; I could crack coconuts on my uncle's forehead  
and he would probably just laugh and say, *now you have gone  
crazy like all the others, like a true Brazilian.*

And I'd have to say, *Uncle, let's not talk, let's just butt  
heads for an hour and then run to Recife.* My uncle feels no shame  
standing here in his shopping mall, trailing his wife and kid

telling me *a wife and kids is no good.* He feels no shame  
telling his mother, *you crazy*, then holding her purse,  
no shame when he tells me *you too will die of cancer.*

Yet, it's with him I feel like walking in this mall, skipping up  
and down escalator steps, imagining the world  
my uncle describes, *you can never have too much  
happiness or too much silence.*

Sales girls, mannequins,  
ATM machines, all speak another language.  
My uncle doesn't listen.

He says, *it's a choice; you don't have to listen.*  
*No one's ever forcing us to listen.*

I am listening to him.  
Why, I wonder, is he listening to me?

*My Mother is One Crazy Bitch*

How do you write that on a postcard?

How will I tell my brother, that yes, yes, I found our mother after twenty years and she's about as lovely as an electrical storm when you're naked and tied to the highest tree in the county.

She has tantrums when we wake in the morning, tantrums when we catch our cabs for the day, outside the theatre, inside the theatre, after the theatre, then again on the ride home. She has several more when I am hiding in the washroom, washing my underwear in the sink.

*You don't love me enough!* is her main point of contention. So, we battle this love thing out as if it were some native Brazilian dish I am supposed to swallow until my stomach spasms, until I learn to crave it. But I am a teacher now, not a student.

My mother switches off the television and starts to snore. Even at night, she accosts me, even in the middle of my across-the-ocean nightmares she makes sure uncredited appearances.

At the checkout desks of my subconscious I am writing postcards to all the dead mothers out there, all the dead daughters who never had a chance to meet in this life. I collect their tears the way I have been hoping to collect my thoughts.

*Unknown grief is sweeter, I write. Stay on your side off-stage, let others stay on theirs. Only then can we indulge in the luxury of applause.*

*My Uncle Pretends He is My Grandmother*

Apparently a nervous man,  
my uncle has no teeth.

And so I picture him washing  
fruit, changing light bulbs, writing  
on the chalkboard at the University of Brasilia  
with new ones in his pocket, peeking out  
every now and then to reorient themselves  
in the large sphere of his life.

The sphere in which I am a smudge  
on his latest family photographs, and my license  
plate reads *Tourist*, except that he is expected  
to pick me up at the airport, as one  
who drives and can speak English  
with a degree of proficiency.

And so English binds us  
though he refuses to speak it in class  
or at conferences and, I hate to say it, but  
it's just like pulling teeth to get him  
to mouth *highway* or *buffet lunch* or *nap*.

Nevertheless, he tries when I am positioned  
in front of him, his sister's late term  
paper, his mother's missing quilt, and he takes out  
a big red pen and circles my eyes:  
*You live here*, he says, *away from the rest of us*.

In the space between emails  
the highway runs red.  
This is all the information I can trust you with at this time.

For at the back door is the big bad wolf,  
teeth wide and pointy,  
and oh boy, am I hungry.

*Grandmother's Purse*

Grandmother knows about countless revolutions, the martyrs, saints, and dictators. Her blond hair blue eyes have survived them all. She knows how many years it took to build the *catehino*; perhaps it was she who tipped the cups at congress.

Brasilia is about architecture. Practical or not, this is where people live. Grandmother's purse changes like the weather with each outfit, a few degrees different each day. We pick her up and she inches along the street like a flag on a pole. We spend our money in shopping malls, go for pastries, pay taxis to idle at the JK Memorial.

How to sort out the past or the future?  
Will it be red or yellow or pink  
tomorrow?  
The present is an accessory.

So is a grandmother.  
So am I.

*My Uncle Parachutes into Garbage*

This is the funniest family video I have ever seen.  
Grandmother sits quietly, sipping watermelon juice  
while Aunt Victoria serves tiramisu  
and tea, and outside a monkey swings from the tree.

**One Two Three**

Uncle drops out of the sky like a giant fly.  
Long arms and legs extend out against the shiny window  
of the clouds. On his back, Daffy Duck gives us all the finger,  
and I laugh, but no one else does. Grandmother shrugs;  
Victoria confers with the servants.

*Why Daffy Duck?* I ask.  
*Palotino*, my Uncle replies, in Portuguese.  
*Daffy's like me. Like how I wish to be.*  
*No wife. No children. No family.*

Now his wife laughs. And my cousin Fernanda.  
*Loco*, his wife announces. It's the first word she's said  
to me since I've been here.

This is my family. The Brazilian family  
that I haven't seen in over twenty years.  
My DNA is in that airplane. My past  
dangles on that branch. My death might  
be curdling on the milk.

The screen wiggles for a second. Then—  
blank. My Uncle shrugs. *I landed  
right in there—right in the middle of the trash—  
I couldn't have planned it any better.*

He snags the video out of the machine,  
sits down for ice cream. But my mind is still flying  
with him, dropping out of sight,  
and past all known geography  
into a future family photograph  
on Aunt Victoria's mantle  
beside her porcelain bells and liqueur glasses  
and a bright orange broken bird's beak.

*Brasilia Pretends To Be Ottawa*

When towns turn to deception, it is time to book one's flight home.  
And so on this Thursday I grabbed my hat, my passport, and my black carryon bag,  
skipping the complimentary breakfast plus the daily news reports

instead I made my way to the square. There, although I was strapped for cash and  
for good advice, I put on my shoes, and before I could muster up the strength  
to call for a cab I was blown to my feet

the desert turning to ice and I began slide, slide, down the tongue of Brasilia  
(which was moist and potent with desire, thereby making me  
uncomfortable), and when I gazed into her eyes, the clock kept striking

*these are government positions  
do not sit on the grass  
keep to the left for hourly tour*

This was no place for a young Canadian woman to lose herself.  
At this moment, I knew exactly who I was. The town had many tricks  
to show me, but no matter how hard I tried

she would not let me revoke her.

*Why Would Anyone Go Back to Brazil Under These Circumstances*

I didn't leave my mother there.  
I didn't leave my lover there.  
I didn't leave my belongings there.  
I didn't leave my heart there.

I didn't leave my sanity there.  
I didn't leave my compassion there.  
I didn't leave my trust there.  
I didn't leave my intelligence there.

I didn't leave my god there.  
I didn't leave my nationality there.  
I didn't leave my ethnicity there.  
I didn't leave my name there.

I didn't leave my home there.  
I didn't leave my second home there.  
I didn't leave my mind there.  
I didn't leave my death there.

I didn't leave there.  
I didn't leave there.  
I didn't leave there.  
I didn't leave there.