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Noite dentro da noite is one of the novels featured in the autumn 2018 Portuguese reading group run by And Other Stories.

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Noite dentro da noite (Night within night)

Joca Reiners Terron

Excerpt (Chapter 1, parts 7 & *) translated by James Young

7.

On the morning after the snowstorm of 1975, Hugo Reiners appeared in Medianeira with his pickup truck, said Curt Meyer-Clason. Boxes and furniture were taken from the house and installed by him in the back of the truck in less than two hours. When he turned up at the hospital, your father had bruises on his face and his left arm was broken at the elbow. He had been missing since the night before. Following Hugo's arrival, the family left in the middle of the night, or at least some of you left, your brother stayed behind. Forgotten, abandoned. At three o'clock in the morning the darkness was turning cobalt and soon the few white flakes that fell from the sky became translucent against the light of the lampposts that were repeated, each one exactly alike, along the main avenue of the town, until you got to the lamppost which had been almost knocked over by the Ford Rural in front of the church at the same moment when all the lightbulbs went out. God and his customary punctuality, the sky, the snow and the wreckage of an automobile

accident. It was a lovely backdrop for an escape, all of you there, covered up by the past that the sky represents, under starlight emitted three years earlier, under all that dead light. The pink trumpet trees in the garden around the church did not have the same colouring as in the daytime, mixed with the snow that covered their foliage. Further on, atop the wall of the school, the national flag was not flying from the top of the flagpole. A few days earlier, and the rat and your father would have wished that it might always continue that way, and that the flag would never be hoisted again. So it mattered little. You reached the exit roundabout, crossed the bridge, took the highway and your father followed Hugo's pickup truck for six hundred and something kilometres without looking back. He drove with only his right hand, his left arm in a cast supported by the window. You all almost died of cold, said Curt Meyer-Clason. On the back seat, the rat shivered as she served coffee to the driver, hardened by the wind. The dawn came and melted the snow, which for those who still remembered (unlike you), became a memory, mixing together with the mud, which in turn trickled onto the hard shoulder to be swallowed up by the pasture, becoming part of history. The landscape transformed, and the frosted fields of Paraná began to disappear, while the first prickly-pear cactuses and clumps of lemon grass in Mato Grosso emerged. The rat said: we've entered Castilian lands. As she pointed out a snail kite atop a palm tree, the stench of the macaúba fruit wafted through the air, but was soon replaced on the back seat by the stench of accumulated vomit that came from the upholstery. You imagined Spanish conquistadors lost in the Pantanal, and Cabeza de Vaca with a fever in the middle of the woods, while Ulrich Schmidl von Straubingen drew his portrait. Cracker crumbs pricked the backs of your thighs, but it didn't seem to bother you, and you looked a little woozily out the window for

signs to read. Shell, welcome to hell. Except for the road signs in the vicinity of a town, there was little to read in that new landscape. And you needed to read, even if it was only the signs of the metalwork and tyre repair shops and oil adverts at the petrol stations. Signs were your ABC, the rat said one day, you learnt to read when you were moving. A dead horse stretched out its hooves between the hard shoulder and the road. With a light touch of the steering wheel, your father swerved around the animal. A few kilometres further on, another carcass appeared, with three vultures perched on top of it. A succession of putrefied cattle followed, mules with distended bellies and animals that had been run over, telling you definitively that you had arrived in Mato Grosso. The corpses, and their guts, spread out across the tarmac, lent themselves to a kind of reading – when they were analysed, the future seemed easily predictable, especially when compared to the darkness of the present in the Year of the Great Whiteout.

During that escape, the reasons for which you did not know, the rat, as though speaking at a vigil to wake you from a nightmare or the land of the dead, told you, as the night went on, the story of Karl Reiners lost in the Pantanal in 1964 and his meeting with the German biochemist, as well as the coincidences involving the sailor Kurt Meier and the spy Curt Meyer-Clason imprisoned on Ilha Grande at the end of the Second World War. But all those narratives only led you to be suspicious of her intentions, said Curt Meyer-Clason, it seemed to you that the rat was only distracting you from more important secrets, filling in a year empty of facts as if she were substituting the guts of a disembowelled lamb with straw and formalin instead of memories.

The rat treated you well, said Curt Meyer-Clason, but you hated her, because you knew she was lying.

8.

You saw the snow.

You were in an accident.

You lost your tongue, but still you spoke.

You crossed the marshlands in the back seat of a car driven by a stranger in the middle of the night.

You were with the dead, you did not think of yourself.

You had neither a father nor a mother.

You were a fool.

You were in an accident.

You lived through the Year of the Great Whiteout.

You remained.

Who are you.

2. The Year of the Great Whiteout

(Mechanical horses)

(The swamp)

(Hassan)

(The tactic of the shadows)

1.

In the Year of the Great Whiteout, said Curt-Meyer-Clason, you stopped speaking. You fled from Medianeira to Mato Grosso, on the border with Paraguay. The rat did not know if your silence was due to the trauma caused by the accident, or the medication that you started to take because of it, or the change of town, or because you had nothing to say. Perhaps your tongue had been ripped out so that you could not reveal what you knew. You took your daily capsule of phenobarbital, an anti-convulsant used as part of the German eugenics program to murder deformed and retarded children. The rat never tired of repeating this when she was in a bad mood. But you were not in the Bernburg Euthanasia Centre, where you had never been, there were other reasons why you were drugged with barbiturates. Bernburg was not important yet, not for you. You started going to school alone, hiding yourself away in your travel books. Silence became your shield, an ineffective shield, as you would see. The red mud no longer swallowed your rain boots

and you no longer needed them, you could go barefoot, if you wanted. The school was three kilometres away, and you had to cross dense woodlands along a trail of papaya trees. The other pupils spoke a strange language, but even so they continued to sing the anthem, the anthem from hell was the only part of the speech of these strangers you could understand. Curva de Rio Sujo was full of soldiers and horses, a cavalry regiment had existed there for more than 200 years, the favourite of General Figueiredo, the President of the Republic. But that came later. Before, a long time before, there was an episode in the War of Paraguay when the Paraguayans defeated the Brazilians. Many of those who died were determined to remain alive, and it was said that when there was a full moon the corpses of dead **soldiers** were seen rising up from the swamp, creeping under the shadows of the genipapo and mango trees where the Battle of Ñandipá took place. One day, when exploring the stables of the barracks of the 10th Mechanized Cavalry Regiment, because of a foolish error of grammatical agreement when reading the name of the regiment on the sign followed by a notable insight on the part of your imagination, you expected to see mechanical horses.

One day in the future, many years later, when you were studying at FAU-UFRJ, you saw some Russian photographs from the early years of the twentieth century in a book. The photos had been colourized so skilfully that they allowed you to go back to the landscape of another time. Just the act of looking at them was enough to transport you to Curva de Rio Sujo, a type of cutting from times past which remained inexplicably glued to the border region of the map of Mato Grosso of your childhood. The world represented in those portraits of Russia was therefore understandable as Curva de Rio Sujo, also inhabited by uniformed soldiers, priests in cassocks, and students in smocks with ribbon

bows around their necks, police dogs and horses with saddles, heavily armed with cannons, everything in its place, all occupying a defined space, seeming to be a world that was easy to understand, recognisable. Within those paper rectangles things were in order. Seeing the photos tranquilized you.

So, said Curt Meyer-Clason, with the retrograde amnesia that impeded you from retaining new memories following the accident when you hit your head, your memory, just like certain physically handicapped people who are impeded from walking at a normal rhythm, such as the lame and the crippled and those with diseases of the nerves and birth defects who are obliged to find ways of moving peculiar to them, often similar to a comical, involuntary and spasmodic dance that generally evokes embarrassed laughter among us when they walk jolting down the street with their oscillating, elastic steps and impossible movements that seem like they are mocking us, in this way your memory was deformed by imagination, which filled the gaps left by forgetfulness with a dance of the mind that occupied, in a quite natural manner, your rutted awareness of the facts with the fantasy of invention.

2.

On the first school day of the second semester, after the bell had gone, you set off down the track towards home, leaving the memory of your secret brother behind. He tried to go with you, but was not able. He could not easily free himself from you, a metaphysical phenomenon united you. He accompanied you as far as he did just to help, the route to the new school involved penetrating a dark tunnel of vegetation, vines fell from high branches above your head, thrown there by tribes of invisible monkeys. The memory of him saw you disappearing into the darkness of the forest, diminishing in the distance,

while also diminishing with each passing metre. At that point you left him behind, or perhaps before, at the back of the house in Medianeira, and on the long journey to Curva de Rio Sujo you stopped thinking about your brother, distracted by the stories told by the rat and the changing landscape, said Curt Meyer-Clason, at least for a while. The memory of him was left behind and the two of you separated. At that point, like any memory, you forgot him.

The above extract was translated by James Young

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